

MAKING SENSE OF PRINCIPALS LEADING AND LEARNING DURING
UNPRECEDENTED AND COMPLEX TIMES

By

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research connects principal leadership to student achievement, but the effects of principal learning in conjunction with leading have not been richly explored. This dissertation provides a different perspective on principal leadership by looking at principals' approaches to their own learning while surviving and sometimes thriving amongst complex, pandemic times. This work explores possible links among learning approaches, decision making and problem-solving as leaders. Shining a light on the current principalship, as well as, increasing our understanding of principals' challenges, experiences, perceptions of identity and approaches to learning may have implications for principals' professional practice and greater support for school leaders. Using a qualitative multi-case study design, I explore and address the following research questions:

- 1) How are principals learning and leading in the context of Covid-19?
 - a) What learning perspectives do principals intentionally or unintentionally leverage when addressing changes associated with adaptive challenges such as Covid-19?
- 2) What prior and new learning do principals identify as helpful for understanding and addressing adaptive challenges such as Covid-19 in their school context?
 - a) How do principals learn through grappling with current challenges?
 - b) What and who do principals say they draw on for learning?
- 3) How did principals view their identities as a support in the Covid-19 context?

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This dissertation is dedicated to my incredible husband, Nicholas Michael Sheldon, for your constant love and support of which are too many to count over the past twenty plus years. To my children, Wilson Joseph and Amari Carmella, for inspiring me to keep going and sacrificing along with me to achieve this dream. To my parents and rest of my family for encouraging me and always showing up in big and small ways.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I examine how principal leaders take up their roles in a multitude of ways with varying needs in complex times, more specifically during these pandemic times. I examine principal learning, leadership moves, and various supports and constraints of their leadership as recognized by the principals. This is important because the practices and approaches by which principals lead contribute to student and school outcomes (Allensworth, 2019; Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021; Northouse, 2019). Additionally, not all leadership moves are equally powerful (Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Heifetz, Linsky & Grashow, 2009) especially within the nuances of context.

In the two decades prior to the pandemic, scholars were building evidence of the need to help leaders learn how to support their own learning and growth before or while supporting the growth of other adult learners (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, 2004; Berger, 2011; Kegan & Lahey, 2009; Lugg, 2006; Lugg & Shoho, 2006; Mizell, 2007; Murphy, 2002; Schwartz, 2013). Understanding how to build one's own (and other adults') internal capacities correlates to those leaders managing challenges more effectively. According to Cosner (2010), doing so enables leaders to produce "desirable organizational outcomes" (p. 121). Yet, other researchers in those same decades identified longstanding gaps in leaders' knowledge of cognitive and social-emotional perspectives of adult learning and development, and most importantly to me, how to support it (Byrne-Jimenez & Orr, 2007; Elmore, 2007; Shoho, Barnett, & Tooms, 2010). In this dissertation, I attempt to address these concerning gaps as well as magnify the complexities and intricacies surrounding principal learning, leadership moves and various supports and constraints of their leadership.

One important nuance that also sets this dissertation apart is my focus on the experiences and perspectives of the principals during these pandemic times, rather than telling the stories of the teachers, students, or communities that surround them. While outcomes of student achievement are important, and teacher learning and voice also matter, the perspectives of principals in the field of education and greater community are necessary, but often not told. Those that are looking at the principalship seem to focus most often on effective principal supervision or even the conditions in place around principal leaders (Goldring, Clark, Rubin, Rogers, Grissom, Gill, Kautz, McCullough, Neel, & Burnett, 2020; Goldring, 2018; Honig, 2019), yet many leave out a valuable research niche that uncovers and honors what principals themselves are saying, what they need to enact the role in the most powerful ways, their perspectives on learning as applied in leadership, and last but not least, acknowledging what is specifically happening during pandemic times. To investigate these topics, I interviewed 17 principals and identified themes and patterns of experience, learning and leading across a broad demographic. Then I took a deeper dive into the lives and world of nine of the principals. In addition to providing a different vantage point to studying principal leading and learning, I hope my research can inform the literature on the importance of supporting principal leaders as adaptive learners with complexity. To that end, this dissertation seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) How are principals learning and leading in the context of COVID-19?
 - a) What learning perspectives do principals intentionally or unintentionally leverage when addressing changes associated with adaptive challenges?
- 2) What prior and new learning do principals identify as helpful for understanding and addressing adaptive challenges such as COVID-19 in their school context?

- a) How do principals learn through grappling with current challenges?
- b) What and who do principals say they draw on for learning?
- 3) How did principals view their identities as a support in the Covid-19 context?"

Summary of Study Design

In this qualitative study, I sought to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of principals during the pandemic. I investigated, interviewed, and interacted with principals to capture their stories, behaviors, and thinking about learning, identity, leading and more. These definitions ground my research:

Identity. Fluid traits or characteristics constructed by self and others (Sfard & Prusak, 2005).

Identity is recognizing a “person as acting and interacting as a certain "kind of person" or even as several different kinds at once” (Gee, 2000, p. 99) inferring that one’s identity has many facets or layers and is complex. Identity descriptions are not silos or discrete; it forms, sustains, and changes across time and can shift dependent on a situation or context

Learning. A change in understanding, practice, or belief. Learning occurs over time (Schunk, 2012).

Leadership moves. The actions that are decided and enacted by individual principals in their buildings, district, or context, with the intent of getting staff, students, or others to change, learn and achieve (Burch & Spillane, 2003; Hatch & Grossman, 2009; Horn, 2010; Rigby, Forman, & Lewis, 2021).

Principal. The head or person with the most decision-making power and authority in a K–12 school. I distinguish principals from assistant principals because their roles are different and from superintendent because superintendents’ decision-making authority is for a district, which is typically beyond the level of school (Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021). A synonym

sometimes used for principals is ‘middle-manager’ but as this research shows, their role is more complex than that (Spillane, 2002).

Support. Transactions between individuals that might include behavior, resources, or communication/language with the intent of assisting (Williams, Barclay, & Schmied, 2004). Not all support provided by one individual is necessarily perceived as support by the other and/or necessarily received in a way that is assisting or bettering the situation or person (Reblin & Uchino, 2008).

In addition to the role of researcher, I am a Director of Learning Services and Instruction for an Intermediate School District of which provides professional learning across the county and state. Part of my role is to understand the needs of the county’s educators and leaders and build learning and support systems for and with them. I believe this additional part of my identity, as taken up in my role, positioned me as a supportive resource for the research participants so that the research was truly mutually beneficial. I also acknowledge the inverse is true. My role and how I take it up, may have biased my interpretation of the data and possibly limited what participants were willing to share.

Findings from this study were drawn from different data sources, including semi structured interviews, follow up interviews, fieldnotes during professional learning and networking experiences — to understand how the principals “make sense of their lives and their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). Additionally, I gathered and used shared communications via email, phone, social media and more as supplemental artifacts to principals’ leading and learning. I collected data from 2020-2022, across almost two years’ time.

Synopsis

This dissertation is composed of three articles written as stand-alone chapters. Each

chapter addresses parts or all the same broad research questions and draws from the same larger data set but have different purposes and audiences, and thus my focus and writing style change. Readers may notice repetition of ideas from chapter to chapter, where I may elaborate more deeply in one chapter and offer only a summary in another. I use some of the same language in the introduction and epilogue from the three chapters, though among the three chapters, language is unique. I advise the reader to consider each chapter on its own, then reread it to consider the chapter in light of the other sections. The dissertation is structured as follows:

Chapter 2: The Principals' Past & Present, Learner & Leader

In this chapter, I examined the way nine principals defined and took up their role of principal. I looked for patterns across the groups' contexts, experiences, thinking, and actions. I also explored how those principals' perspectives about their role were confirmed or shifted rapidly, and sometimes repeatedly, during Covid-19 as well as what they did as they grappled with rapid change and adaptive challenges. Findings from this study illustrate that the role of principal is complex and varies by context, skill, knowledge, and perception. Principals perceived a need for more and customized support if they are expected to be highly effective principals. This study provides insight into the role of principal today, the variety in the adaptive challenges they face, learning stances principals leverage as they grapple with and resolve challenges, and the supports that help or hinder along the way.

Chapter 3: Identity as Support: How Identities Relate to Principals' Leading and Learning

In this chapter, I compared and contrasted three principals' descriptions of their own ways of learning and leading. Identity was a common influencer in both, however talked about very differently by the principals. Specifically, I found the ways in which principals perceived their own identities as a support or constraint insightful into the real world and work of

principals. Using Gee's framework for power and identity, this research further uncovered the complexities of identity, the interconnectedness to learning, and the translation of how identity in combination with learning helps or hinders the principals' leadership in their given contexts. In short, this study illustrates some of the ways identity, learning and adaptive leadership intersect.

Chapter 4: One Principal's Lived Experience as an Adaptive Leader

This chapter is a practitioner piece for principals and other educational leaders about one principal's journey of learning and leading through Covid. This article highlights the importance of principals understanding their own ways of learning and reflecting on their leadership journeys. I argue that although Melonie does not have a universal story or experiences, nor would she ever claim to speak for others, she does provide a rich account of the principalship during pandemic times. Her stories highlight the intricacies of learning, ways she took learning into action, and her enactment of adaptive leadership moves— sometimes all separately and sometimes all concurrently.

CHAPTER 2: THE PRINCIPALSHIP: PAST & PRESENT, LEARNER & LEADER

Introduction

Sometimes the general public in the United States constructs the education systems as just students, teachers, and leaders working to build productive citizens or for the public good (Labaree, 1999), but on the inside of this space, this complex system includes many, many more working parts or elements, visible or invisible relationships across parts, interconnectedness of elements, and various purposes and outcomes for and from education (Meadows, 2008). This article focuses on principals as a critical part of the education system without trying to oversimplify or under complicate the role of the principal and the many ways adults take up this role during pandemic times-- knowing there are hidden and visible supports or constraints in place within these systems. In short, how are principals learning and leading in the context of Covid-19?

Literature Review

Over the last 25 years or so, research investigating K-12 principal leaders and their leadership moves has been broad and slow to gain the attention of the public in comparison to other sectors (Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021). Now, in a research report synthesizing multiple studies across 22,000 principals over two decades, the researchers claim principals have a large effect on student achievement and a host of other important school outcomes (Grissom et al, 2021). To get the best student and school outcomes, broadly speaking, current research suggests that principals' roles and responsibilities should include, but are not limited to:

- Acting as instructional leaders (Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010; Rigby, Larbi-Cherif, et al., 2017; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010).

- Cultivating the school and instructional vision that guides the culture of the school (Wallace Foundation, 2010) grounded in teacher efficacy and teacher collaboration (Rigby, Foreman, & Lewis, 2021).
- Managing non-instructional duties such as completing paperwork for the central office; managing logistics like student pick-up and drop-off, breakfasts and lunches, recess supervision, the school schedule, and substitute coverage; resolving discipline issues; managing the human resources in the building by supervising employees, including hiring and firing; analyzing and sharing school-based data in ways that make sense to multiple stakeholders; and establishing supportive relationships with families and community (Goldring, Huff, May, & Camburn, 2008).

The research above and a larger body of research shared below, summarizes how, simultaneously, over time, and interwoven all together, are the ideas that:

- the role of principal has evolved to address current context and demands
- the ways principals take up their role(s) from middle managers to leaders are different
- principals affect student and school outcomes (Kaul, Comstock, Simon, 2022; Nelson & Squires, 2017)

Historically, the United States educational system is set up in a hierarchical model much like a factory with workers (students), supervisors (teachers), the supervisor's boss(es) (principals), and the owners (Superintendents/Board of Education). The principles of effective management and supervision used to be enough to lead a school (Murphy & Hallinger, 1992; Johnson, Reinhorn, Charner-Laird, Kraft, & Papay, 2014). Good principals knew their role, followed the chain of command, and technically carried out their managerial duties, and yet today, the role is so much more complex than that (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, &

Orr, 2009; Drago-Severson, Blum, & Asghar, 2011; Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, & Blum-DeStefano, 2015). According to Alvoid and Lesley-Black (2014), “the job of a modern-day principal has transformed into something that would be almost unrecognizable to the principals of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The concept of the principal as a building manager has given way to a model where the principal is an aspirational leader, a team builder, a coach, and an agent of visionary change” (p. 2). Principals do still supervise and evaluate teachers, but they also must be experts at budget, motivating adults, responding to new legislation, instruction, curriculum, and much more.

Today, principals face tremendous implicit and explicit complexities in their work and communities as they tend to a variety of issues. In recent years, some of the most visible issues have included topics such as equity, social justice, demographic and developmental differences, various leadership styles and mandates; adapting to the Common Core, evaluation systems; and much more—all within an accountability and sanctions-driven context (Danielson, 2011; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2016; Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, Hoffman, & Barbaro, 2014; DuFour & Marzano, 2009; Goldring, Clark, Rubin, Rogers, Grissom, Gill, Kautz, McCullough, Neel, & Burnett, 2020; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009 as cited in Drago-Severson, et. al., 2018). Many principals often feel overwhelmed and indicate the challenges they are facing are unpredictable, demanding, and stressful. Note, all of this research is pre-pandemic at this point. Also, it is common that principals receive little or no formal preparation to respond to or minimize these challenges (Barber, 2006; Byrne-Jiménez & Orr, 2007; Kegan & Lahey, 2016; Peterson, 2002; Terosky, 2013; Townsend & MacBeath, 2011 as cited in Drago-Severson, et. al., 2018). Exacerbating the complexity of the principalship that has already been laid out, mandates and policies are further forced upon principals from different directions. In short,

principals are expected to “decipher problems quickly and create conditions to build capacity at ground level” (Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018) while also making sense of and navigating three-dimensional change. Three-dimensional change identifies conditions that have been building for years and now make up our new reality for all to navigate. The three dimensions are *perpetual* — occurring all the time in an ongoing way; *pervasive* — unfolding in multiple areas of life at once and *exponential* — accelerating at an increasingly rapid rate (Chima & Gutman, 2020, para. 3).

Yet, with all this research on the principal’s role and its impact on student outcomes, there are actually two gaps I see. First, during and through Covid-19, we do not have substantial research on the principal role changing and increasing in size and complexity again for these unprecedented times which we now call the ‘new normal’. Each day new research comes out and this research will contribute to that just-in-time capture of principals’ voices, lived experiences, perspectives, and what is on the horizon. The second gap in the current, relevant literature is that it does not specifically bring to the forefront principals’ thinking, beliefs, and learning perspectives that influence their leadership moves helping or hindering them as they grapple with current challenges. Although I do think promising research on leadership moves is coming out rapidly, I hope to contribute by focusing on the principals’ thinking and learning perspectives that in turn crystalize into their leadership moves while also acknowledging the context and uncontrollables that contribute to their lived experiences.

Theoretical Framework

In trying to understand principal leading and learning in complex times, I draw on three perspectives of learning. However, leading and learning are so intertwined, I also chose to analyze this research through the lens of adaptive leadership. This affords me the ability to see

how, in different ways, different principals learn to lead and lead to learn in today's system of education.

Cognitive Learning Perspective

According to Borko and Putnam, “cognitive psychologists posit an individual's knowledge structures and mental representations of the world play a central role in thinking, acting, and learning. The learning of individuals is a constructive and iterative process in which the person interprets events based on existing knowledge, beliefs, and dispositions. Learning outcomes are the changes in mental organization, structures, and processes that result from this active, constructive process” (1996, p. 674). These changes in turn influence the individual's actions in various settings. Although learning can be heavily influenced by instruction, how and what individuals learn is always shaped and filtered by their existing knowledge and beliefs. It can, therefore, never be completely determined by instruction (Schunk, 2012). In essence, learning is inside the head of the individual.

As adults enact the role of principal in Michigan schools, they are expected to have their administrative certification which indicates some level of professional knowledge, acquired skills, and base competency. This certification may or may not have afforded the individual opportunities to deliberately practice and rehearse what they would do in the principal role. Yet, once the principal starts the job, the daily performance continues to iterate the individual's understanding of leading and the responsibilities of being a principal. A principal may shift from novice to expert perceivably in correlation to increased professional knowledge, acquired key leadership skills, increased efficiency through individual motivation and effort, and/or increased effectiveness per their individual performance as identified in the Michigan administrator evaluation process (Meloche, 2006). Spillane, Healey, and Parise (2009) indicate formal

professional development as well as on the job learning for principals does increase professional knowledge in general, yet knowledge transferred into application or decision making is inconsistent. As I explore and examine the principals in this research, this particular learning perspective is one way to make sense of how each individual principal is learning, thinking and acting.

Situated and Sociocultural Perspective

In contrast to cognitive perspectives, situated learning highlights the social nature of learning and places value on the learning community in which the participants are members (Lave, 1996; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Werstch, 1991). Learning is not only social and contextualized, but cognition is distributed across participants. It emphasizes that individuals do not exist alone and must be considered within a community and with consideration to cultural contexts (Rogoff, 1997). Principals of varying levels of craftsmanship and efficacy learn from and alongside members of their community, such as district peers, countywide or statewide colleagues, and others in leadership roles in the field of education. They learn the principal role by doing in context through interacting with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sfard, 1998).

One assumption underlying this perspective of learning is that more experienced principals are positioned closer to the core of the community, however, contexts and individuals influence this dynamic. Hence, the positioning of individuals in the community of practice is fluid. What does unite a community of practice regardless of proximity is a shared purpose. An additional assumption underlying this work is that experienced principals have expertise and that activities in which less experienced principals engage have the potential to be rich learning experiences. I define expertise as extensive experience, involvement, and participation in teaching and leading (Ericcson, 2002). There is important learning that can occur from working

with an experienced other. For example, the learning that may be generated through “careful coaching by others who have already been initiated into the profession” (Grossman, Compton, Igra, Ronfeldt, Shahan, & Williamson, 2009, p. 2061). Within the situated perspective, when novice administrators are mentored or coached in particular leadership moves and engage in deliberate practice, there are greater learning opportunities. (Ericcson, 2002; Grossman et al., 2009; Schön, 1987). Approximations, as sometimes seen between assistant principals and head principals, or principals and superintendents, are one way for mentors to create this chance for learning (Grossman et al., 2009). In short, learning is not only occurring inside the individual’s head, but is also shared across a situation, environment, and context that is interwoven with relationships therefore distributed.

Sociocultural learning perspective is not confined to a perfect silo from the other learning perspectives explained in this dissertation. However, three key themes of this perspective are drawn from Vygotsky’s research. Vygotsky claimed:

- 1) human development and learning are grounded in social, historical, and cultural interactions,
- 2) use of psychological tools, specifically language, mediate development of higher mental functions, and
- 3) learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development.

Furthermore, these ideas are closely interrelated, non-hierarchical, and connected. (McLeod, 2008; Polly, Allman, Casto, and Norwood, 2017). Vygotsky said, “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). This is also true for adults. It is through working

with others on a variety of tasks that a learner adopts socially shared experiences and associated effects and acquires useful strategies and knowledge (Scott & Palincsar, 2013). Sociocultural theory recognizes that “different historical and cultural circumstances may encourage different developmental routes to any given developmental endpoint” depending on particular social or physical circumstances and tools available (Miller, 2011, p. 198). In short, seeing learning through sociocultural perspectives means richly considering the interconnectedness of the world, context, relationships, and individual(s). These things are so intertwined that it would be nearly impossible to understand learning without looking at it all.

As a framework, these learning perspectives may seem to be positioned as silos, however, that is not my belief. I see these perspectives overlapping in some respects and on a continuum as well. No one person only experiences learning through one perspective. And, when examining learning, these perspectives afford me a way to see, examine, and make sense of each principal’s story.

Adaptive Challenges and Adaptive Leadership

Shifting from learning perspectives to a framework for leading, I leveraged Adaptive Leadership as a way to make sense of the thinking, beliefs, decisions and actions of the principals. Adaptive leadership starts with first defining technical and adaptive challenges leaders face in their roles and organization. Technical and adaptive challenges are terms originally coined by Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky in 1994. Technical challenges are usually linear, straightforward, often easy to identify, commonly have one or a few possible solutions, and are solved independently or within current structures. Contrastingly, adaptive challenges are interpersonal and do not have a defined quick fix. They require people and systems to embrace solutions that take into account any number of variables as well as bring

students, parents, teachers, and leaders together to collectively resolve complex problems (Heifetz, Linsky & Grashow, 2009). Generally speaking, adaptive challenges are very complicated or best described as complex. Solving such challenges might require stakeholders to adjust their values, beliefs, habits, ways of working, and/or ways of life (Nelson & Squires, 2017). In terms of the current study context, Goodwin (2022, para. 5) calls the massive, abrupt transition to remote learning in 2020 at the beginning of Covid-19, the “Mount Everest of adaptive challenges”. It required rapid rethinking of the entire enterprise of schooling to problem solve with no playbook to follow. That is just one of many examples of what constitutes an adaptive challenge.

This continuum of terms, technical to adaptive challenges, affords principals a way to make sense of and categorize the responsibilities of the principal role. While understanding technical and adaptive challenges is helpful for leaders, Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow more importantly draw the deduction that different challenges require different leadership moves (2009). Murphy (2011, p.1), says, “technical and adaptive leadership skills both have a strong influence on student achievement” but in today’s everchanging context, the adaptive leader recognizes and works to create or iterate systems, therefore generating more substantive and sustainable change in the spaces they work (Simmons, 2022).

As a working definition for adaptive leadership, I framed my thinking in Ramalingam, Nabarro, Oqubay, Carnall, Wild (2020) descriptions that adaptive leadership generally concentrates on change management with an understanding or attentiveness to emotional intelligence because empathy and trust are cornerstones of human-based fields. Adaptive leadership demands flexibility, a willingness to learn and think in systems. Ramalingam et al.,

also claim this leadership approach specifically requires four leadership moves or actions referred to as the 4A's:

- *Anticipation* of likely future needs, trends, and options
- *Articulation* of these needs to build collective understanding and support for action
- *Adaptation* so that there is continuous learning and the adjustment of responses as necessary
- *Accountability*, including maximum transparency in decision making processes and openness to challenges and feedback (2020, p.1)

Furthering my working definition is Simmon's summary (2022), adaptive leadership is about "adopting a growth mindset to build the capacity and resilience of all educators, especially school and district leaders, to address complex organizational challenges.... And a key ingredient to adaptive leadership is being consciously aware of how adults learn" (p. 4). Of all the components and tenets that define adaptive leadership, this definition matters to me the most because it ties together learning and leading.

Methods

My study uses qualitative research methods. More specifically, I implemented a multi-case study design. I was interested in understanding principals' current context, roles, learning perspective & leadership moves. I hoped to magnify the experiences of the principals, rather than telling the stories of the teachers, students or communities that surround them. While outcomes of student achievement and teacher learning and voice also matter, the perspectives of principals in the field of education and greater community are necessary to bettering the entire system of education. To do this I collected a variety of data sources but relied most heavily on semi structured, one-on-one interviews with 17 principals in Michigan.

Context and Participant Selection

Due to my role at an intermediate school district in Michigan and past educational experience, connections, and relationships, I was able to access a large pool of current Michigan principals. I reached out informally through email and phone calls to gauge interest in principals sharing their stories and experiences in the principalship. Some of those principals responded immediately and excitedly; some also connected me with other principals that I had no relationship with and expanded the pool of principals to vary more greatly in location across the state. Although this was a convenient sampling, the leveraging of relationships and connections yielded too many interested principals for me to do the study in a timely and deep manner. I narrowed the list of initially interested principals down to 17 principals based on my schedule, timeliness of the principal's response, and excitedness in response. I also made sure I had a variety of locations across the lower peninsula of Michigan, size of district, and level of building. Those that I did not select, I made sure to respectfully acknowledge their willingness and asked to keep their contact information for future research opportunities. I interviewed 17 diverse principals about their principalship and the experiences surrounding their past and present. Informally, approximately two thirds of the way through the interviews I was feeling a sense of saturation. Out of respect for the principals and due to my commitment to listen and follow through, I completed all 17 interviews.

For this article, I chose to focus on nine principals as a microcosm of principals in Michigan. The selection of nine principals out of the 17 was based on a few factors. One factor was my initial feeling of saturation noted part way through the interviews. After completing all the interviews, I reread all my handwritten and highlighted notes from the 17 interviews, some seemed more productive than others. By productive, I mean the interview felt like an open, free-

flowing conversation; the participant demonstrated cognitive engagement and sometimes seemed to have cognitively shift through tells like eye movement, body language or saying it; or it was a long interview because the participant was fully answering the questions. Another factor was the quantity of data. Nine participants generated a substantial data set. In my novice research experience, much more data would have felt overwhelming to fully analyze and less would have felt like I could not make some generalizations of principals. Nine participants data felt like it was manageable. A third factor in the selection of nine was time. This became crystalized during the transcription process. I started transcribing each interview in order of what excited me. The first interview was just over an hour and a half and took me about two full days. By the ninth one, I felt like time was a constraint and I needed to move forward. The last, but most important factor in selecting the nine was variation of demographic and contextual features. Each participant was a combination of demographics including but not limited to gender, race, age, level of role (elementary, middle, or high school), and years of experience (Table 1). This is important as a broad sampling, not that each principal is speaking as a representative, but more so providing diverse viewpoints, as I hope this work adds to the conversation of what principals need for preparation and support in their context.

I began the preparation of this dissertation and my search for participants in the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 without knowing the world was headed into a pandemic and that the world of education was going to change like no one had ever seen before. This additional, but highly relevant, layer in the context led to greater complexity in each participant's experiences. Not only were principals experiencing extreme and accelerated change in their jobs, but personally also dealing with loss, fear, and other emotions and actions no one else could see or necessarily understand.

Principals included in this study were servicing school districts in the southern half of Michigan. The school districts range in size from three to 16 buildings and the schools of each principal range in student population from 90 students to over 1,200. The demographic makeup of students in each principal's building (specifically 1: percent of students identified as 'free and reduced lunch' or economically disadvantaged; 2: percent with IEPs/receiving special education services; and 3: the largest race/ethnicity category identified) varied dramatically across the participants selected in order to attempt to gain a broad representation of the principals' landscape in Michigan (Table 2). Also, I specifically acknowledge if a principal's self-identified race/ethnicity matched or did not match the school's largest category.

Table 1
Principal Self-Reported Demographics (from the Demographic and Historical Information Survey taken prior to or the day of the interview)

Principal Name	Gender	Race	Age Range	Level of Role	Years' Experience in K-12: Administrator	Years' Experience in K-12: Teaching
Melonie	Female	Black	50-59	High School	5	14
Tanner	Female	White	40-49	Middle School	7	18
Danielle	Female	White	50-59	Middle School	13	8
Kelly	Female	Latino	30-39	Elementary	0.6	16
Jordan	Female	White	20-29	Elementary	1.5	5
Winson	Male	Black	40-49	High School	3	4
Beck	Male	Biracial (Asian & White)	40-49	Elementary	9	9
Sean	Male	White	60-69	High School	17	18
John	Male	White	30-39	Elementary	3	5

**All names are pseudonyms.*

Table 2

Principal Building/District Context

Principal Name	School Size (Approx. # of Students)	% of Students Economically Disadvantaged in Building	% of Students Sp. Ed. in Building	Largest Category of Student Race/Ethnicity in Building (% of Largest Category)	Principal Self-Identify Race/Ethnicity Consistent with Student Majority
Melonie	1200	76%	14%	Black (45%)	Yes
Tanner	250	61%	12%	White (84%)	Yes
Danielle	240	34%	9%	White (86%)	Yes
Kelly	120	89%	12%	White (47%)	No
Jordan	400	72%	20%	Black (52%)	No
Winson	90	80%	20%	White (60%)	No
Beck	390	39%	10%	White (72%)	Yes
Sean	1000	56%%	13%	White (77%)	Yes
John	500	34%	9%	White (84%)	Yes

**All names are pseudonyms. School and District data from mischooldata.org 2020-2021 school year.*

During the time of this study, I not only positioned myself as a researcher investigating leading and learning, but I also made myself available and accessible to the principals through professional development and networking meetings, formal and informal coaching cycles, and nonprofessional connection times. Sometimes I was leading professional development and meetings, sometimes I was participating, other times I was just there-- this afforded me the opportunity to learn through observations and participation as a participant observer (Erickson, 1986). This translated into some of the absent or weak bonds that existed at the beginning of the study with the participants growing immensely into strong bonds. This happened with some more than others. Additionally, I need to acknowledge this likely means I was able to learn

different kinds of things from each participant. I was also influenced by unconscious bias, and/or these relationships and bonds may have prevented me from learning or seeing some parts of the data in my exploration and interpretation.

Data Sources

To “uncover and interpret” leading and learning from a principals’ perspective through unprecedented times (Merriam, 2009, p.24), I collected data between May 2020 and April 2021. I began with a demographic and historical information survey via google forms (Appendix A) and semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) of 17 principals. In July 2020 through August 2021, I collected data in up to four additional categories on nine of the participants depending on their responses in the demographic survey and initial semi-structured interview.

Semi structured interviews. In order to understand principals’ experiences and thinking, I needed a rich and deep one-on-one conversation with each principal where they were asked intentional questions but had the flexibility to expound and felt safe to be authentic and share. To do this I adapted an interview guide (Appendix B) from Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski (2018) that was originally used in the book, *In Translation: School Leaders Learning in and from Leadership Practice*. I focused on naming pressing challenges, managing the named challenges, and learning in and from those times to help or hinder overall leadership or success in the role as principal. In addition to the interview guide having clearly constructed questions, I found it was within the probing follow ups that stories, experiences, emotions, and insights were more richly shared and captured. Each interview was conducted via zoom and was recorded. During the interviews, I took extensive notes. Immediately following the interview, I secured and confirmed the recording for transcription later and then took 15-30 minutes to walk back through

my notes, capture anything I might have missed and most importantly, highlight with a highlighter any immediate ‘ahas’ or heartstring moments that personally struck a chord with me.

Four Other Data Categories. Depending on the responses in the semi-structured interviews, I followed up and tracked other data categories (Table 3). This led to over 100 additional data inputs of varying magnitude and impact. The other categories were:

- Follow-up interviews
- Post interview participant-initiated direct communication with me (emails, texts, calls, drop bys, coaching)
- Post interview participant social media posts (only if the participant mentioned social media in the interview as a space of learning or a source of challenge- *Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn)
- Observation field notes from professional development or network meetings (e.g.: MASSP/MEMSPA conference, County Principal Network Meetings, etc.)

Table 3
Principal Data Sources and Number of Each Collected

Principal Name	Demo-graphic Survey/ Google Form	Semi-Structured Interview (segmented transcripti on) ~60-120 min/each	Follow Up interview (segmented transcripti on) ~15-30 min/each	Post-Interview Participant-Initiated Direct Communic ation	Post-Interview Social Media Communi cation	Observation + Field Notes
Melonie	1	1	1	7	16	4
Tanner	1	1	1	14	34	8
Danielle	1	1	0	11		13
Kelly	1	1	1	24	5	15
Jordan	1	1	0	4	4	18

Table 3 (cont'd)

Winson	1	1	1	5		3
Beck	1	1	0	0		1
Sean	1	1	0	3		13
John	1	1	1	22	3	5

Follow-up interviews. These interviews were initiated for five of the nine principals after their initial interviews because I wanted to probe further on a response, needed clarification or felt I missed something in the initial interview. To set up the follow up interviews, I emailed each principal with my request and gave a general prompt as to what I wanted to follow up with them on. However, the actual questions in these interviews were specific to each person, not standardized like the first set of questions, and not crafted in such a scripted way. These interviews felt more like a conversation where the principal was able to tell the ‘rest of their story’ or circle back to some unfinished experience. It also had an informal aspect to it that afforded a more relational exchange, but was recorded via zoom just like the full, first interviews.

Post interview participant-initiated direct communication. Although I knew some of the principals prior to this research and had some weak or strong relationships with some of them, I offered to everyone I interviewed to connect with me any time as they continued to be in their principal role. I made myself accessible via email, phone, text, and to drop by any time. I was intentional about positioning myself as a trusted supporter, even though I had never been a principal myself. I also offered to do informal and formal Cognitive Coachingsm to help mediate their thinking when posed with whatever challenges they identified.

Post interview participant social media posts. If the principal mentioned social media in their initial interview as a space of learning or a source of challenge, I sought out their accounts in whichever named platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and/or LinkedIn) and started to follow them. Across approximately a year's time, if a principal created a post that was related to their own learning, a challenge, problem-solving or decision making, I screenshot and saved it. I did not save any posts that were just regenerated from others or just 'liked', only ones that they created. Some individuals highly engaged in and used social media.

Observation field notes. Although many professional development opportunities and network meetings took place via zoom during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school year, there were still many times to observe interactions, learning and leading in person as well. I was able to attend Michigan Association for Secondary School Principals (MASSP) and Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principal Association (MEMSPA) conferences virtually with many of the participating principals. There I participated in session breakout rooms and while I was learning beside many other principals, I also intentionally took fieldnotes and observed six of the nine principals in the study. I also led 10 virtual and face to face local principal network meetings during between July 2020 through July 2021. One particular example of data gathered during a principals' network meeting came from an intentional discussion prompt I posted at the beginning of the meeting, "What is something that you've experienced that only another principal would truly understand or relate to?" Principals each responded with stories of which I took notes of content, as well as intangibles like body language, tone, and reactions in the room.

I collected multiple data sources over the course of the year to provide a "full and revealing picture of what is going on" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126). This is important to provide evidence that "warrant[s] key assertions through triangulation" (Erickson, 1986, p.140). I am

aware that I will never be able to capture every particular piece of revealing and relevant data, but my quest was to obtain more than a snapshot of a time or story and to shine a light on the complexities of the world of principals in a way that honors each principal's authentic experience.

Data Analysis

In my process of analyzing data, I started with the semi-structured interviews, then used the demographic data surveys and follow up interviews. After those three sources, I then began to gather, organize, and analyze the other acquired sources. My process for analysis of the initial interviews may seem informal at first, but it was intentional. Immediately following every interview, I took time with my handwritten notes to capture anything I might have missed back in the responses to each question and at the bottom of the document. These additional immediate notes also captured connections between responses, the larger points across the whole interview and any contextual things like a mood or feeling, external interruptions or unexpected occurrences. This usually took 15-30 minutes. Then, while it was fresh in my mind and heart, I switched over to internalization. I highlighted in my documentation any immediate "ahas" or heartstring moments that personally struck a chord with me. "Ahas" were big, synthesized ideas that the principal had stated or captured such as naming the kind of learner they were or providing a metaphor for making sense of their role. Heartstring moments were when a principal shared a strong emotion or experience that resonated for me, likely beyond learning, impacting their leadership and possibly brought about by their context. This highlighting process usually only took another 10-20 minutes, but it was central to my internalization of the data before formal analysis. I put this informal, immediate analysis to the side and waited until I completed all the semi-structured interviews to do my formal analysis. It was through this formal analysis

explained below that I moved from codes, to categories, to themes and eventually findings (Saldaña, 2009).

As described in the participant selection section above, after all 17 interviews were completed, I reread all my handwritten notes for each interview and examined the demographic/historical information survey, noted additional compounding selection factors and selected the nine principal participants. Then, I considered again my first research question, “How are principals learning and leading in the context of Covid-19? What learning perspectives do principals intentionally or unintentionally leverage when addressing changes associated with adaptive challenges?” and I began open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

I coded each transcript for these big buckets of conversation connecting to my research question: context, challenges, learning and leading. Some examples on the transcripts included:

Table 4
Snapshot of Codes, Descriptions, and Examples in Data Analysis

Code	Abbreviation	Description	Example
Context	CON	Environment or situation surrounding the principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid-19 • Discussed culture of building or community • Talked about different stakeholders like staff, students, superintendents, parents, etc. • Brought up social media
Challenge	CH	Problem, issue or concern that the principal named and considered themselves responsible for or needing to contribute to solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussed number of legislative mandates or government directives placed on principal or school • Named school safety from health of students to wellbeing of staff • Brought up the gap between the expectation of the superintendent and the practices of teachers

Table 4 (cont'd)

Learning	LR	A change in understanding, practice, or belief.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussed time and ways principals obtained new knowledge • Principals named cognitive shifts that happened during particular or deliberate experiences or within particular communities of practice/learners • Named formal learning like courses, classes, professional development, etc.
Leading	LD	Behaviors or actions that are decided by individual principals in their buildings, district, or context, with the intent of getting staff, students, or others to change, learn and achieve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals acted based on the particular challenge such as holding a staff meeting to problem-solve. • Made a decision based on particular learning (like starting a communication newsletter). • Acted based on external influences or context such as greeting students and parents at the doors to ensure both knew and followed Covid protocols. • Acted then reflected • Acted alone, collaborative or shared in decision making.

Many parts of these interviews had multiple codes identified since principals often talked about leading in context to solve particular challenges, however, within each code, I categorized the statements in the following ways.

Table 5
Snapshot of Code and Categories

Code	Category
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid-19 or pre-Covid-19 • Group Interaction: One on one; small group; large group; school; district; community; state; nation • Stakeholder influence, present or involved: Instructional Staff, non-instructional staff, students, other principals/colleagues, superintendents, other leaders, parents/guardians, community members, non-school stakeholder or other (personal) • Location: Education or non-educational (in the school; at home; etc.), space in the state (north, south, east, west) • Items: Legislation/public acts, state directives, district policy, job description • News/Media: Facebook, Twitter, News/TV, Websites

Table 5 (cont'd)

Challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical • Tech/A (Mostly technical, but starting to broach some adaptive features) • Adapt/T (Mostly adaptive, but some technical challenges within the larger adaptive challenges) • Adaptive
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive • Situated • Situated/Soc • Sociocultural
Leading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified simplicity of a problem/task but was the responsibility of the principal to do/solve (Technical) • Identified complexities of a challenge and/or magnitude of a problem (Adaptive) • Unclear of specific challenge but acknowledge a tension that needed more than what the principal could do or was in control of (Adaptive) • Acknowledges unknown, and potential for unintended, outcomes (Adaptive) • Made a clear, immediate decision/solution (Technical) • Explained solutions through experimenting together, discovering, learning, and taking time (Adaptive) • Made decision alone (Technical) • Defaulted to law, rule, policy or structural authority to make decision (Technical) • Sought out others' perspective, thinking, knowledge, or voice (Adaptive) • Brought others together to collectively and collaboratively work towards solutions over time (Adaptive) • Displayed empathy and other emotional intelligence approaches in interactions (Adaptive) • Sought out others for shared decision making (Adaptive)

To identify which categories surfaced most in the principals' context, challenges, learning and leading, I highlighted categories that appeared at least 20 times across the transcripts and took into consideration if the repeated codes were also echoed in my handwritten, initial notes in some way. This separated occasional thinking and unintentional acting from everyday habits and conscious or unconscious beliefs about principals' own learning and leading. At this point I was starting to get a sense of themes but had not triangulated these categories with my other data sources. So, I read each of the follow up interviews, field notes and

artifacts from the 9 participants and marked up the data per the categories. Weighting the semi structured interviews as the most important but also considering my newly coded and categorized data sets, I collapsed categories and combinations of categories across codes into understandable, dominant themes (Table 6). Through that coding, categorizing, and theming, any themes that were not sustained through triangulation did not become part of the findings.

Table 6
Dominant Themes and Examples of Leading and Learning

Theme	Description	Example	Source
Acknowledging context	Describing the external visible and invisible variables that contribute to the lived experiences of the principal.	“I still remember the day my world blew up at school and we sent everyone home for what we thought was going to be just two weeks until we could sort this thing out... we were lucky we told kids to bring home everything. I remember the pit in my stomach and the fear mounting from teachers. We had no idea.”	Melonie Semi-structured interview zoom (10/30/20 - Timestamp 15:55)
Identifying principal responsibilities	Listing the tasks, expectations and activities that are explicitly or implicitly the duty of the principal.	“Well, my job is not my job description... My job description is so antiquated, like I wonder if it has been updated in 20 years and what gets me is the part that says-- ‘other duties as assigned’ If I listed out my current ‘other duties as assigned’, like run summer school, implement the new technology one-to-one initiative, etc., that list would be 10 times longer than my current job description.”	Tanner Semi-structured interview zoom (12/23/20 - Time Stamp 49:01)
Naming the principal’s own learning	Acknowledging a change in understanding, practice, or belief	“I was reading a MASSP update about tools for better principal staff communication and realized I may have been over communicating or giving too much that was overwhelming my people. It wasn’t the quantity of emails and newsletters; it was the length and language. After seeing their examples, I tried something new...”	Kelly Semi-structured interview zoom (1/22/21 - Time Stamp 46:44)

Table 6 (cont'd)

Reflecting on the principal's own learning.	Setting aside time to think or completing specific actions to examine a change in understanding, practice, or belief	"After the last principals meeting, I took the long way back to the building and just thought about all that was shared. I knew there were a few new ideas I wanted to try out, but it was during that drive that I felt like some learning just crystalized for me."	Jordan Semi-structured interview zoom (2/18/21 - Time Stamp 1:20:04)
Naming the challenges	Acknowledging particular struggles, problems or dilemmas facing the principal, students or school.	"I know I can't be the only one that has this problem, but there are so many layers to what I'm facing, I don't know exactly what to do next. If I let the kid retake the test and join the elective, another parent is going to say that's not fair and then I'll likely have to justify my decision to my superintendent but if I go to him, he'll either make a decision I don't want in the end or he'll make me feel like I should have handled it on my own inferring I'm not competent...Its is just a hot mess."	Beck Semi-structured interview zoom (11/06/20 - Timestamp 1:20:04)
Reflecting on the challenges	Setting aside time to think or completing specific actions to examine challenges.	"After my superintendent's monthly leadership meeting, I block out 30-45 minutes on my calendar, not to knock out the tasks he just gave me but to revisit and think about the bigger picture, what are the big challenges I'm facing, what did I just learn of that might be a big challenge coming up, how does all this interconnect with continuous improvement, who else or what else might I need time with to address the biggest, most complex challenges? It is hard to not jump right in to doing, but I find it is when I just sit in this space and truly am not moving that my best thinking happens. I really try to protect that time."	Sean Semi-structured interview zoom (11/11/20 - Time Stamp 43:58)

Table 6 (cont'd)

Leadership moves	Completing specific actions to strategically resolve challenges and make leadership decisions visible.	I started a school leadership connect team this year because I was feeling like an island. They know it is to help me think and reflect but not a shared decision-making space. I'm not sure how I'm going to evolve it for next year, but so far it has been a lifesaver. I needed people to help me think about my thinking. It is kind of like group cognitive coaching and we really generate a whole lot more options and perspectives than I would have if I was just stuck in my own head.	John Semi-structured interview zoom (02/02/21 - Timestamp 52:29)
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Taken together, in the findings, I present these experiences and actions as systems and processes of principal growth that support or constrain principals in their current roles. By looking at all this data in a strategic way, I present in the findings, the themes supported by multiple data sources, to show that even amongst the messiness, principals' jobs have changed, the context and challenges have changed and therefore they need different kinds and more support to be effective in their role.

Findings

Role of Principal

As articulated within many of the semi-structured interviews, principals commonly described their pre-pandemic role as “multi-faceted”, “complicated” and “too much for one person”. As each principal named the various parts of their jobs, they described an informal dichotomy between the tasks they felt passionately made a difference in the quality of their work and the tasks that they had to do to ‘check a box’. For example, one principal said “if I added up all the hours spent on the consolidated app or budgets or reporting for grants or reading the latest MASSP legislative update, – you know the boring stuff– and stacked it against the stuff I love – like working with the teachers, listening to students, collaborating with parents and families for

their child to get what they need – my former would far exceed the latter... but it is the latter that I think really matters”. It is more complicated than tasks that are ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Principals identified that when the value of each task, in their eyes, is greater or less than, in comparison with the expectation to do it well, that that influences how they feel about their role in its entirety. Filling a day or week with tasks that they must do but do not like or want to do, makes it difficult to feel like they are doing the job well and making a difference.

All the principals with experience in the role of greater than 10 years, indicated generally that “only” managing staff, knowing students/families and being visible in the community were not enough to be effective or dynamic in the principalship anymore. An example of this finding shines through in this excerpt from Sean’s interview:

“Let me tell you about my morning. As of 5:30, all I had scheduled on my calendar for today was this interview at 11:00 and a staff meeting at 3:30 that I was already prepped for. Oh, and at the top of my list from yesterday’s ‘must – do’ was submit a grant report for this \$1000 grant I got from our community foundation. It should have taken like ½ hour, but I didn’t get to it– so that’s out there. So, I was up at 5:00 to do my normal work out and knock out a few emails before the day got away from me. I am on a three-day streak for that – yay me. By 6:30 on my drive into work, the sub system notified me I had three rooms not covered and so I rushed to put out those fires. Before 7:00 I got a text from a bus driver about some kid on the bus that was supposedly posing a threat. I got a few more details and found out it was just a kid being an idiot but there was no real legitimacy to it – but man, you can’t down play anything dealing with threats because sometimes you just don’t know so then I am trying to make it up to the front doors because I like welcoming the students in and connecting with teachers to get a pulse on

their worlds but six, yes, six teachers stopped me in the hall between my office and the doors to complain about one thing or another. I am used to one or two, but something must have been in the coffee or water this morning if you know what I mean, and they weren't at all about the same thing. I didn't really even get to the front doors because I got a text from our superintendent that said 'come see me' and I couldn't decipher if it was good or bad and with him, it could go either way... so now it is really only like 7:30 and I run over to Jason's office and he just wanted a board report on this event that our school put on. He wanted the report in this board packet, so it needs to be written by the end of day he said, and I was thinking, yeah as if I have nothing else to do— of course I didn't say that to his face, but you know how it is. Just as I was walking back from Jason's office, I get a call from my secretary that a m-live reporter called to get a quote regarding an incident that happened on school grounds yesterday. She said she tried to use the script I had given her but the person was persistent so she put a 1:00 zoom appointment on my calendar to speak with the reporter and that I could cancel it if I felt like it wasn't going to work. I was pissed and annoyed because my day was getting sucked away from me. Oh, and did I mention that it is like only 8am and as much as I want to say this was an abnormal morning, it isn't and oh yeah, I walked in my office to find basically a pallet of Covid-19 test and 50,000 masks. So, I got into my office and wanted to knock out the board report but before I got the second sentence done an email popped in my inbox from a parent and the subject line said, "call me". There went the next hour of my day – as I was on the phone with the parent, I am seeing a MDE memo

pop in about reporting on 98b¹ learning goals and then I have to check myself to make sure I'm really listening to this parent but now I feel the weight of knowing, dang, I'm gonna have to report on those goals coming up soon and let's be real, I can't remember exactly what I wrote so that's one more hoop I know is coming – but hey on a positive note, I made it to my 11 o'clock with you and I'm finding it weirdly therapeutic to dump all this on you. Even if it is just for an hour today, I feel like I am being seen and that that right there – that is the abnormal part of my day.”

I included Sean's very long quote because in looking at its entirety, one can see the complexity, variety and intensity of the principalship -- that whole quote was only about six hours of time in one day. Additionally, Sean infers that this morning was normal and what was not normal was that he got to share it with someone, to be “seen”. As I reflect on Sean's statements, it is so clear that each task has waves of implications for himself, the school, and others, some bigger and some smaller and many intertwined. This is not surprising, but it suggests to me that the role of principal is not what it used to be. Just 10 years ago, it would have been much less common to hear about a principal being interviewed for negative incidents at schools, but school safety is very much in the forefront of principals' minds now in a different way. Just 10 years ago, the substitute and teacher shortages were not at this magnitude. In years past, principals may have covered for a teacher one day here or there, but principals now frequently talk about how their teachers are out for Covid-19 or mental health or other things and they cannot get anyone to come in and those teachers are gone for a longer duration of time as well. Just 10 years ago, principals would not have been the identified employee to administer

¹ 98b references the section of Michigan legislature Public Act 48 of 2021 that requires school districts to write measurable learning goals using data for all buildings and all students within a district. These goals had specific requirements like alignment to Covid-19 Learning Plans and supported by Michigan Integrated Continuous Improvement Plan (MICIP).

Covid-19 rapid tests to students so they could participate in learning and sports, but now, in many counties, they are the ones that have been trained to safely administer the tests and with the permissions from parents to do so.

All principals shared to some degree how they subscribe to one or more of the tenets of adaptive leadership. Not every principal spoke to every tenet, but each acknowledged at least one. Seven principals discussed cultivating healthy school culture through emotional intelligence and collective understanding of needs. Eight discussed a drive to attend closely to teacher and student learning through adaptation and accountability; and of those eight, half indicated how many barriers they felt were not in their control that took away from their ability to truly and genuinely focus on learning. One elementary principal, Joe, said:

“I really just want to go into classrooms with the sole purpose of seeing students learn and learning from my staff what incredible engaging strategies they are doing. This is like a really joyful and inspirational thing for me that I know would fill my bucket a little and instead, that joy is sucked out of my day when I have to squeeze in four Danielson observations for evals and one teacher is freaking out about getting me her data for student growth because she might be effective instead of highly effective. It's like ugh.”

This quote shows how it is not necessarily a lack of want for many principals to be instructional leaders, but other compounding variables influence their daily decisions and leadership moves.

Four principals talked about the need to stay current and be responsive to legislative demands while also knowing and implementing innovative research and best practices for all subject areas and education overall. They spoke to the complexity of doing that when new demands and new research come out all the time. Two principals in back-to-back interviews said

the exact same thing, “There are not enough hours in the day to do this job” and one ended the statement with “and do it well” and the other one ended with “with the resources we have”. These statements were powerful to me and magnified again, not necessarily a lack of want, motivation or desire, but rather, potentially, a gap in agency.

All principals indicated as a core belief that the role of principal is vital to student and staff success. Seven of the principals placed a high value on and/or declared a calling to the work they do as principals. Seven of the nine principals also used analogies to describe their pre-pandemic role such as wearing many hats, building a 747-airplane mid-air, and keeping many plates spinning and balancing in the air all at once.

Context and Challenges

In March 2020, near the beginning of the pandemic, Michigan schools shut down and our whole state of Michigan was forced to respond to the unknowns of Covid-19. This layered into the principal role a new context and set of challenges that did not necessarily stop any of the prior challenges. Principals all described to varying degrees the additional needs of staff, students, families, and communities during the pandemic. According to the principals, some said complicated shifted to complex, while others described it as a “breaking point” or unmanageable anymore. Principals described many of their pandemic challenges including but not limited to supporting their teachers to instruct differently and keeping students learning safely and continuously regardless of location or personal resource/access.

All principals acknowledged the helpfulness and massive hindrance of social media that exploded when March 2020 hit. Three principals mentioned Facebook and Twitter as effective tools to quickly mass communicate from the classroom, school or district to families and the community. However, all nine principals told extensive stories of posts where parents

“lambasted” them for decisions made. One principal shared a story of when an anonymous person posted a picture of her with her mask off at an outdoor restaurant followed by all kinds of slanderous statements about her in the comments under the picture. Another principal shared stories of a handful of teachers in her building posting negative comments about building administration and their commentary of how to be a “good leader”, implying she was not. The common thread across the stories from principals about social media was that it was more of a hindrance, and quite frankly, a pain point for many during Covid-19. One middle school principal, Danielle, said “it is like everyone that went to school once is now an expert on how to run a school and so no matter what I say or what decision I make it is going to piss someone off ...they feel they are entitled to publicly tell everyone I’m doing it all wrong.” Platforms like Facebook and Twitter gave the “anonymous” and others who historically were peripheral to information or decision making a new power and voice. In general, the principals’ statements named social media as a constantly shifting context exploding with negative narratives. The principals further discussed the internal impacts they felt on their identities as leaders, unintended and intended consequences on relationships, and the impact on the entire culture of schools and education.

Principals also reported having to respond to demands far outside their prior scope of work like contact tracing and even doing rapid or antigen testing on students at school. Eight principals said they lost a sense of boundaries between home and work, explaining work “never turned off”. Four of the principals described their role during the pandemic as not only “principal” but also “health care worker”, “mental health counselor/therapist”, “legal expert”, “media/communications director”, and more. An interesting common demographic among these

four principals is that their districts were smaller, fewer than 1000 students in the district. Jordan, an elementary principal who just started in 2019, stated it this way:

“...see when a kid jumps off the bus in the morning and walks up to me at the door with a tear in his eye and I can’t see his face under his mask, I pause and try to check in. Just yesterday, this happened– I found out this kiddo was not feeling well but I don’t have a nurse I can send him to, so I took him to the office, and I took his temperature. His mask is off, and he is in our side room that used to be a conference room but– ya know with Covid-19 – that’s no more. As I did that, we talked, and I found out last night his mom didn’t come home again. He had to get his 1st grade half-sister and himself up, dressed, not fed because there isn’t much in the house, but he gets both of them on the bus– he is in fourth grade. I wish I had a counselor or social worker on site but yet again that’s me. Last time I did a referral, nothing happened, even my calls to CPS and child welfare checks with our police liaison are anywhere from two days to two weeks out. The kiddo does have a fever and so I Covid-19 rapid test him –since that is our policy– before I hope to send him on to the classroom. Fifteen minutes go by and sure enough, he’s positive. And now I’m exposed. We just got over it in our house and I’m vaccinated but man with all this going on, I just don’t know. And this kid has missed so much school already this year, I am worried about him even passing 4th grade. I can’t send him to the classroom. It’s a real lose-lose and to top it off, I walk out of the conference room to check with the secretary and there waiting for me is our union representative wanting to talk with me about an incoming grievance regarding our mask mandate and the inability to work remotely unless greater than 60% of the class is quarantined. My brain can’t switch gears that fast but now I have to shift into lawyer mode, carefully, and watch my

every word because who knows how or when the next land mine might explode. I wish I had a real lawyer helping me!”

In this statement from Jordan, I heard him not only name other occupations that would help him like nurse, social worker, and lawyer but that he is not confident in his skills or ability to do these things that are now a part of the principalship.

Across the data, both pre-pandemic and during, the principals listed a seemingly endless number of responsibilities that they either were required to do or felt obligated to do. Six of the nine principals described to me during the interviews that with some of these responsibilities they felt unqualified, untrained, or incapable of doing them. Principals also acknowledged that some responsibilities or tasks were larger and more complex while others were smaller but still required time and cognitive demand. They also talked about how each day those demands, responsibilities and the overall role kept changing so even when they felt a little traction or small win one day, the next day could and likely would bring something new. Winson summarized this particularly well, “unless the system of education implodes and is truly reinvented the principalship will keep evolving, being added on to, or being band aided. What especially worries me, well it is really like a wondering circling in my head over and over...are we the weak point in the system? It is like a house of cards and I’m near the bottom on an unlevel surface, but I don’t feel like anyone is acknowledging that or me right now.” The thread that weaves all of this together is that the role of the principalship was challenging and multi-faceted even before the pandemic but became almost unmanageably complex during these pandemic times.

More and Different Kinds of Support

When asking principals to share how they were grappling with and addressing these challenges, principals gave a variety of responses and perspectives indicating no “one size fits all” solution. However, three quotes paint an interesting summary of principals’ thinking in their roles as they learned and led through Covid-19. Each of these examples magnifies that support plays a role in learning and leading.

1. “Sometimes I just don’t know what I need ... but if I don’t hold my shit together, no one’s gonna do it for me.”
2. “Just once this year I want someone that is not a principal to acknowledge to me that this is a really hard job and that they don’t really know what it takes to do all that I do.”
3. “There are days I think I might be on the right path, but it feels like it's never going to be enough. There is no ‘easy’ button or manual for leading a school during a pandemic.”

As I unpack each of these quotes and other data below, the message is clear that principal support within the field of education is inconsistent across spaces, underwhelming in general, and mostly a missed opportunity to better the system.

Sometimes I just don’t know what I need...

Principals talked about “needs” in a variety of ways such as along dimensions of time, magnitude, and by stakeholders. By time, I mean the need is there one minute and could be gone the next or must be resolved immediately. By magnitude, I am referring to the size of the need and level of complexity. Simply said, is it a little or big need? And by stakeholders refers to a need for or requested by a student, family, staff member, self, superintendent, etcetera. Three of the principals said their own needs changed from day to day or minute to minute depending on what ‘fires’ they might be putting out. One middle school principal, Tanner, discussed how she

prides herself on building systems and thinking in systems, yet she continued the interview to say that,

“...no matter how amazing my system is, I can’t prevent all fires or really see every one coming. That’s where I need to know I have support, but in my space, I don’t, well I wouldn’t really say that I think I kinda do, it just isn’t consistent or dependable or timely.”

As principals shared, I recognized it is not just about having or not having support that makes it work, there is a level of specificity and customization to the person and context that affects the perceived value of support.

Time and capacity. All the principals shared that they felt a constant ‘pouring out’ to take care of others’ needs which left little or no time, space, or resource, to meet their own needs as humans or sometimes just do their ‘actual work’/the ‘real work’ of being a principal. One elementary principal, Beck, said, “1440, that’s what everyone gets, no more no less. 1440 minutes in the day and that just isn’t enough. I know it is real and important work to take care of the staff and their needs, but what teachers don’t frequently see is that in my job description I am also responsible for a million other things so after I subtract out others’ needs, my required job duties, ... my family does not get the best of me, and I don’t have anything left for me. I can’t sustain this”. Beck continued on to portray that the exhaustion from supporting others and the girth of the role leave him feeling like he is inefficient and ineffective making decisions by the end of the day. He said, “I am so dog tired by the end of the day that even if someone said, what can I do to help, my brain cannot think of anything.” Another principal compared their exhaustion, the role and the intensity of the context to the grieving process when a loved one passes and says, “you know people ask all the time, how can I help, or say, I’m here for you,

what can I do, but you are grieving and can't even think about your needs or what would be helpful, you just don't know." Looking across all the data, all principals named in some way how their emotional and cognitive exhaustion perpetually diminished their decision making and affected how they responded to others by the end of the day or end of the week and so on.

Information/Knowledge Needs. Seven principals talked about their needs ranging from a knowledge or information perspective to social and especially emotional/mental health perspectives. Six of the principals talked about the need to have accurate and clear information. There was so much coming at them it was hard to decipher what was real and accurate and what they needed to really know to make critical decisions. Also, what they felt they 'knew' one moment, changed the next and no longer made sense. They articulated that this led to frustration and cognitive exhaustion.

Social/Emotional Health. Three of the principals that described social needs framed their dialogue around being "connected/disconnected". To summarize, it was a difficult juxtaposition to have a feeling of needing to be available or accessible 24/7 but feeling disconnected in authentic and meaningful ways. During the height of the pandemic lock down all the way through coming back or only seeing people two-dimensionally on screen or covered by masks, they felt disconnected from others. This disconnection was from staff, students, or other leaders and for some it included personal disconnection from family and friends that also impacted their work.

Mental Health. The three principals that really elaborated on their mental health needs also explained from their perspectives how they had felt prior to the pandemic that a person's mental health was a personal topic, not to enter their professional life and that there were some stigmas connected to weakness if a leader needed mental health support.

The quote by Danielle about everyone thinks they are experts had a few more sentences at the end worth including. She said, “I am lucky to have hindsight in some instances and really think about what needs and supports I have or that worked, but even then, I pray I don’t ever go through a pandemic again. I end up often wondering if I’m applying and learning from all this or if I’m just too traumatized from it all.” Danielle brought up the word trauma as well as grief in her interview. She was not the only principal that did this, and although this research does not focus in on those two topics, I felt it was important to acknowledge the pattern. Trauma is present in some principals’ lives through their role as principal.

Acknowledging this is a “really hard job”

Support can be defined or interpreted as many different things or actions. It is not only about the things or actions of support but how the support is received or perceived by the individual. In over half of the principals’ interviews, they described support as not only being some tangible thing or visible action like a financial bonus for hours spent contact tracing or a teacher covering the building if they had to step out to a meeting, but it was also when a valued other recognized and acknowledged them in an authentic way. Support was an emotion or feeling. Middle school principal, Tanner, said, “just once this year I want someone that is not a principal to acknowledge to me that this is a really hard job and that they don’t really know what it takes to do all that I do”. Tanner went on to talk about how isolating the leadership role is and the judgment she feels from others (mostly teachers and parents) who think they know and can do better or that she should be doing what they recommend. This same principal also shut down her personal Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts midway through the pandemic as well as highly limited what was posted out on the school’s accounts citing social media as a source of assumptions, criticism, and judgment. Three other principals acknowledged similar actions

regarding social media and the connection to it being negative or a space of ‘anonymous criticism’. Overall, eight of the nine principals echoed similar points in their interviews making connections to empathy and/or seeing multiple perspectives while owning that no one else (who is not a principal) is likely to fully understand what it is like to be a principal. Tangentially, during a networking meeting with principals in May of 2021, I asked for volunteers that might be willing to share a story or an experience that they think only another principal would understand. There were 38 principals in the room at the time (including those participating via zoom which is how I recorded it). Of the 38, eight of them had already participated in the interviews for this research. After the request for stories or experiences, the room was filled with energy and over 30 examples and stories were shared. These stories captured the idea that others outside the role of principal really do not see or know what a principal does or experiences day in, day out. In the end, many made similar remarks to the aforementioned quote and one individual mentioned that his significant other said to him recently, “I know that I don’t know– what I do know is your intent for good –and to me, that will always be enough”. At that point in the meeting, there were many teary eyes and we had spent more than triple the amount of time on that exercise than I had planned for the meeting, but I am glad I did.

A manual for leading a school during a pandemic

All principals through these interviews shared in their own way an internal drive to do their jobs well and the conscious efforts they were making to learn so they could be responsive to students, staff, and families through the pandemic (and always). When asking principals to share what or who they draw upon or access to learn and eventually make decisions or act, their answers were diverse including a variety of sources and mediums, but they all talked about trying something new for the first time or having to do something they had never done before.

These responses demonstrated a mindset of adaptive leadership and certainly learning transpiring.

People-based Sources of Learning

Formal Networks/Organizations. Six of the nine principals described one or more formal networks or organizations that they accessed within the previous three months to assist them in responding to the needs presented by Covid-19 or learn something new that would help them move forward in their work. Some examples of networks and organizations cited were the local county Principals' Network, both the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association (MEMPSA) and Michigan Association for Secondary School Principals (MASSP) organizations, and individual principal's district leadership teams. These formal networks and organizations shared two characteristics. The meetings or conferences that transpired included two-way engagement/interaction and offered additional tools and templates that frequently became 'just in time' to help address a current responsibility like developing "Covid-19 Return to Learn" plans.

Informal Loose Networks and Individual, Affinity-based Relationships. Nine principals shared examples of calling, texting, or emailing other principal colleagues or former principals who were still in to answer questions, learn from, share knowledge, or make sense of a situation together. Again, these sources of learning were interactive or two-way. Principals talked about the value of dialoguing through their challenges or inquiry and learning and synthesizing ideas. They also shared that due to the depth of interaction, many times they were able to get to a conclusion they would not have otherwise. Here are a few examples:

- Email from Principal (not in MASSP) to Another Principal (in MASSP): Hi There, I just got an email back from [Sarah] with their completed goals and two other school

districts' goals as well that she had access to. Thank you so much for connecting me with her. Certainly better together!

- County Elementary Principals' Group Text: Did everyone see the health department's new response guidelines? What are each of ya doing with your policies?
- Text from High School Principal to Intermediate School District Consultant (Former Principal): Thank you for always taking my phone calls! Feels great to have you as a thought partner. I know you likely can't always spare an hour to just chat, but I feel like I have a great plan forward at the moment. Thanks again.
- Email from County HS Principal-Lead to HS Principal Out-of-County (knew each other from Admin Program): Hey, I know you are trying to make a plan for summer learning opportunities, just wanted to pass along some of the tools, resources and research our county has pulled together. Hope it helps and let me know if you want to meet up again. We were super productive last time!

Each of these examples of principals supporting each other in informal ways was identified by them as valuable. It is clear in the data a relationship was positively established at some point previously. Based on these deductions, I can see aspects of situated and sociocultural learning present for principals as they learned. I noticed there was also a level of gratitude in most of the examples. Principals remarked that a benefit of most informal supports includes, but is not limited to, speed of information and response, spontaneity of learning, and usually one-on-one interaction that increases the feeling of connectedness or being seen or heard.

Digital and Written Sources of Learning

All nine principals also talked about accessing digital or written sources of information to assist in learning. These mediums are mostly or traditionally one directional, meaning the

principal was not getting a human or interactive response back from the source. Principals indicated the following as information sources, some of which they ‘trusted’ more than others to be accurate or helpful:

- Google it
- Searched Twitter for a thread or Facebook for a group
- Read articles
- Listen to podcasts
- Scan specific ‘go to’ organizations’ websites
- Read books

Four of the nine principals remarked in some way about trusting the source of information. Some described how they carefully looked at the source if it was something they googled, others sought out podcasts, books and articles from authors or individuals they had previously known or known of or that were cited by trusted sources. Additionally, one principal pointed out in her interview it was the aggregate of multiple digital sources with similar or repeated ideas that made it feel trustworthy to her or that she might use it as a valid set of information. Four principals referenced that they decided to use this approach of accessing digital and written resources to learn dependent on the kind of information they were seeking or the kind of problem they were trying to solve. Although overall fewer principals spoke to digital and written sources of learning in comparison to people-based sources, the evidence shows cognitive perspectives for learning are present in principal learning and decision making. Again, every principal made countless decisions within their role during these pandemic times and likely thought at least once, “I’m on the right path”, but no matter the information there's no manual for leaders on how to learn and lead well through pandemic times.

Discussion

As I synthesize my findings and look across all the data, I recognize two big ideas. Principals' roles and responsibilities have changed over time; and the support needed for principals to feel effective in their roles is varied and commonly less than adequate, especially in the current context. These ideas are not shocking to anyone that has been a principal or in a leadership role of similar nature, however knowing these facts deeply as case knowledge (Shulman, 1987) and doing something about it are two different things. Later in this section, I will explore potential opportunities for individuals, organizations, and systems to do more and better after examining and understanding the role of the principalship in the current context, but first a deeper dive into discussion.

Role and Context

The repeated message from each principal and across all the principals in this research is that, from their seat, the principal's role and responsibilities have changed. The data point to an ever-changing and increasingly complex context including but not limited to legislated education mandates, implicit and explicit expectations from the district superintendent and community including those that have never had power in their voice before, increased understanding of the impact that principal practices can have on student learning, and the unpredicted, unprecedented pandemic. In the 2015 revised Professional Standards for Educational Leaders by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration formerly known as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards of 2008, the researchers unpacked some of the myriad of challenges faced by current principals. They also named the educational landscape in terms of how the global economy is transforming jobs, the 21st century workplace for which schools prepare students, and the conditions and characteristics of children, in terms of demographics,

family structures and more. Furthermore, the revision of the standards explicitly called out the link between educational leadership and student learning, stating, “Improving student learning takes a holistic view of leadership. In all realms of their work, educational leaders must focus on how they are promoting the learning, achievement, development, and well-being of each student” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p.9). These posits were true prior to the pandemic and now ring true like never before today through the pandemic.

I hoped that by looking across my data and comparing my findings to the national and international educational landscape that Michigan would be an anomaly. The sadness of the intense impact of the pandemic and the ‘no win’ feeling of a principal as they attempt to effectively lead their school buildings day in day out, however, was not abnormal. Research shows Michigan is just like other states and countries. Principals and other educational leaders are leaving the profession or leadership roles in droves for the same reasons the nine principals discussed – over simplified, that’s context and support. Schools are not retaining leaders. According to Kim and Pendola (2022) “nearly 20% of school principals exit their position each year—and cite high levels of stress as a primary motivating factor.” (p.5)

Additionally, although this context and the outcomes of student achievement and principal success do not solely sit on the principal’s shoulders, principals currently feel immense responsibility and significant, overwhelming pressure. This paints a rather sad picture of the principalship. I posit from this research that many principals are suffering silently or struggling internally and often self-sacrificing because they do not see themselves as having the agency to create or modify the complex system and uncharted landscape so all youth and adults can experience true wellbeing.

Support

As established earlier, the role of principal is critical to student learning, yet larger and more complex than ever before. The principals in this research in essence are saying, the job is too big for one person, and they need support to do it well. Current research highlights this finding by pointing to the alarming level and increasing rates of burnout and turn over (Kim & Pendola, 2022). In this research, I found that principals more specifically indicated that they need support to be customized to the specific person and context to make a difference. There is no ‘one size fits all’ support that will work.

Interestingly, teacher researchers commonly also say the same thing, the job is too big for one person, and they need support. However, frequently the suggested solutions include the principals taking on additional tasks to relieve teachers. For example, Oplatka & Crawford (2022), in the *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, claim that “School leaders should support their staff in coping with a sense of loneliness and frustration many of them have experienced during this [pandemic] period and thereby encourage them to manage their emotions in classrooms and support their students similarly” (p.165). Although principals may do this, those principals examined in my research demonstrate that they do not universally have intentional and well-built systems of support or explicitly assigned individuals that they can “turn to” in house or accessible in the system with the actual purpose of supporting them. Also, where there may be pockets of successful support, they are much less common than they should be in an effective education system.

At the height of examining the roles, complex context and supports of principals I can see and hear an awareness of a true tension in principals’ lives. The thought that life is not meant to be lived or done alone and yet, many principals feel alone and/or not supported enough (or in

ways that make a difference) for them. My data really makes clear that principals are calling for and seeking out support and yet it is common for them to not feel it is there or available to them.

The role, context and supports are, for the most part, controlled by or heavily defined by someone other than the principal. I do believe the way principals perceive and take up each of these variables shifts their efficacy and therefore it is complex to consider what it is truly like for principals in education today and how successful leaders make it work.

Implications

Context is not Individually Controllable

As impactful as context is on a situation or person and as critical as it is to understand the world that surrounds a problem or space, there is reality in stating that a singular individual is likely not able to fully control the context. Therefore, it is important to look at the implications of this research through a lens of systems change. According to the Social Innovation Generation (SIG) organization in Canada, systems change is “shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place.” (Kania, Kramer, & Senge, 2018, p. 3). Individuals, organizations, and institutions may not control or change an entire context but may focus on smaller, controllable conditions within the context that could eventually lead to a change. In the end, the context will still be the context, and by which needs to be accounted for and acknowledged.

Principal Roles & Responsibilities

I do not think the way forward in this space is to do a universal simplification of the principal’s role and responsibilities, so it is clear, consistent for all, and void to context in a very complicated system. Instead, I can think of three possible implications.

- Researchers could do large scale, nation-wide audits on job descriptions of principals similarly scaling up beyond the six districts represented in the July 2020 Wallace Foundation Report: *Changing the Principal Supervisor Role to Better Support Principals*. Then, add further research on tasks of principals in today's world (during/post Covid-19) to triangulate real gaps. Once identified, then action steps such as potentially reducing the size of their role and increasing the resources afforded to take up the role of principal could happen but most importantly, taking the findings and making them known in the public eye could lift the real principal narrative in ways not already done.
- Legislators or private organizations could fund additional positions/roles like assistant principals, deans of students, co-principals, instructional principals, etcetera to fit the context and acknowledge that the job that was asked was frequently too big for one person. One drawback to this might be inequitable funding.
- Higher Education institutions, research organizations, intermediate school districts, school districts and others could collectively:
 - Building a comprehensive, aligned principal pipeline for new and aspiring principals as a strategy to improve student achievement and schools district wide (Wallace Foundation, 2020).
 - Audit and revise the Professional Standards for Leaders with leaders for clearer definitions and expectations of leaders and possibly address the disconnect in the loop between model, preparation, and practice. Additionally built into this systems' change could be principal certification and evaluation to hopefully address some gaps between theoretical design and user/principal experience (Koehnlein & Zmuda, 2022).

Support

As explored in this research, support comes in many forms and fashions. To that end, I see many implications and possible next steps for supporting principals. There will never be one magic bullet solution for principal support that authentically helps each individual principal or the collective. Hence, I see the following as just a few of the potential opportunities to explore or do:

- I will contribute to making the space better for principals in my county and for any principal I have or build relationships with and feel a responsibility to do so.
- Individuals can seek and see others' perspectives, specifically principals' experiences and opinions, with the intent to magnify their experiences and voices. This act would prompt principals' narratives to be more richly included in the larger, dominant narratives in education. It is important to listen and lift, not judge.
- Organizations can evolve, generate and/or co-construct communities of practice with and for principals as well as other kinds of high-quality professional development (Mercanti, 2022).
- Organizations can also acknowledge and lift the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model for successful youth as a model for understanding and supporting principals since they are whole people, too (ASCD, 2014). For example, one way this might look could be if principals were given additional supports like 'in house' employee assistance programs including counselors or therapist, or building level leadership teams made of assistant principals, curriculum and instruction coordinators, and others whose plates were not already full, or external supports like the networks named and unnamed with the sole purpose of supporting all aspects of principalship and

the whole adult. This would also be something afforded to central office as superintendents so play a key role in principal agency and could benefit from this thinking as well.

- Legislators that have the ability to change funding, professional requirements, and evaluation could fund initiatives that focus on supporting further principal learning and leading as well as incentivize or reward principals for their enhanced learning or leading. Although this may sound somewhat simplistic and grounded in extrinsic motivation, this could also mean taking away accountability metrics or other legislated requirements that have not produced the outcomes intended and therefore are irrelevant and an unnecessary drain on the system and principals.

Wonderings and Conclusion

In summary, now 22 years into the 21st century and through a pandemic, a majority of principals' context and defined responsibilities are different than years or decades of the past. Additionally, parts of an individual's context and the principal role may be out of his or her immediate control to change, however many principals strive for high levels of craftsmanship in their roles. As seen in the research above, many principals work hard and intentionally to learn and lead well drawing on various forms of information, support, and more, acknowledging they often cannot do it all alone. These efforts are not without barriers and leaves me wondering, how has the pandemic had a lasting impact on current principals' belief in themselves that they can do the job well, even with high craftsmanship, what does this mean for principal efficacy? And, what about principals that are headed into superintendency and teachers that are headed into the principalship? How has the pandemic affected potentially both their craftsmanship and efficacy?

Something that this research did not directly address but was discussed in different ways was the loss of loved ones, friends, students, and student's families from Covid-19. This came up multiple times and certainly has an impact on one's ability to think, make decisions, manage, and lead.

CHAPTER 3: IDENTITY AS SUPPORT: HOW IDENTITIES RELATE TO PRINCIPALS' LEADING AND LEARNING

Introduction

The role of principal is complex, extensive, and impacts student and staff achievement (Kaul, Comstock, Simon, 2022; Nelson & Squires, 2017). With such variance to the role, how it is taken up, and the context for which the principal is situated, there is no one size fits all solution to assist principals in developing into better leaders or to better their performance (Coburn, 2003; Elmore, 2000; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Grissom et al, 2021; Murphy, Elliot, Goldring & Porter, 2007). Even with universities investing time and resources in providing aspiring school leaders quality programs to start principals off well and decades of research that has identified knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to be high quality, highly effective school leaders (Murphy, Seashore, & Smylie, 2017; Swiggett. 2019; Thomson, 1993), principals commonly voice they cannot do it all and cannot do it alone (Clifford & Cogshall, 2021; Drago-Severson, 2012; English, 2008; Firestone & Shipps, 2005; Kegan & Lahey, 2016). Goldring et al (2020) directly name that principals need external support while in the role of principal to develop as leaders, but very little research has been done on what constitutes support through the principals' perspective and what specific supports help or hinder principals in today's context (Kaufman, Dilerti & Hamilton, 2022; Woo & Steiner, 2021).

I conceptualize support as transactions between individuals that might include behavior, resources, or communication/language with the intent of assisting (Williams, Barclay, & Schmied, 2004). Not all support provided by one individual is necessarily perceived as support by the other and necessarily received in a way that is assisting or bettering the situation or person (Reblin & Uchino, 2008). Therefore, when examining what is helpful to principals in today's

realities, I needed their perception of the supports provided. By principals naming the supports and then talking about the extent to which they are helpful, I can claim the support was received. In this chapter I will compare different principals' perceptions and experiences with support and how that in turn made a difference in their perceptions of being effective in their role. This exploration begins to address the questions:

1. What do principals perceive as supports and constraints in this context?
2. From the principals' perspectives, who and what limits or enhances the principals' learning and leading?
3. How did principals view their identities as a support in the Covid-19 context?

Literature Review

Providing support for teachers for improved instructional practice and student outcomes has been richly and continuously researched over the past thirty plus years (Beaudoin, Johnston, Jones & Waggett, 2013; Crawford, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Kaiser, 2021, Syed, 2015). The main supports identified in this research for teachers as they carry out their roles includes but is not limited to:

- principals providing supports teachers through direction, time, resource and relationship
- teachers supporting each other
- communities of practice
- quality professional learning experiences
- processes or systems that validate the profession

(Darling-Hammond, 2012; Leichtman, 2021; Shapiro, 2020; Vega 2015)

Just as teachers are adult learners with complex and extensive roles that need more and/or different support to effectively take up their roles, so too are principals. Yet, little research has

been done on the main supports provided to principals for improved leadership practice that then tie back to improved instructional practice and student outcomes. This is one critical gap in the current research in education.

Researchers in other fields, such as health care, have extensively studied ideas around support, not only regarding providing supports, but also how support is perceived and received (Eagle & Hybels, 2019; Lugton, 2008; Williams, Barclay, & Schmied, 2004; Willis & Shinar, 2000). This means that not only might we know about the quantity and diversity of supports offered in a particular field or system, but also about how individuals perceive those offerings as support and in what ways after support is received it is assistive or helpful (Reblin & Uchino, 2008; Smith, Uchino, & Reblin, 2010). In such research, the researchers ensured the voices of those receiving the support were magnified to draw conclusions about their perceptions and the extent that the support was beneficial after it occurred. I found this especially interesting because that is a gap in the teacher support research and even more so in the almost nonexistent research about what really supports or constrains principals. Lastly, within the specific field of mental health, perceived social supports research has been published claiming that all individuals' perceptions of support (or life) are filtered through the individuals' lived experiences and made a connection to identity as an influencer of perceived support (Inekwe & Lee, 2022; Procidano & Heller, 1983; Wang, Yan, Gou, & Jaing, 2022). As I think about that research identifying identity as a variable correlated to perceived and received support, I circle back to Vygotski, Gee and other researchers because I see connection within the field of education.

Within the literature regarding principals, a growing body of research exists about principals' leadership identity. Increasing attention has been paid to examining how principals' identities and leadership are intertwined and the outcomes of school or student achievement in

relation to principal identity (Crow and Møller, 2017). According to a large systematic review of principals' leadership identities from 1993-2019 authored by Cruz-Gonzalez, Rodriguez, & Segovia (2021), the "perceptions and opinion of other school members also shape the professional identities of principals" has not been appropriately examined and neither has training nor learning fundamental to leadership identity development (p. 43). This research uses a narrowed definition of identity in the sense that it is talking about leadership identity as a subset of professional identity and that is somewhat different than the definition of identity used in noneducation fields that I referenced above. I define identity as fluid traits or characteristics constructed by self and others (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Identity is recognizing a "person as acting and interacting as a certain "kind of person" or even as several different kinds at once" (Gee, 2000, p. 99) inferring that one's identity has many facets or layers and is complex. Identity descriptions are not silos or discrete; it forms, sustains, and changes across time and can shift dependent on a situation or context. Yet, Destin, Silverman, & Braslow, push on this definition by naming identity as a support in some context and Mommers, Schelling & Beijaard (2021) claim identity activities as supports for teacher development. Therefore, further in this chapter I adjust my working definition for identity as it pertains to this specific study and based on my findings to include identity as a version of potential and perceived support. I believe this study will contribute a narrowed, but highly relevant understanding of the intersection of support and identity in the context of schools through the principals' perspective.

Theoretical Framework

Prior to conducting this research, I did not have just one specific framework in mind to examine the data and seek the answers to my questions. As my research unfolded, I was continuously learning myself in different sectors and spaces, and I continued to reflect on these

two research questions: How did principals view their identities as a support in the Covid-19 context? And, from the principals' perspectives, who and what limits or enhances the principals' learning and leading? I began to see identity surface as a tool that may be useful. I oversimplistically define identity as fluid traits constructed by self and others, but I will more fully elaborate on that further on in this dissertation. Once I recognized identity as a way to make meaning and interpret my research, I narrowed down the topic to the particular framework by James Gee, "Four Ways of Viewing Identity".

Gee claims that part of what frames the way a person sees, interprets, and interacts with the world is their identity. Since seeing, interpreting and interacting with the world are core components of learning and leading, I can deduct that identity must also frame or influence an individual's learning and leading. I have selected Gee's framework of power and identity because it allows me to pay attention to and interpret principals' experiences and information shared in a particular way. It is through this framework that I am able to see, assess and appreciate the relationships between leading, learning, and identity and what that means as supports, constraints, limitations or enhancements within the principal's lived experience and perceptions.

Identity is recognizing a "person as acting and interacting as a certain "kind of person" or even as several different "kinds" at once" (Gee, 2000, p. 99) inferring that one's identity has many facets or layers and is complex. I believe identity descriptions are not silos or discrete. A person's identity forms, sustains, and changes across time therefore may be defined as fluid. Different facets of one's identity may come into the foreground or background depending on the situation or context or that facet of identity may be unchangeable and visible across time and spaces.

Gee’s framework, as summarized below in the table, is especially helpful for categorizing facets of identity and making sense of some of its complexity. I will explain further each of the four categories in more detail.

Table 7
Four Ways of Viewing Identity

Process		Power	Source of Power
1. Nature-identity; a state	Developed from	Forces	In nature
2. Institution- identity; a position	Authorized by	Authorities	Within institutions
3. Discourse-identity; an individual trait	Recognized in	The discourse/dialogue	Of/with “rational” individuals
4. Affinity-identity; experiences	Shared in	The practice	Of “affinity groups”

(Gee, 2001, p. 100)

Nature. Nature-identity is described as the parts of one’s identity that are created by nature, such that it is biological or something one is born with. This identity category is outside the control of an individual or society, except for the point that society has positioned these traits in particular ways. For example, biologically my sex is female, and I have brown eyes. Although one’s nature identity seems clear and objective, the meanings society constructs regarding these identities has historically and currently helped or hindered particular identities both in and outside of the realm of education. Specific to education, society has positioned some nature identities as gaining or restricting access to education, educational careers, and leadership (Hill, Ottem, DeRoche, 2016; de Brey, Musu, McFarland, Wilkinson-Flicker, Diliberti, Zhang, Branstetter, and Wang, 2019).

Institution. Institutional identity refers to the part of one’s identity that is defined by an institution or society. Gee uses the question, “who am I”, or who do authorities determine I am to set the boundaries of this category. In short, the “position one occupies in society” (Gee, 2001, p. 105). For example, my organizational institution would identify me as the Director of

Learning Services and Instruction; the Michigan Department of Education would recognize me as a teacher and administrator due to the licensure that they awarded me; and the Community Foundation would say I am a Trustee for their board. It is through these titles that I am also likely afforded certain benefits regardless of the actual work I do. In each of these institutional identities, it is the institution that has the control or power to recognize me. Gee (2016) elaborates further on the way institution-identity names an organization as a system to have power or an individual with a particular institutional-identity, such as principal, has authoritative power over other institutional identities, such as teacher or assistant. Historically then, researchers have identified how some institutional identities have helped or hindered some individuals as a part of a larger hierarchical educational system.

Discourse. Discourse-identity is categorized as individual traits that come to light through self-identification or identification by others as shared through dialogue and interaction. These traits are not considered something someone is born with, and they can change over time or context. Gee gives the example of a friend being charismatic and explains that it takes that interaction or discourse between his friend and others to display the trait (Gee, 2001). These are frequently the descriptions individuals use when asked “what am I”.

Affinity. Affinity-identity refers to the groups by which one has “allegiance to, access to, and/or participation in” and therefore share in some specific practices or experiences. (Gee, 2001, p. 105). In this identity category, the shared or common practices or endeavors define the affiliation, not necessarily the other people in the group, a trait or institution. Common examples that come to mind are those that call themselves “runners”, likely sharing the common practice of running. Those that call themselves “foodies”, likely share in the common endeavor of seeking out special foods, share in a genuine interest of food and/or loving food. Affinity

identities can range in the sense that sometimes individuals intensely participate and other times they may peripherally or minimally engage. With technology so prevalent in today's world, an example of peripheral or minimal engagement with an affinity group may be subscribing to a certain Facebook group that I like or an example of intense affinity for me is the moms book club that I started a few years ago that meets once a month to talk about books, kids and life. We all share in the practice of reading books that help us raise our kids and do life together. In both of these examples, part of my identity can be identified and categorized through these affinities.

In this research, for the given time and place, the four categories of identity: nature, institution, discourse and affinity of Gee's Power and Identity framework allow me to name the predominant category or categories of identity for an individual principal and why. And, since Scribner and Crow define professional identities as "identities which individuals use to make sense of and enact (their) roles" (Scribner and Crow, 2012, p. 246), this framework for identity is one way for me to understand and answer my research questions: How did principals view their identities as a support in the Covid-19 context? From the principals' perspectives, who and what limits or enhances the principals' learning and leading?

Methods

Context and Participant Selection

Working from my larger data set of 17 principals, I narrowed the participants down to three because I wanted to compare and contrast just a few principals and their experiences as opposed to give a broad representation of principals, like I did in my last article. By focusing on three principals, I more deeply see nuances and relationships between leading, learning and identity for each individual principal. I shifted from looking at principals as a general group to seeing the individual and lifting their particular experiences and stories since no two humans are

ever completely the same. I used the demographic and historical information survey, more fully explained in the data sources section, that included the following questions to assist in the narrowing of 17 principals down to three:

- What is your current age?
- What gender do you identify as?
- Please specify your race(s)/ethnicity(ies)
- Name your completed degrees and what each one is in.
- What is your marital status?
- How many dependent children/independent children do you have?
- What is your current household income range?
- How many years did you teach prior to being an administrator?
- How many years have you been a principal (or AP)?
- How many years have you been in your current role?
- In your current position, what level(s) are the building(s) you oversee?
- Approximately how many years until you are able to or would consider retiring?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share to assist in this research?

With this data, I created a side by side excel spreadsheet of responses with questions down the left side and principals' names across the top. Using color coding to indicate similarities and overlapping answers to the 13 questions, I found six principals that had five or more overlapping or similar answers. This seemed to be a breaking point in the data. By that, I mean that four overlapping answers equated to a group of nine principals and at six overlapping answers would have only identified two principals as participants. Richly expounding on six principals' experiences and comparing or contrasting their learning and leading experiences through an

identity lens felt like too many, so I looked at the six principals' semi structured interviews and selected the three that I already fully transcribed from the previous research I was doing to save time. This quickly narrowed the six to three. Again, these three principals shared at least five overlapping or similar answers in the demographic survey, such as woman, former teacher, and has/had children so that in my research I knew I had a starting place of similarities in identity and context before going too deep in analysis. As my focus participants for this investigation, I selected Tanner, Danielle, and Kelly.

For the context of the three principals, all were in districts within 70 miles of each other, but not in the same county. All were in the southern part of Michigan, but their buildings varied in size between 120 and 250 students and population density being suburban or rural. The one with the greatest number of students had additional human resources such as a shared assistant principal, shared social worker and shared literacy coach with another building in the district. So again, although Tanner, Danielle and Kelly shared at least five similarities in identity which is partly how I selected them, their contexts differed.

Data Sources

To richly see the complexities of principals, interpret principals' experiences, and compare similarities and differences in principals, I needed to gather multiple forms of data (Merriam, 2009). I collected data between May 2020 and April 2021. I began with a demographic and historical information survey via google forms and semi-structured interviews of 17 principals. In July 2020 through August 2021, I collected data in up to three additional categories depending on their responses in the demographic survey and initial semi-structured interview.

Demographic and Historical Information Survey

After principals agreed to participate in this IRB approved research study, I emailed an invitation to a google form acquiring demographic and historical information (Appendix A). If participants did not fill out the electronic form prior to their interview slotted time, I gave them directions and time to complete it while with me. Although most of the questions were either multiple choice or fill in the blank, the final question of the survey was, “Is there anything else you'd like to share prior to your interview?” This was included to ensure the participants felt a level of comfort in sharing and increased voice. If a response to a question earlier in the survey was causing some other inquiry or the answer options were not clear or accurate, this question gave a space for them to address that. Also, none of the questions were required in order to submit. Participants could also go back and edit their response at any time and resubmit.

Semi structured interviews

In order to understand principals’ experiences and thinking, I needed deep one-on-one conversations with each principal where they were asked intentional questions but had the flexibility to expound and felt safe to be authentic and share. To do this I adapted an interview protocol (Appendix B) from Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski (2018) that was originally used in the book, *In Translation: School Leaders Learning in and from Leadership Practice*. I focused on naming pressing challenges, managing the named challenges, and learning in and from those times to help or hinder overall leadership or success in the role as principal. In addition to the interview guide having clearly constructed questions, I found it was within the probing follow ups that stories, experiences, emotions, and insights were more richly shared and captured. Each interview was conducted via zoom and was recorded. During the interviews, I took extensive notes. Immediately following the interview, I secured and confirmed the

recording for transcription later and then took 15-30 minutes to walk back through my notes, capture anything I might have missed and most importantly, highlighted any immediate ‘ahas’ or heartstring moments that personally struck a chord with me.

Three Other Data Categories

Depending on the responses in the semi-structured interviews, I followed up with additional interview conversations, tracked social media posts if in the interviews social media was brought up by the principal, and collected fieldnotes in professional development or networking settings when one or more of the three identified principals was present. This led to a more detailed and clearer picture of each principal. See the summary of data sources gathered in the table below.

Table 8
Three Principals’ Data Sources and Number of Each Collected

Principal Name	Demo-graphic Survey/ Google Form	Semi-Structured Interview (segmented transcription) ~60-90 min/each	Follow Up interview (Segmented transcription) ~15-30 min/each	Post-Interview Social Media Communication (if mentioned in interview- Twitter, FB, LinkedIn)	Observation + Field Notes (PD/ Networking Meetings)
Tanner	1	1	1	34	8
Danielle	1	1	0		13
Kelly	1	1	1	5	15

Follow-up interviews. These interviews were initiated for Tanner and Kelly after their initial interviews because I wanted to probe further on a response, needed clarification or felt I missed something in the initial interview. To set up the follow up interviews, I emailed each principal with my request and gave a general prompt as to what I wanted to follow up with them on. However, the actual questions in these interviews were specific to each person, not standardized

like the first set of questions extended the conversation for each to tell the ‘rest of her story’ or circle back to some unfinished experience. It also had an informal aspect to it that afforded a more relational exchange.

Post interview participant social media posts. If the principal mentioned social media in their initial interview as a space of learning or a source of challenge, I sought out their accounts in whichever named platform (Facebook, Twitter, and/or LinkedIn) and started to follow them. Across approximately a year’s time, if a principal created a post that was related to their own learning, a challenge, problem-solving or decision making, I screenshot and saved it. I did not save any posts that were just regenerated from others or just ‘liked’, only ones that they created, and I could see in ‘public’. I could not capture everything due to some Facebook groups are private or not joinable by a non-principal.

Observation field notes. Although many professional development opportunities and network meetings took place via zoom during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school year, there were still many times to observe interactions, learning and leading in person as well. I was able to attend Michigan Association for Secondary School Principals (MASSP) and Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principal Association (MEMSPA) large annual conferences virtually with Tanner. There I participated in session breakout rooms, observed, and participated beside many other principals. Between July 2020 through July 2021, I also led 10 virtual and face to face local principal network meetings and observed or participated in 15 other networking and smaller principal or leader professional development opportunities where one to three of the principals in this investigation attended. During these learning opportunities, I took field notes of spoken statements, actions, and intangibles like body language, tone, and reactions in the room.

I collected multiple data sources over the course of the year to provide a “full and revealing picture of what is going on” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126). This is important to provide evidence that “warrant[s] key assertions through triangulation” (Erickson, 1986, p.140). I am aware that I will never be able to capture every piece of revealing and relevant data, but my quest was to obtain more than a snapshot of a time or story and to shine a light on the complexities of the world of principals in a way that honors each principal’s authentic experience.

Data Analysis

My process for analysis started the same in this article as the previous one– informal at first, but intentional. Immediately following every interview, I took time with my handwritten notes to capture anything I might have missed. Then, highlighted in my documentation any immediate “ahas” or heartstring moments that personally struck a chord with me. “Ahas” were big, synthesized ideas that the principal had stated or captured, for example, naming when and how learning happened, naming leadership moves they made and why, and any hindrances or supports that impacted their leading and learning. Heartstring moments were when a principal shared a strong emotion or experience that resonated for me, likely beyond learning, impacting their leadership and possibly brought about by their context. This highlighting process usually only took another 10-20 minutes, but it was central to my internalization of the data before formal analysis. I put this informal, immediate analysis to the side and waited until I completed all the semi-structured interviews to do my formal analysis. It was through this formal analysis explained below that I recognized different, highly tangled, inseparable connections between principals’ identities and the ways they take up their roles as principals during unprecedented times.

I revisited all three of my research questions at the conclusion of all the semi-structured interviews. Then I took all my highlighted ‘aha’ and heartstring statements from the interviews and listed them out of context on a separate document to get a different perspective. It was in this process and the review of the new document that I noticed phrases of identity interwoven in many of the responses to my questions about learning and leading through adaptive challenges—phrases like, ‘I’m a problem solver’; ‘as a woman leader’, and ‘my staff tell me I’m an oral processor’. That was the moment I decided to look richly at this work through Gee’s “4 Views of Power and Identity”.

It would have been overwhelming to fully overlay Gee’s framework on 17 principals’ interviews and all my data, so in the section above, I explained how I narrowed it to three. I went back to the three principals’ semi-structured interviews and demographic surveys and got clean, unmarked transcripts alongside my own notes and the google form responses to reread each one in its entirety with fresh eyes. On this first pass, I highlighted all data entries that referred to any part of a principal’s identity. For example:

- Use of words like, “I am a _____” or “my friends say I’ve always been _____” using a descriptive noun, not emotion, in the sentence to recognize a trait.
- Use of the word “my” showing ownership and name of a group or network referring to shared experience or practices like “my _____ group is my go-to for...”

Part of this analysis here was just reading comprehension on my part and not looking for a certain word. In the demographic and historical information survey, this was almost all identity related, so I did not need to highlight that for most of the questions, except the comments question at the end.

Where I did really mark up the survey was in my next steps where I annotated in the three data sets for each of the three principals what category(ies) the identity statement may have fallen in (Nature=N; Institution=I; Discourse=D; Affinity=A). As Gee indicates, identities are multidimensional and therefore some statements had more than one category associated with it. Because of my novice research experience, I started small with the first few pages of each semi-structured interview transcript. To enhance internal validity of the qualitative research, Merriam (1998) recommends peer examination which means asking colleagues to comment on methods or findings. So, I gave about 15 pages of data with highlights and annotations to another scholar who is a former doctoral colleague familiar with Gee's framework, now faculty member at a large research-focused university. He evaluated my analysis to determine whether the entries were placed in the correct categories and provide other methodology feedback. My definitions and descriptions of the four categories and the categorization of data entries were confirmed. I then completed annotation of all the datasets for the three principals. Most nature identity and institutional identity responses were identified on the survey and most of the affinity and discourse identity responses were in the semi-structured interviews.

I then looked at two other facets of the data, how frequently these identity statements were occurring and where in the interviews they occurred. To do this analysis, I tallied for each person how many identity annotations I made. By these tallies, it was evident that identity was a contributing factor in the ways these principals learned and led. Then, using a blank interview protocol document, I wrote the principal's initials next to the question each time their response to the question evoked an identity-connected statement. I noticed questions three, four and six (see Appendix A) relating to the research question #2 (What prior and new learning do principals identify as helpful for understanding and addressing adaptive challenges such as Covid-19 in

their school context...How do principals learn through grappling with current challenges and what and who do principals say they draw on for learning?) had the most statements.

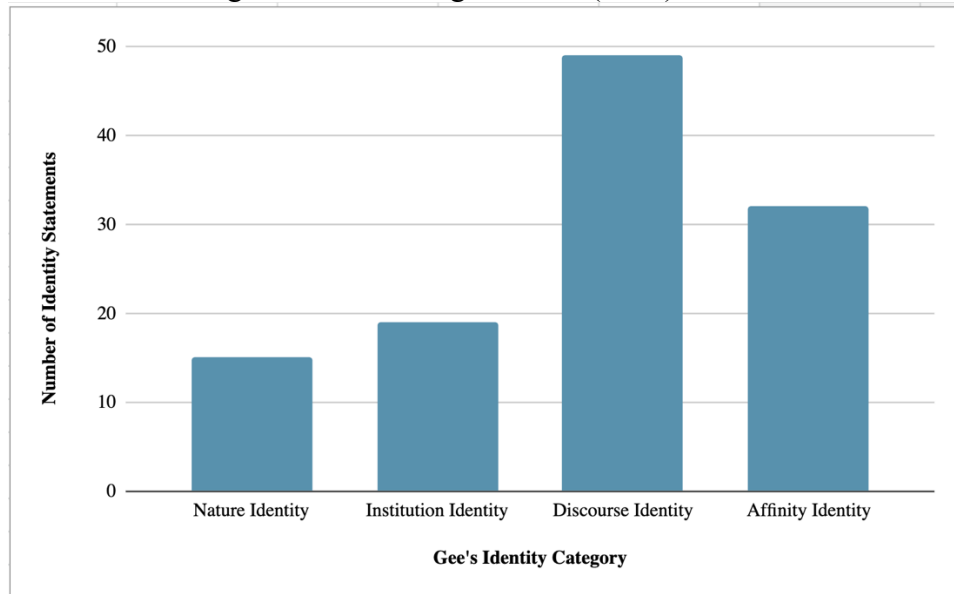
Next, I went back to my annotated data and highlighted pink if it was positively framed or connected to support and green if it was negative as in reference to a hindrance or constraint. This took interpretation on my part as well as making sure I was reading in context. If a statement did not appear to be one or the other, I just wrote a large “C” next to it because it was neutral but contributed to the idea that identity, learning and leading are all complex, but still critical in my mind. Also, “C” is different than the marks I had used previously, so it stood out for later reflection. I then looked back at my categories, tallies/initialing, highlights and annotation across my data to see possible themes and patterns. I took personal notes as I reread and began to list possible themes and patterns as they may be translated into claims. It was in this step that my first findings and possible claims truly surfaced. I then synthesized these notes to reduce the quantity of claims and hone in on what claims seemed to me to have the strongest evidence.

Findings

Across the three principals the number of data excerpts highlighted and identified as fitting into Gee’s four categories during the semi-structured interview was much higher than I originally thought since I was not explicitly asking about identity. The total number of entries within the framework was 115 for the three principals’ semi-structured interviews. The data is as follows:

Figure 1

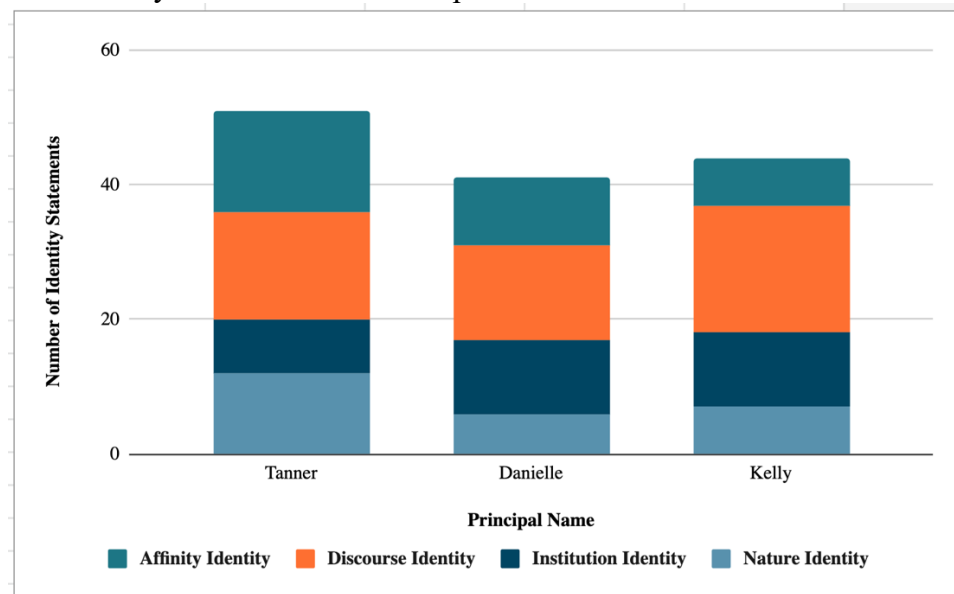
The Number of Entries Categorized According to Gee's (2001) Framework



This does not account for the nature and institution identities named and shared in the demographic and historical information survey that is summarized in Table 8. Looking at the data by principals allowed me to see the frequency of identity related statements made by each principal.

Figure 2

The Number of Identity Statements Per Principal



Three Principals' Identities

Others' Views - Principals' Identities through Nature and Institution

According to the demographic and historical information survey, the three principals examined in this research had multiple similarities as demonstrated in the following table.

Table 9

Identity Markers Gathered in the Demographic and Historical Information Survey

Identity Marker	Tanner	Danielle	Kelly
Age	48	51	39
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Self-identified Race/Ethnicity	White	White	Latina
*Building's Dominant Race/Ethnicity	White (84%)	White (86%)	White (47%)
Building Level	Middle School	Middle School	Elementary
Level of Degree	Master's Degree (in Ed Leadership)	Master's Degree (in Ed Leadership)	Master's Degree (in Ed Leadership)
Annual Household Income Range	\$100,000- 200,000	\$100,000- 200,000	\$100,000- 200,000
*Building's Percent Economically Disadvantaged	61%	31%	89%
Years in Principal Role	11	15	1
Years in Current Principal Role	3	15	1
Years in Teaching Role	15	15	13
*District Superintendent Gender & Years in Current Role	Female, 3 years	Male, 4 years	Male, 10 years
Number of Children	1 Dependent & 4 Adult-aged Children	0 Dependent & 3 Adult-aged Children	2 Dependent Children

**Note: In the table I included additional rows pertaining to the building/student make up and district superintendent to easily reference and compare in the discussion section.*

Most of the identity markers above fall into Gee's (2001) nature or institution identity categories.

Additionally, as captured in the zoom recordings or face-to-face out at a professional event, such as a conferences and network meetings, the principals demonstrated a few more similarities per their visible or observable identities including but not limited to dark, medium length hair, light skin complexion, height approximately 5'4"-5'8 and professional attire (dress, blazer/jacket, button down blouse/dress pants). Other identities recognized or categorized in accordance with the institution category that came out during the semi-structured interviews or follow up interviews were:

- Kids at home during the pandemic
- Sports coach
- Adjunct instructor for university
- Teaching is second profession ("Thought I was going to be a nurse")
- Board member of non-education based non-profit
- Authors of articles in varying formats

At the time of the study, Kelly was the only principal of the three that had younger, dependent children at home and made mention of how difficult it is to be mom, teacher to her kids as they had school at home during Covid-19, and principal and "wear many other hats" during the pandemic. Kelly was also the only principal to frame her entrance into education as a second choice. When Kelly talked about her learning pathway to her current role, she talked about it as a journey and that her life experience has made her path winding. She also said college was a struggle each time she was seeking a new degree.

Tanner and Kelly both talked about coaching different sports while also being a principal. Since these are paid coaching positions of which an institution selected them for the role, I

identified these parts of their identities in accordance with the definition for institution identity. Yet, there are parts of their interviews where both talked about coaching through an additional affinity lens. They explained being a coach and being a principal shared many similar leadership moves such as motivating individuals, knowing the rules of ‘the game’, and getting people to work together.

Danielle and Kelly both referenced being board members to non-profit organizations in their communities and authoring articles or blogs visible to others. I interpreted these parts of their identities as institutional attributes, however, the way they talked about them came through in a more discursive way. Both indicated that as leaders, they felt a need to give back to the community or field of education by sharing their learnings and/or contributing their time for the greater good.

Danielle and Tanner shared one other institutional identity, being adjunct instructors for undergraduate education classes at universities. Both talked about this teaching as a way to stay connected with individuals entering the profession so in a way it was helping universities, but also helping their districts creating informal relationships with possible pre-service teachers that may become new educators in their buildings one day. I found this interesting because it is clearly an institutional identity, however, it seemed like Danielle and Tanner were leveraging this part of their identity as a leadership move.

The Individual Sees Themselves - Principals’ Identities through Discourse and Affinity

Tanner

In the semi-structured interview while responding to the question, “how did you learn to do what you’re doing,” Tanner said, “I need social, I’m a people person. I like talking with people, processing together and building off each other's ideas. Also, I’d say I’m a problem

solver by nature, I think in systems, but people make the systems, so I default to talking with people. When I try stuff out, I check with people to know if it is working.” This indicated that Tanner sees a connection between learning, doing and identity and she sees part of her identity as contributing to her learning. I recognize that she responded as if she had always had these traits but later, she explains how her identity has ‘grown and changed’ over time as her experiences have influenced who she is and how she leads.

Through this conversation, Tanner gave other descriptions of discursive traits she recognizes as influencing, connecting to and supporting her learning and leading. Other identity attributes or traits named directly or indirectly in the interview were team player, humble, and smart:

- “I’m a *team player*. I like being on a team, sometimes I depend on my teammates, but it also brings me joy to help them. I would say I thrive on a strong team. Over my 15 years as a principal, I’ve had a variety of principal colleagues in district and two different superintendents... some for the better, some for the worse. On a side note, my current super just sent me a new Ed Leadership article. You might like it. I know you like to read. I haven’t read it. It is like the sixth one in a week and I just don’t connect that way.”
- “I’ve learned to be humble over the years in this role. I think it comes with the experiences I’ve had and the other leaders I’ve been mentored by and really respect. I believe some leaders are in name or title but without humility they can’t really lead in meaningful ways. I can think of two examples. A good one and a bad one... My third year as principal back at my other school, I messed up... and genuinely apologized. And, for the bad one... well, out of all those ICS meetings I told you about, came a lot of ideas

generated by me or by other district principals and sure as shit my superintendent would say she came up with them. This wasn't the first time she's wanted the glory and praise for an idea that wasn't hers, but I just tell myself if it benefits kids and our community then I don't need to self-promote. I'm okay with being *humble* for the greater good. I don't know that I could have said that early on in my career."

- "I've always considered myself *smart* and able to learn anything I set my mind to."

In these three quotes I interpret Tanner as naming a trait that she has acquired or learned across her years of experience: team-player, humble, and smart. Some seem learned intentionally, while others more by happenstance. I also synthesize that these learnings and identity traits are perceived by Tanner as benefits and enhancements to her leadership. Tanner infers generally across the three quotes and other statements that her leadership moves are better today because she has grown, learned and changed through her principal journey. As a side observation worth noting, if I unpack the first quote a little more, I found it interesting that Tanner made a semi-negative comment about her superintendent and the articles sent. I think it was subconscious, but by saying, "I just don't connect that way" I interpreted that Tanner does not necessarily feel she has gained much from particular leadership moves by her superintendent. This surfaces more later.

In addition to discursive attributes Tanner discussed formal and informal affinity groups related to learning, leading and connectedness. She referred to being a sports fanatic, college athlete, runner, and soccer mom. Tanner also shared stories of being a traveler, following travel blogs, watching the travel channel, going on trips with former teacher friends for spring break and previously cruising with her spouse and kids. Sometimes these affinities seem to subconsciously affect how she takes up her role as principal and shows up as a leader, but

conscientious or not, they are recognizable as part of her identity. For example, during the interview a teacher stopped in and asked if she wanted to go for a run after school the next day. Tanner said yes and after the teacher left, Tanner shared that she gets such a good pulse on her staff when she takes the time to do these nontraditional things with them. I thought it was also interesting that she said, she does not initiate these nontraditional activities so much because she does not want the teachers to feel pressured to say yes, but that she's made it known she loves to run, watch sports, grab coffee, and so on.

Many of these affinity references stated above were woven into the responses after I asked Tanner, "what kinds of support(s) do you have to help you manage during these complex times?" She indicated she would access these groups or participate in these specific practices to feel belonging, connectedness and in turn, it gave her "brain space" to "learn what she needed to learn and lead with a fuller bucket". Additionally, Tanner shared a story of early in the pandemic when the district superintendent was running Incident Command System (ICS) meetings daily, she identified she had a real "meltdown". She said,

"In normal times my superintendent held biweekly leadership meetings. She's done this since her (and my) 'day 1' in our roles. At almost all those leadership meetings, we'd spend 5-10 minutes just connecting... sometimes formally –like sharing something you do for fun– or sometimes informally like –hope everyone's weekend was good, anyone got a good story? I think this made it easier for my colleagues and I to work in general because we know about each other, we know what makes us tick and what we care about and my super[intendent] would casually bring things up in passing that made me feel like we had life in common, then BAM! No leadership team meetings, only daily, yes daily, we had one-to-two-hour ICS meetings for literally a month straight. Then they went

weekly. About five weeks into these meetings, I had just had it. I was sick of talking about Covid-19 and nothing else. No one, including my sup, checked in on me, how I was holding up. We were connected 24/7 but not really connected and I remember just melting down one afternoon feeling like my superintendent just didn't get it, didn't support me, didn't see me. Looking back at this now, I can see where I was looking for connectedness and support didn't translate."

Furthermore, Tanner identified several formal affinity groups she chooses to actively participate in:

- Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association (MEMSPA) through conferences, networking, blogs, articles, and access to resources.
- The Principal's Desk (Facebook Group) through online chats, posts, and resources sharing.
- #WomensLeadershipNetwork (follow on Twitter @MASA) through tweeting/posts and resource sharing.

In these formal spaces, Tanner recognized that affinity groups including formal networks were her learning spaces. This description of Tanner's identity through traits and affinity groups is not an exhaustive list.

Danielle

Although Tanner and Danielle appeared most similar by looking at their nature and institutional identities, what came out during the interview was very different. In the semi-structured interview while responding to the question, "how did you learn to do what you're doing," Danielle said:

At 51 years old, I've seen a lot. Lived and learned. I feel like I know a lot and it is my experience that helps me know how to do what I do or don't do again. Lots of trial and error in my world. Usually, I learn as much from my errors as my successes. I also think it is my experience that has informed my perspective on what works for me and what barriers I need to either address or let go of. I don't let things eat at me like I used to – maybe its maturity, I wouldn't say I'm wise, but I am experienced. Regardless, I'm better off for it and don't want to go back to being a 20- or 30-year-old, or a novice administrator.

In this quote, Danielle explicitly linked her identity of “experienced” to her way of learning.

Other descriptions of discursive traits Danielle recognized as contributing to her learning and leading include good listener, hardworking, and optimistic as magnified below with direct quotes:

- “I think some of my skills that support my learning and leadership sometimes get stereotyped into being a woman leader. For example, my superintendent will make offhand remarks about people coming to me over him because I'm a woman, but I think it is because I've intentionally worked to be a *good listener*. I take my time with people and actively listen because that is who I am. It also happens to help me be good at what I do.”
- “I have to work hard for my learning. I read slowly, and reread frequently, I think on things, I ask clarifying questions. Learning does not come easy, and it never has but my ability to work hard at learning translates into *working hard* in everything I do. I see that as one of my best traits as a leader. I feel like my people know I'd never ask them to do

something that I would not do myself and if something is worth doing, I do it until I do it right.”

- “I am generally an *optimistic person* and try to keep my mindset positive. This has always been a part of my core from the time I was a little kid. My family, my friends and my staff have all told me this over the year but through Covid-19, I’ve really had to hone in on this to stay centered and I’ve infused this in the way I lead because I think it helps. It’s not all the time... and it doesn’t mean I don’t get pissed or down but staying genuinely positive is a part of me I’m proud of.”

I see these three discussive traits as interesting because I feel that I could take them out of the context of being a principal or being in the field of education and a dominant narrative I’ve heard is that they are good traits to have to support a successful life. Additionally, Danielle also named two other traits, competent and flexible that I think speak more directly to leadership and surviving through a pandemic. Here is what she said:

- “I saw myself as highly *competent* in my role after doing it for 15 years but through the pandemic there have been days here and there when I had a few doubts.”
- “I used to think that everyone in education had to be flexible, and in general, I think what I assumed was to be a good teacher, a good leader, you know, you had to roll with the punches and just be flexible because so much was out of your control. But now, in the heat of the pandemic, I am really seeing people fold or even totally crumble. So introspectively I think I’m seeing a divergence of flexible and not flexible people specifically in leadership through Covid-19. I put myself in the *flexible* side and think that this trait supports my approach to leading right now in a more magnified way than ever before.”

Overall, I noticed the way Danielle talks about these five identity traits seems to be absolute in the moment and true across time for herself, as if they are unchanging and at her core.

During the interview I also asked Danielle, “what kinds of support(s) do you have to help you manage during these complex times?” She paused here for what felt like a long time in silence. She started with explaining a bit about self-care and other ways in which she chooses to turn inward for support. She indicated supporting and knowing herself has always seemed to be something that has gotten her through hard times. I was struggling a little to see how this answer connected to my question, so I reworded the question and probed further, I asked, “who or what helps you know what to do next as a leader or makes you feel supported in your leadership?” Then, she shared there are not many people or specific things that have supported her, or more so, that she relied on, but across her years in the principalship she has drifted in and out of groups that may have served her learning or leading needs at the time. She explained how now those supports are just lower on her list of how she wants or needs to spend her time. She gave the example of the County Middle School Principal Network. In her first few years of being a principal she was highly participatory in the principals’ group. It was her “go to” spot for current information, a pulse on the county, and how to deal with big problems she faced as a novice administrator. Then in her seventh year of being a principal she began to lead that group and really formed some genuine bonds with the other principals. She said they problem-solved together, brainstormed creative ways to engage their staff, and so on but after about three years, she did not want the additional load of leading it, so she stepped down from the role. Then new principals joined the group, some of her favorite senior principals retired, and she kind of stopped going to the meetings, especially because when her new superintendent came into his role, he indicated to her he did not like her being out of the building for meetings. She said, “I

do not remember the exact day I decided to not go any more –it really just fell to the wayside-- and I haven't made time for it since". When the pandemic started, she had a few text messages with a handful of other principals but still did not access the county group again as a whole or go to the now virtual meetings. Interestingly, as she closed out that story about the middle school principals' group, she clearly had an "aha" shift said:

"I've got one, not sure why I did not think of this first. I frequently use my Facebook group, 'Principals & Administrators: Networking, Collaboration, Support', like daily. I do not post a ton on there, but I search all the time to see if others are posting about the same problems I'm having and if there are any good ideas I can learn from. Probably weekly I snag something and use it in my principalship. I do not know how many people contribute to the group but probably thousands from all over the United States, so I think it gives me a variety of views and I never have to leave the building. It also is something I can do when I just have like 5 minutes of time. So that's bank [really good]. Also, when I do post in the group, I always get multiple comments like I just posted a week ago about ideas for how to end this year well. Being that Covid-19 is still so prevalent, and people are all dealing with it differently, I can't do what I've done before so in a matter of an hour, I felt like I had five great ideas, and I knew what I wanted to do as an "End of Year" experience with/for my staff. It's been a life saver." Both are examples of affinity groups that Danielle has linked to her learning and leading.

Later in the conversation, I circled back and asked if she could think more or share about any constraints or things that might have hindered her in her learning and leading now or pre-Covid-19. Danielle started out slowly saying, "well, it's complicated, but I think vaccines impacted me." I was not following or seeing the connection at first, but she went on to share how she is medically fragile, and it is just her and her husband at home without a lot of family or

friends nearby and due to her unique health and she could not get vaccinated right away. She shared with the other principals in the district that she was not getting vaccinated (yet), and they treated her differently. She had a medical exemption submitted to HR and the superintendent was accommodating but gossip spread across the leadership team and into the community. She said trying to lead through all that gossip and negativity about a choice she made for her own health was really hard. Danielle said she does not know how much that really impacted her learning but certainly her “mindset to leading” during the pandemic. Note, I identified the district principal and superintendent “leadership team” as both an affinity group and an institutionally created group at the same time depending on the context and the person.

Lastly, I just wanted to acknowledge here that the interview between Danielle and I seemed to have the least flow of the three principals. It jumped around quite a bit; I rephrased questions more so than with the other two principals and felt that it was the least conversational. I am not sure if it was me that day or something I particularly did or if something else was going on for her, or a third variable impacted it.

Kelly

Kelly was the least experienced and youngest of the three principals examined in this research and yet, when asked in the semi-structured interview, “how did you learn to do what you’re doing,” she answered the quickest, without any hesitation, as if it was not the first time she had thought about the subjects of leading and learning, successes and struggles. First, she named herself, not only a learner, but a “consumer”. She said:

“I love learning. I am a consumer – every article, podcast, TED talk, radio quip that gets sent my way and I seek it out, too. Those that know me joke that it is like a sixth love language for me– giving and receiving learning!

She then jumped right into talking about learning to lead...

“...long before I was a leader by title, I read, studied, observed and practiced leading, leadership strategies... Now I’ve only been in this role a short while, but I frequently recall prior learnings when I come across problems or situations that I have to resolve as principal. A lot of times I seem to take some obscure theory and someone else’s experience that I read about, and I can merge them together to come up with a new way of looking at or solving some of the problems we’re facing. People are always like, you are so creative, I’d never have come up with that. Then we try it out and voilà, that’s my leadership move, for better or for worse, then I can scaffold from there or try again.”

These two quotes are critical because not only does Kelly identify herself as a learner but also a leader by action or behavior. She also highlighted that others name her as creative in her leadership or problem solving. This is one way people tend to recognize discursive traits-- through how others perceive them. Kelly did this multiple times in her interview. I also found this last part of this quote particularly interesting, but in a tangential way more related to other chapters of my dissertation, because she used the word “voilà” as if inferring that leadership has some magic or chance to it. I am not sure what she intended by her word choice, but I interpret that sentence as speaking to the complexity of leadership and the interconnectedness to learning.

When asking Kelly about making decisions, other leadership moves, and leading through adaptive challenges, Kelly highlighted additional parts of her identity. These quotes acknowledge Kelly through a holistic lens, not siloed by each trait.

- “I’ve had a hard upbringing, life struggles and personal trauma so that lets me come alongside students, staff and colleagues in a different kind of empathetic way [Me: So, would you call yourself an Empath?] Yes, totally. Not just because of my experiences

but it is also just my personality. I'm a feeler and I come alongside others by acknowledging their feelings so they can be seen and heard. Others tell me that is part of why I'm so easy to talk to for them. It is just a part of who I am."

- "I am passionate about education, people and life—not in any one order and not separate! Its each day, every day, all day for me. Even though I didn't know right out the gate that education was my pathway, once I started, I've never stopped. I found my why, and now I own my vision. Like how awesome is it that I have the privilege of being a principal. I may not always know the right steps, but I have surrounded myself with really smart people including my husband and we are all better together."

These two quotes show some of the emotional and mental aspects of Kelly's leadership but really demonstrate that one's identity is inseparable from learning and leading. Interestingly, Kelly did not explicitly say she is a positive or optimistic person, like Danielle did, but when I asked Kelly to name challenges, she briefly did, then quickly turned the language around to make it an opportunity or downplayed the intensity of the challenge in some way. See the table below as a summary.

Table 10
Challenge Downplayed

Challenge Named	Opportunity/Downplay
I just started as a principal back early in 2020 and probably by others' standards, I am novice .	I have so many great leaders around me, I may not know exactly what to do next, but I know my Superintendent has my back, I know my staff has great ideas and they know I'll listen to them. We also all believe it is about the kids, so no problem is too big for us.
The pandemic is like nothing my family and I have ever seen before—the rate of change in such a short amount of time ...	I tell my staff, if we have to do this again, we'll be more ready for next time, look at all we've already learned. We should be proud.

Table 10 (cont.'d)

With 2 kids at home as well as other family duties layered on top of the long list of full-time work duties, it's really a hard, constant juggle.	Sometimes I think about trying to do it all, mom, wife, principal, friend, sister, daughter but then I think about this is the 21 st century and if all these rock star women did it before me with more kids, less tech and so on, I know I can do it.
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Based on these shifts in language talking about hard things, I perceive positivity as part of Kelly that integrates into her leading and learning. She may not be cognizant that she even does this, but I think being positive is a part of her way of seeing and engaging with the world.

Throughout the interview, Kelly seemed very social, but did not name any professional affinity groups supporting or constraining her leadership or learning like Danielle and Tanner did. She referred to personally being highly connected to other Latina women as a source of strength and identity. Kelly spoke a lot about “my girls” and when asked if those were family member or friends, she said, “both, we Latina we are thick forever”. One story Kelly shared was regarding the support she got as a principal from her “girls”:

“When I share with my girls about what I do in my role as an elementary principal, I think they get it - or at least come beside me and I know they’ve always got my back. Their words of affirmation give me the strength sometimes to show up the next day. We always joke, what’s said in this group, stays in this group— you know Vegas rules. Sometimes we also swap mom stories and believe it or not, lots of things that work with our kids, work with my staff. Just last week I was getting drinks with my girls and my friend, Sara, shared about her twenty-year-old son struggling with mental health and girlfriend problems. How she gracefully handled it made me think of a particular teacher on my staff and the next day, I had a one on one with this teacher. A few days later, the teacher came and shared how that conversation was like a real flip of a switch for her. She now has an appointment to get some help and feels like she is on a better path for

herself. She said her students are even noticing a difference in her in the classroom. I just think you never know where the next idea will come from so I'm always thinking, listening, connecting and trying new things."

I found it interesting that Kelly was the only principal of the three to call out her culture as influencing the way she took up the principalship and a support to herself as a leader and learner. Kelly was able to cross community of practice boundaries with her learning and bring it into her leadership. Kelly talked about other interests that help describe her identity, but they did not explicitly link to leading and learning in the way she talked about them. Kelly said she was a nature lover, foodie, movie addict, secret librarian based on her number of books at home, and volunteer at the homeless shelter.

Exploring and explaining each principals' identities through Gee's four perspectives highlights the forming and reforming of each of these principals based on their lived experiences within the context including expectations of others and the constructs of the system of education.

Discussion

Identity is Complex

There is a risk in my choice to reduce individuals' identities down to four categories and concern of my own bias in selecting specific examples within each category. This choice may mean my interpretation and decision making on which attributes to recognize may not be what the principal had selected if they were writing this research. And this choice to disentangle identity for sake of understanding takes away some of the nuance and essence of what identity means. Despite these risks, it is also beneficial to do this. It helps me understand that identity can be a visible or invisible influencer in the ways principals lead and learn. Much of Tanner, Danielle, and Kelly's interviews were not "let me tell you about my identity", they were about

recognizing that who they were/are drove their decisions, approaches and take aways from leading and learning in rich, complex ways.

In & Across Situations & Environments.

Time. Identity is a constantly fluid process in which a person interprets and reinterprets oneself as a certain kind of person and is also recognized as a certain kind of person in a particular context (Gee, 2001). All three principals recognized some discursive traits that were established in youth or young adulthood, while other traits were developed through experience. From this there is an interconnectedness between identity and learning as both are grounded in time.

Situation. “People can actively construe the same identity trait in different ways, and they can negotiate and contest how their traits are to be seen (by themselves and others) in terms of the different perspectives on identity” (Gee, 2001, p. 28). This came through in both Kelly and Danielle’s interviews. For Kelly, she’s “passionate” which comes across in the different situations and contexts she is in and is usually taken up as a positive part of her personality, regardless of the situation. Contrastingly, Danielle seemed to acknowledge a nuance of showing up differently in different spaces because of how it was perceived by others like her superintendent, colleagues or staff. Both seemed aware of how this can be a help or hindrance dependent on the context or situation. More could be explored in this arena.

Many layers, multiple identities, foregrounds and backgrounds. If we think of parts of someone’s identity as circles of different sizes measuring importance for which they see that attribute or part of their identity, we can imagine a person’s identity having many circles, the size of the circle changing over time and the placement of each circle more towards the foreground or background affected by context. For example, being a teacher might have been the biggest circle for someone before they had children of their own. Then after they have a child, the “teacher”

circle still exists, it may have on certain days shrunk in size or be a little bit more in the background rather than be so prominent in the foreground. This is one way to see or think about the aforementioned variables of time, situation or context as well as Gee's four ways to view identity: nature, institution, discursive and affinity. Lots of layers, lots of circles of varying sizes, fluid and complex. For each of the three principals, across the days of interviews and data gathering, I was able to capture a partial snapshot of their identities recognizing differing aspects of their identities at the time. These contextualized, identified, and complex aspects of each's identity came through in their stories and responses. More specifically, how the principals fluidly positioned themselves, using their identities in relation to contextual challenges was prevalent in each's responses and connects to similar research by Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) about teacher professional identities leveraged to resolve challenges. Not to oversimplify and say certain traits or characteristics are better than others, but rather the act of knowing that in each principal's lived experience, they are using parts of their identities, some more strategically than others, to influence, change or resolve a situation or challenge.

Shared Versus Hidden

Reflecting across all the interviews, I was reminded that I could only see and interpret what was shared with me. Remember, responses from principals were generated based on questions about leading, learning, supports and constraints, not specific to identity. I also do not have a way to parse out what was consciously, or unconsciously, shared or explicit reasons individuals kept some parts of their identities hidden.

One of the three participants was going through a very painful divorce during Covid-19 and shared pieces of the divorce negatively impacting the support she felt in life in general. Part way into her response, she stopped to confirm that she would not be identified in the research.

Her watery eyes and slouched shoulders told me that she was struggling with this piece to her identity. There was a connection to how unsupported she felt as the principal leader, but her words only told so much of the story. She also mentioned that she did not tell anyone on her staff until much later after everything was finalized. Another principal shared that one of her children was going through some “gender identity inquiry” and that although she sees students at school struggling similarly, she had not truly empathized or learned what she felt she needed to support her child. She shared she joined a Facebook group for parents of children at different stages of gender inquiry and learned so much that is helping her at home and school. Both principals wanted to protect these parts of their identities in some ways and so I did not go into too much detail, however, both also made connections to these parts of their identities being linked to leading, learning, support and constraint. To that end, it is valuable for me to acknowledge I do not know the whole picture or any of the research participants’ whole identities. In short, identity is too complex for me to fully explore and explain-- even my own identity.

Identity as Support or Constraint in Learning and Leading

Affinity groups Interpreted as Support or Constraint

In Tanner, Danielle, and Kelly’s semi-structured interviews all three referenced different affinity groups as sources of support for their own leading and learning. Though particular affinity groups identified differ from principal to principal, I posit the shared beliefs, practices or experiences connecting the principal and her/his particular affinity group translates into feelings of support by way of belonging and a safe and trusting learning space, like Kelly said, “what” said in this group, stays in this group.” All principals also explain the individual benefits of participation in different affinity groups as a way to get feedback and affirmation for their

leadership decisions. I interpret these affirmation and other benefits as support for principals leading and learning.

Over time, who is in the group, how strong the shared purpose is, and the frequency of shared learning or benefit changes just like identity changes. As these variables change, so too does the individual principal's perception of the group being a source of support. Furthermore, since affinity groups are basically by choice, I deduct that affinity groups are more likely to be a support than a constraint to principals' learning. Through the pandemic principals that choose to continue to attend, engage with, and/or utilize the affinity groups do so because it benefits them. If the group was a constraint, I think the principal would just not participate and therefore no longer continue to identify as having an affinity with the group.

Discursive Identity Traits Interpreted as Support or Constraint

In looking across the data, all the attributes I categorized as discourse were positively linked to supporting the principal in their leading and learning. Each principal mentioned how certain attributes helped them in being a quality principal, got them through hard times like Covid-19 or supported their learning in some way- like I'm a continuous learner, I'm a good problem solver, I'm a team player. However, even though all the shared and categorized discursive attributes were framed as positive, I do not think that is because all traits support learning, I think that is because people generally or unconsciously like to see the good in themselves and I only had a limited time for the interview. I did not probe further or explicitly ask if there were any traits they felt they had that constrained or hindered their learning or leading. If I would have, or if I had also interviewed their staff or superintendents about other discourse identity traits, I think I would have gotten a greater variety of attributes that may have framed parts of their identities as a hindrance to learning and leading. A few examples of

possible traits that I could have predicted might have arisen in the principal interviews could have been stubborn, task oriented over people focus, arrogance, disorganized, poor-time manager, etc. These examples position some attributes as good while others bad but more importantly this speaks to discourse identity traits as being individually constructed or ‘owned’ but recognized “by how other people treat, talk about, and interact with this person” (Gee, 2001, p. 103). And to that end, supporting or constraining leadership more than learning since leadership always involves others.

Additionally, I recognize that usually discourse identity traits are interpreted as individual and internal whereas supports are commonly assumed as things or people externally applied to assist the individual. Yet, in Danielle’s interview she specifically spoke to supporting herself and knowing herself as if it was a trait of hers. I found this outside my interpretation of the framework but valuable to think on some more.

Identities In or Out of Sync with School or District

The identity of a school or district is an ever morphing, almost living, non-formulaic aggregate of the individuals that make up the school. Hence the principal is both an individual with an identity and a contributor to the school and district’s identity. Though unintended in my methods, I recognized through the data where the three building principals were either in sync or out of sync with their school staff, students, or superintendent. This appeared to trigger each principal’s perceptions of support or constraint on their leadership or learning to varying degrees. I do acknowledge this is not the only identity and context related variable that influences leading and learning.

Nature. Danielle brought up a few times a comparison between her past female superintendent and her present male superintendent. Rather than speaking about the superintendents just as

former and current, she inserted their sex as a necessary descriptor in the conversation. Based on her examples, she felt in sync, connected to, and more supported by her prior superintendent in a positive way. Inversely, she indicated she was out of sync, stereotypically positioned as a female, and less supported by her current male superintendent.

Institution. When discussing supports or constraints on leading and learning, Danielle shared her experiences around the Covid-19 vaccine. Particularly how the other principals, some of her own staff, and others in the community treated her differently and negatively after hearing she could not get vaccinated right away. Even though only a few knew the why behind this, people made remarks to her about how stupid a person was if they did not vaccinate, some unfriended her on social media, and overall discounted her in different ways. She said the general agreement in the community was clear ‘get vaccinated’ and so she was out of sync with the district and community until her doctor said it was medically safe for her to vaccinate. She shared she had a new revelation going through that about what it feels like to be pushed out of a space and felt unsupported. She was deeply personally hurt by this, and it constrained her leadership in a way because of all the tension. This was also a particularly interesting story from Danielle because it really magnified for me how Covid-19 has affected communities differently, communities have/had different resources, and different supports.

Discourse. Considering how Tanner shows up or engages her staff and how they come to her or respond to her seems to show an alignment or some level of being in sync with each other. More specifically, Tanner calls herself a team player and coach that strategically supports people to work together for a greater good. Her staff see her as social, open and caring enough to make time for them. These traits align with the schools’ written expectations and practices of teachers and students. This idea of shared discursive identity traits across the principal, individual staff

and sometimes even named in school values, makes me think about belonging and possibly support. I believe a key part of thinking about being in sync or aligned by discursive traits is the idea that it is others that see or name these traits in an individual or group giving it validity, not just a person's perception of themselves.

Affinity. Although the data was brief, Tanner brought up in the interview how she sees that her approach to participate in learning is somewhat out of sync with her superintendent's approach. She named learning by sharing and engaging others particularly through various, active communities of practice like MEMSPA and The Principal's Desk Facebook Group. In contrast to her superintendent that visibly pushes learning from articles or books that he consumes individually. When he shares one article after another, she said she feels "annoyed and disconnected", hence out of sync. She indicated that those feelings turn into tension and therefore a constraint under his leadership.

I recognize this is an oversimplification of Gee's framework in a myriad of ways, such that identities are not siloed. Also, the framework is in respect to individuals, not organizations or groups, etcetera, so possibly this is a set of data and interpretations that could hold potential for future work.

One last thought for discussion. I might have been able to draw attention to the idea that a white, economically advantaged, married woman within a predominantly white, economically advantaged community led by a white male— like in Danielle's case— may have invisible (or visible) privileges when it comes to leadership. This over simplistic example of being 'in sync', opens a different conversation about race, power and systemic issues in our field of education and world, but I did not feel like I had enough data to go down that pathway.

Conclusions and Implications

Identity is a contributive and every-changing variable connected to how principals learn and lead. More specifically, some principals consciously and unconsciously leverage their identities to work towards resolutions or address challenges in relation to other individuals, institutions, and contexts. Identities of nature, institution, discourse, and affinity can be perceived as supports or constraints for the principal. This is a critical finding and one that changed my working definition of identity from the beginning of this research to current. Affinity groups were most commonly acknowledged as a space of formal and informal support. However, the perceptions by principals were less about each of the four ways of viewing identity and more about seeing identities “in” or “out of sync” with the school, district, or community. When in sync, identity was perceived generally as support, help or benefit and when out of sync, a constraint, hindrance, or detriment to learning and adaptive leadership during complex, pandemic times. From these conclusions, I see potential implications or next steps. One option might be to create or promote time, space and ways for principals to reflect on their identities. For example, principals could be given specific time by their superintendent to individually engage in self-guided reflective learning opportunities or fiscally, the district could allocate funds to support one-on-one principal leadership coaching with a model that intentionally honors identity and integrates thinking on identity as connected to leading and learning. Both these examples magnify the value of the institution or supervisor being in sync with the individual principal and supporting them. Another implication might be to offer more affinity groups for support. These likely are made by principals and for principals, however, integrated into those support spaces could be intentional learning about attributes and dispositions of adaptive leaders. This is not to oversimplify the complexity of leading but rather further principals’ efficacy,

agency, and craftsmanship. Barriers in this possible next step include but are limited to, getting principals to know about the opportunity, principals' time, and the permission they sometimes do not get from superintendent or staff to participate. Although all implications and next steps will have barriers, I strongly feel these are missed opportunities if we do not try.

CHAPTER 4: ONE PRINCIPAL'S LIVED EXPERIENCE AS AN ADAPTIVE LEADER

Introduction

Each chapter up to this point has addressed one or more of the research questions in this dissertation from the perspectives of multiple principals. In this chapter, I thoroughly examined the case of just one principal to provide a more robust and in-depth picture of her principal experience and holistically response to all the research questions.

1. How are principals learning and leading in the context of Covid-19? What learning perspectives do principals intentionally or unintentionally leverage when addressing changes associated with adaptive challenges?
2. What prior and new learning do principals identify as helpful for understanding and addressing adaptive challenges such as Covid-19 in their school context? How do principals learn through grappling with current challenges? What and who do principals say they draw on for learning?
3. How did principals view their identities as a support in the Covid-19 context?

This is then a representation of one principal's story that she believes and sees as her understanding of leading and learning during these complex, pandemic times.

Literature Review

Pre- Covid-19 literature repeatedly confirmed that principals and the way they take up their role as principal leader matters for student and school success (Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay, 2021; Northouse, 2019). Literature up to January 2020 captured and conveyed characteristics and experiences of effective school leaders (Cruz-González, Rodríguez, Segovia, 2019; Gumus, Bellibas, Esen, 2018; Hallinger, 2013; Hallinger, 2018; Hallinger & Bryant, 2013). Some of the researchers acknowledge the role context has in making sense of leadership

moves, while others left that out. Some also paid attention to identity, again, while others left that out.

The dominant narrative most commonly captured the voices of white, male administrators, and only within the last 15 years or so, have some researchers began to address gender and race-based barriers to the development of leadership identity in school leaders (Cruz-González, Rodríguez, Segovia, 2019). According to Moorosi, Fuller, & Reilly (2018), in the 1980's a growing body of literature started to examine the experiences, leadership characteristics and outcomes associated with female principals. Then, in the early 2000's, more and more research highlighted Black school leaders' experience, development, barriers, and outcomes. Most of this literature was qualitative in nature. In 2019, Lomotey wrote the first comprehensive review of research on Black women principals using research from 1997 to 2017. He found Black women principals, specifically, have been understudied and five other findings that laid the groundwork for future theory-testing studies looking at the leadership strengths and struggles of Black women principals.

The limited, quasi-current research available specific to Black women principals paints two pictures. One, Black women leaders' "multiplicative identity as Black and women influences their experiences and perceptions of leadership" as they enact their roles (Aaron, 2020, p. 146). The other suggests that Black women leaders' "constructions of success are shaped by overcoming barriers of their own racialized and gendered histories to being in a position where they can lead in providing an education for their Black communities, where they are able to inspire a younger generation of women and to practice leadership that is inclusive, fair and socially just" (Moorosi et al, 2018, p.152). I was able to find one quantitative study by Jang and Alexander (2022) studying the link between Black women principals' leadership and

9th grade students' math achievement, but the student data from this study came from 2009-2015. This research provides valuable perspective, however, the world changed at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and therefore the context of schools through Covid-19 needs to be examined in conjunction with these other variables. This research offers two things, 1) a narrative of one Black, female principal's story past and present that has not previously been captured and 2) knowledge about principal leadership in today's context.

Theoretical Framework

In a previous chapter I explained three learning perspectives (Cognitive, Situated/Distributed, and Sociocultural) and one leadership framework (Adaptive Leader). In this chapter, I am focusing on sociocultural learning theory, and not just tenets of adaptive leadership, but more so the characteristics of adaptive leaders and the leadership moves adaptive leaders make.

Sociocultural Learning Theory

Much of sociocultural learning theory and the connection to identity is grounded originally in Vygotsky's research (Nasir & Cook, 2009). Vygotsky (1987) claimed:

- human development and learning originate in social, historical, and cultural interactions
- use of psychological tools, particularly language, mediate development of higher mental functions, and
- learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development.

Furthermore, these ideas are closely interrelated, non-hierarchical, and connected (Mcleod, 2008; Polly, Allman, Casto, and Norwood, 2017). Werstch (1991) posits learning is a social activity through which social practices become internalized by an individual. Additionally, Hand and Gresalfi (2015) claim that it is relevant to examine the extent of one's participation in and across

activities as well as the sense of oneself in relation to these activities that influences and builds fluid identity. Sociocultural learning theory provides a means for understanding how identity, culture, experience and knowledge are all intertwined (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). In short, seeing learning through sociocultural perspectives means richly considering the interconnectedness of the world, context, relationships, and individual(s). These things are so intertwined that it would be nearly impossible to understand learning without looking at it all. I acknowledge that the limited research published about Black women principals usually is grounded in an intersectionality framework or Black feminist epistemology (Lomotey 2019), however, I chose a different approach. This matters in my research as I listen to and learn from the case of one principal. I cannot separate her identity, experiences, the context or her learning from one another and still make sense of it all.

Adaptive Leaders Characteristics and Leadership Moves

Characteristics of individuals may be explained as discursive traits as a component of identity (Gee, 2001). Although conflicting research is present regarding depicting leadership theories through traits, I am doing this only to provide one manageable way to see and identify adaptive leadership in action (DeRue, 2011). The adaptive leader is described as being flexible and varying their approach in terms of mental framework and thinking strategies. They are active learners, proactive, open to diverse viewpoints, and displaying emotional intelligence (Korengel, 2019; Bulutlar, & Kamaşak, 2014). Ramalingam, Nabarro, Oqubay, Carnall, and Wild (2020) claim the adaptive leader is deliberate in collective decision-making, transparent in learning with and from others, and transparent in their leadership moves building “360 accountability” (p. 5). Georgios (2019) goes as far as calling adaptive leaders, “chameleons”, as they can shift and change their leadership, learning and other dynamics based on the context, participants, and

more. He says, “a chameleon knows *why* he must adapt and that understanding keeps him from making arbitrary change” (Georgios, 2019, p. 3). These descriptions of the adaptive leader represent a certain kind of identity one might associate with adaptive leadership theory, however, these traits may only be acknowledged or confirmed through behavior and experience.

Therefore, I also use leadership moves - behaviors, actions or decisions that a person does - to describe the adaptive leader. Heifetz, Linsky & Grashow (2009) and Simmons (2022) give similar lists of leadership moves representing what adaptive leaders do. Below I have combined their research to name six leadership moves I used in my framework for exploring one principal’s experiences.

Adaptive Leadership Moves:

1. Recognize and name adaptive challenges.
2. Seek out others’ perspectives to see and understand the complexity in the challenge.
3. Bring together individuals (or generate multiple groups) that collectively, collaboratively and visibly:
 - understand the challenge
 - learn together, and
 - work toward resolution.
4. Communicate empathy and constantly build social connection with being attentive to emotional intelligence. Specifically, invest in and value relationships as human needs that need to be met before and during difficult work.
5. Construct systems that encourage iterative problem solving
6. Encourage and support people who believe in iterating and persist to evolve solutions

Combining sociocultural learning with adaptive leadership traits and leadership moves affords me the opportunity to make sense of and name how one principal takes up her role as she learns and leads during the pandemic.

Methods

My study uses qualitative research methods. More specifically, I implemented case study design (Yin, 2009) to generate an in-depth, multifaceted understanding of the complexity of learning and leading in current times. I was interested in understanding the principal's current context, roles, learning perspective and leadership moves. I collected a variety of data sources but relied most heavily on one semi structured, one-on-one interview, a follow-up interview and pages of field notes.

Participant Selection & Context

Participant Selection

Within this larger study on principals' roles, leading and learning in complex times I chose to focus on one principal's narrative to allow for greater depth in exploring her experiences as a principal. I was purposeful in my selection. Working from my larger data set of 17, I selected the participant based on four criteria:

1. I had not examined this participant in the comparative research described in Chapter 3
2. I had a broad variety of data sources that I had compiled beyond the semi structured interview (i.e.: emails, tweets, PD field notes)
3. The individual's demographic and historical information was different in at least three ways from the majority of the 17 participants interviewed.
4. The individual's semi structured interview stood out to me with multiple metaphors and 'ahas' documented in my initial analysis.

From this point on, the selected participant will be identified as either principal or Melonie. This deep dive into Melonie's narrative is important, as I hope it builds a more robust set of narratives captured in educational literature, demonstrating a greater variety of narratives occurring in the field of education, and a deeper understanding of the real life of principals.

As a researcher-practitioner working in the same county as the principal selected, I acknowledge that I had a relationship with the principal in my study that was not simply researcher-to-participant, but also as a quasi-peer. I understood that our interactions existed before and after this research. Also, what I am highlighting in this research really only reflects a particular time and context. I also am aware that our interactions were part of a growing and learning processes where we would each learn from another. I believe, in fact, that since we were struggling with similar problems it allowed the principal to trust me as a researcher and not be fearful that I would use her honesty about struggles, leading or learning in any punitive way. This was a benefit for my research, and I am also attentive to the fact that, with me, also comes bias. Our historical relationship and my own personal experiences effects the ways I hear and see this principal.

Context

The principal in this study works in a relatively large school district in the state of Michigan. There are 12 public school districts in the county varying greatly in size, three public school academies or charters, and other private or parochial schools. The county is in southern Michigan and has a population of approximately 160,000. According to the 2019 U.S. Census and MiSchoolData, the county can be summarized in the snapshot below.

Table 11
County Facts

Category	County
Race	Roughly 85% Caucasian, 9% African American, and 6% Other
Median Income	~ \$54,000
Educational Attainment	~ 91% of 25+ year old have a high school diploma; ~ 22% have a bachelor's degree or higher
Persons Identified as Living in Poverty	~13%
Persons Identified as Living with a Disability (under the age of 65)	~ 10%
County Average 6 Year Cohort Graduation Rate (not including the school district in this study or PSAs)	~ 96%

School & District Background. The school district that employs the principal can also be summarized in the following ways according to MiSchoolData, the state of Michigan's data website.

Table 12
School District/Building Facts

Category	District	School
Race	~ 36% Caucasian, 40% African American, & 24% Other	~ 38% Caucasian, 45% African American, and 17% Other
Number of Students	~ 4,500	~ 1,200
Graduation Rate	~ 72%	~ 91%
Economically Disadvantaged	~ 80%	~ 76%
Students with I.E.P (identified as receiving Special Education services)	~ 14%	~14%

Notice that the population of service is not a mirror of the larger county in terms of race. The school district is considered urban, and its largest category of students' race is African American. I also think it is worth highlighting that the superintendent of the district is a white male and that does mirror the dominant race and gender in the county.

Principal's background. The individual self-identifies as an African American female, with six children ranging in age from 10 – 36 at the time of the study. She has two master's degrees and was working on her Ed.D. from a non-Michigan based university. She would consider retirement in 11-15 years. The principal has been in her current position as principal of the high school for five years. Prior, she taught for 14 years. Notice that the principal's race is consistent with the school's largest category of race and not consistent with her immediate supervisor, the superintendent.

Data Sources

The following data sources were gathered in just a six-month time frame, although the entire research took much longer than that. The tools and descriptions of each data source were described in Chapter 2. In the table below is the quantity of each source that I generated or obtained.

Table 13
Quantity of Melonie's Data Sources

Data	Quantity
Semi-Structured Interview	1
Follow Up Interview	1
Post Interview Initial Notes	1
Post Interview Participant Initiated Direct Communication (Email, texts, calls, drop bys/face-to-face)	7

Table 13 (cont'd)

Post Interview Social Media Communication (Twitter, FaceBook, LinkedIn)	16
Observation/Field Notes (from formal professional development, networking events, and meetings)	4

I collected multiple data sources to provide a “full and revealing picture of what is going on” for the principal (Maxwell, 2013, p. 126). This is important to provide evidence that “warrant[s] key assertions” (Erickson, 1986, p.140). I chose to have the principal review both interviews’ transcripts and my initial notes as an opportunity to make clarifications. I explained my focus on her stories with special attention “on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, pp. 42–43). Additionally, I focused in on the stories within the data sources as an intentional attempt to see the individual principal’s narrative. Bruner (1991) says, “Narratives are accounts of events occurring over time... about people acting in a setting, and the happenings that befall them must be relevant to their intentional states while so engaged—to their beliefs, desires, theories, values, and so on” (p.6-7). So, this case study lifts one principal’s narrative with a particular focus that is not everyone’s truth. It is her own. And it is not the dominant narrative in education, but one that could contribute to a new genre of narratives in educational leadership. I am aware that I will never be able to capture every particular piece of revealing and relevant data, but my quest was to obtain more than a snapshot of a time or story and to shine a light on the complexities of the world of principals in a way that honors this principal’s authentic experience.

Data Analysis

I reread all data sources generated from or connected to Melonie including the semi structured interview transcript (already marked up from the prior analyses), my initial interview notes (also marked up from the prior analyses), the follow-up interview transcript, four emails, two text messages, one page of notes documenting a phone call conversation, 10 Facebook ‘shares’, six tagged tweets, and five pages of field notes documenting four meetings that we both attended. The data that was already marked up contained the codes and categories of different learning perspectives and adaptive leadership (see Chapter 2 methods). I then reread all the additional data and utilized the same codes and categories. I tallied the number of statements per category but that did not especially assist me in recognizing themes. What I did notice, when I looked at it all together, were the larger stories or parts of the semi structured interview and follow up interview that had all four codes: learning, leading, challenge & context present. There were 10 sections total. For those 10, I checked if any of them were connected explicitly to another data source that I had, like an email, meeting notes, or twitter post. Through this, I narrowed from 10 down to eight sections but I also increased my data because it went across sources. I was able to see at that point certain categories commonly together across codes. And I stepped back to think about Melonie’s story as a whole. I felt I had a representative picture of Melonie, a rich case study, could really reflect on what I had and answer my research questions; therefore, I could generate themes at that point and did not need to go further. My two biggest themes were: 1) the interconnectedness of learning and adaptive leading, and 2) the complexity of learning and leading, and how it was especially escalated in pandemic times.

Findings and Discussion

Learning

Sociocultural Perspective

Across the different data sources that I compiled from my interactions with Melonie she provided a plethora of information about her perspectives on learning and ways of learning. In the semi structured interview, she said these three critical quotes:

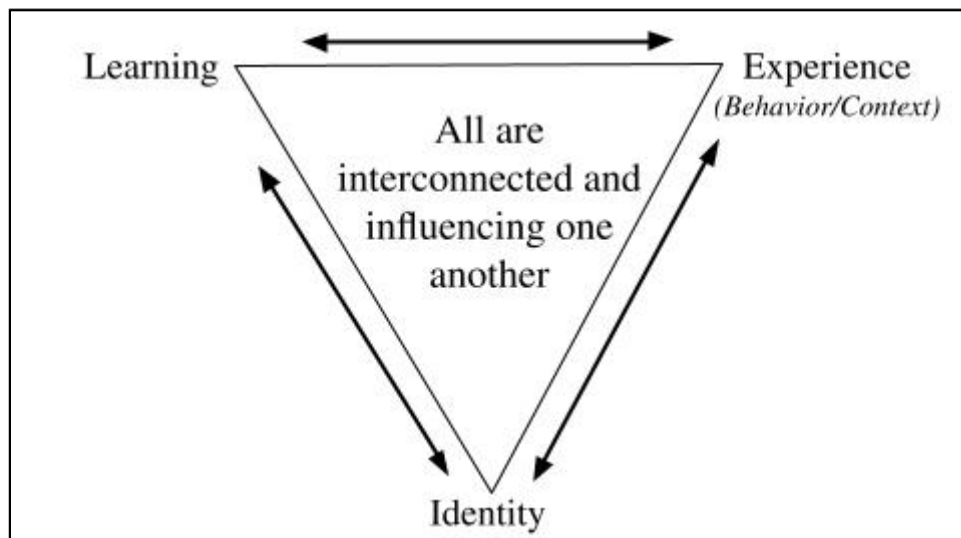
- “Learning has always been my survival tactic in good times and bad. I wouldn’t be where I am today if I wasn’t and I’m still learning every day. Sometimes learning is my escape into a foreign spaces or different fields, other times learning is problem solving for me with others, seeing their perspectives, or learning is reflecting on a job well done. I can’t think of a day in my whole life where I haven’t learned something. And that learning, that has served me well.”
- “Who I am and how I learn are so entwined, I don’t think I can separate them. Actually, I think of it like the Bermuda triangle between my learning, experiences and identity. Messy, magical, and monumental”
- “In the most simplified way, if or when I need to learn something, I seek out three things. I think of who I know that might be an expert, have some knowledge or connect me to the right person. I think we are smarter together, so I put a lot of stock in my social capital – I’m always building relationships and learning from others. Two, I think of what I already know about [this] that I might scaffold from– like what experiences can I go back to or maybe have I learned this before but in a little different way. Like maybe it is already in my brain somewhere and I need to recall or reframe for now. And third, I think of what other tools might get me what I need or help me learn like Google, a podcast, or a

book or one of my organizations or their webpages, you know. That kind of boils down my process for learning in pieces for you but like I said before it is actually really messy.”

What these three quotes tell me is that Melonie tends to most heavily rely on an understanding that learning is social, in context(s), and continuous. Specifically, her language in the quotes above and other words in her data such as “entwined”, “inseparable”, “interconnected” are consistent with sociocultural perspectives on learning. The rich, detailed, and deep stories Melonie shared of her learning, identity, experiences and how together that made all the difference in her current state were powerfully captured Melonie’s authentic principalship.

I found the metaphor Melonie used about the Bermuda Triangle rather fascinating. She elaborated further as she responded to the question and spent more time visibly roughly drawing out the figure below.

Figure 3
Bermuda Triangle Metaphor



To Melonie, learning is “messy” because it is not like she can remove her past experiences or identity, of which according to Vygotski, are ways she sees and interprets the world. Hence learning is like a triangle, if one vertex is removed, it is no longer a triangle. Melonie explained learning as “magical” and described inside our brains, tiny synapses too small for the eye to see and too fast for the brain to measure, all connecting and firing pulses—taking experiences, information, and whatever else is needed to make new thinking or learn – like magic. And, from Melonie’s description the Bermuda triangle is magical because no one really knows what happens under the auspices of the fog within the triangle, it is not visible. Lastly, learning is “monumental” in the way that humans can and do learn. It is like the Bermuda triangle, one of the “Wonders of the World”. Although the Bermuda triangle is not a wonder of the world or real in its mystery, the point Melonie was making was how monumental and amazing learning is. Based on Melonie’s representations of learning, experiences, and identity, it is clear the interconnectedness and complexity of learning as grounded in a sociocultural perspective.

Other Perspectives and the Complexity of All

Melonie also frequently participated in professional development and networking opportunities, shared articles with me, tagged me in tweets and invited me to join Facebook groups related to leadership and other education-based topics. In approximately six months’ time, I documented Melonie engaged me over 30 times in this way. This matters because it demonstrates that Melonie participates in and shares learning regularly. This represents learning from a situated or distributive perspective, and yet, she also acknowledged learning from within and scaffolding her own thinking which I assimilate to a cognitive perspective on learning. Terms associated with cognitive learning perspective, such as “acquired”, “individual”, “expert”,

and “transfer”, were used least frequently across Melonie’s data. In totality, this tells me that just as learning perspectives are not siloed, neither are the ways and perspectives Melonie takes up the principalship as a learner.

Interconnectedness between Learning and Leading

Part of paying attention to the world through a sociocultural lens is recognizing that context, experience, identity, culture and more live in each person as a whole, not just while at work or just at home, not just some days, but rather all days and all spaces. Some parts may come to the foreground or be further in the background, but we are whole. So, when Melonie said, “It matters that I’m in a majority black school and I’m a strong, black woman. It matters that I have some other black leaders as colleagues and confidants, but my Superintendent isn’t black or a woman. I say this because that’s my reality and it does frame how I see and experience learning, problems, or challenges. I sit with this knowing it influences how I respond in situations and lead. I’m not saying it is the only thing that matters, but I’m just being real with you,” I felt it was a powerful representation of interconnectedness between leading and learning as well as identity which she already established as messily connected in complex ways. I think it is also valuable to acknowledge that Melonie said she was being “real” with me. I heard that statement as her lived experience, which is different from mine simply because I’m white, only allows me to understand to a certain level and I agree.

Melonie repeats the message of interconnectedness throughout her interview with statements such as:

“As I am faced with, what you are calling adaptive challenges, I feel like it is my learning, my experiences and my identity, again, that drive me to lead the way I do and respond, or problem solve the way I do. Being that I’ve been a principal for five years

and in public schools for almost 20, I've experienced a lot and changed a lot based on what I've learned...I'm also really grounded in my faith and values, and I think my actions match that. I know I wasn't born with those values, so I've learned those over time. That prior learning helps me lead— always putting two and two together, trying new things... But I'd definitely say all this is not that straight forward. I can't say I learned x or am learning x and therefore now I know how to effectively lead. Like, we aren't going to come out the other side of Covid-19 and be able to say, I now know how to lead and learn through pandemics so I'm ready for the next one.”

This is a very dense quote from which I could have just acknowledged where she says “learning helps me lead” but the rest of the context surrounding that indicates her manifesting interconnectedness in and across leading and learning as well as the complexity of the whole person living in a leadership role during the pandemic. It is worth stating that the data does not indicate that every learning experience is connected to or drives leading, and vice versa, not every leadership move is grounded in intention or connected to learning for every human, or every principal, or every time. And yet, for Melonie, her words and stories do indicate a strong, consistent connection.

Beyond the interview data sets, the connection between Melonie's sociocultural perspectives on learning and adaptive learning was highlighted during a particular professional development we both attended for culturally proficient leaders. I was fortunate to have paired with Melonie for an activity called “Knee to Knee 3-2-1”. During this we sat facing each other, masked, and were asked to respond to certain prompts. As one person talked, the other could not interject or respond, just listen and nod. The first prompt was to tell your life story in three minutes. The next prompt was to tell why you went into the profession or why you do the job

you do. That interaction was for two minutes. The last question was, in one minute, explain a challenge you are facing right now (professional or personal) that is weighing you down or you'd like support or help with. It was during this activity that Melonie had a clear thread connecting her life experiences as constant learning, to her why as principal and the challenge that, at that moment, she was facing. In short, Melonie had her first child at the age of 16; she does her role because she wants youth to not feel alone, to know they can have a great life ahead of them, and make a difference human to human; and she had started a youth voice/empowerment group in the high school, and was particularly worried about two girls that are strong leaders in the group but have a lot going on. So much more was shared during that 20-minute protocol and what it magnified was how Melonie's learning was inseparable from her identity and her decisions as she leads or takes up her role as principal.

Adaptive Leading

Adaptive Challenges and Adaptive Leading

In the following three longer, connected segments, Melonie named an adaptive challenge and a number of leadership moves she deployed as she continued to work through the challenge. This is just one adaptive challenge amongst the many challenges she faces as the principal. The moves she used are evidence of adaptive leadership practices. These leadership moves appear in this segment and are repeated most commonly in other parts of her interview. From that I deducted that these four adaptive leadership moves are central to her practice and beliefs as a leader.

Segment 1:

“We’ve been struggling for a long time with grades at the high school. This is a really complicated problem that definitely existed prior to Covid-19. It was my second or third

year as principal when I had my eyes opened up to the inequities of our grading system and practices. Everything from how GPAs are calculated, to grading homework, to extra credit, everything was a mess and teachers totally had different opinions in the matter. So, I'd say it was emotional, too. I know this sounds weird since I graded papers for almost 15 years in the classroom and never saw an issue then, but more and more students were coming to me with real concerns that I couldn't reconcile. One student and her parents even brought a lawyer to a meeting, and I saw the writing on the wall... this was bigger than I understood from my teacher-seat. My first year I just learned, listened and watched...

This excerpt was from the semi-structured interview. I asked Melonie to name a pressing challenge and how she responded to that challenge. The quote demonstrates not only her response, but her recognition of that particular challenge as adaptive. This is the first adaptive leadership practice: *Recognizing and naming an adaptive challenge. Seeking out others' perspectives to help the leader see and name the complexity in the challenge.* Melonie did this when she said she "had her eyes opened up to the inequities", "saw the writing on the wall" and spent her first year just learning, listening and watching.

Segment 2:

I was reading articles from Guskey and Wormeli, I went to trainings, I looked at our handbooks, I asked teachers questions, I listened to students and parents, I sought out other administrators for their opinions, policies and practices. I also brought it to my superintendent to make sure he was aware of this challenge and get his perspective. This all was hugely informative... There came a point for me that I felt like a call to action. I knew I had the power to do something about these poor, inequitable practices, but I also

knew I couldn't and shouldn't change the system alone.... I carefully started a grading committee composed of a broad variety of teachers, students, parents, leadership and even a few external consultants. We did many critical things leading to change. We became clear on what grades meant to our school, students and teachers –like we did not want grades to be used as weapons against student success and we did want grades to represent actual learning that happened or competencies. This was done by gathering voice and perspective like through surveys, interviews, quick polls, just talking with others. The committee and I were a bit shocked by how happy people were that we asked, and we listened. People wanted to be heard. We shared back to all of the school members, students, staff and community, summaries of what we found. We could have stopped there, and some would have been happy with that... We piloted a few practices in the teachers' classrooms that were on the committee. So, we weren't jamming these ideas down others' throats, it was more for those with skill and will. That perked the interest of some early adopters...

This segment demonstrates the second key adaptive leadership practice that Melonie enacted: *Bringing together individuals to collectively and collaboratively understand the challenge, learn together, and work toward resolution*. Melonie said she “carefully” generated a diverse group for a grading committee. That group went beyond traditional boundaries and included students, parents, and external consultants. She did not go into detail about why or how she chose each individual but inferred some variables such as age, gender, race, economic status, experience, and motivation or willingness. She briefly also spoke about not making change alone, although she had the authoritative power to do so. Later, Melonie talked about “hard work” in the sense of gathering a variety of ideas, research or information and learning with and

from each other. Then, it was her actions, planning and facilitating meetings of which brought together differing ideas for a coherent, relevant plan or solution and eventually led to a rollout, then restart of these grading changes. Lastly, Melonie rarely talked about herself in this, she repeatedly said, “we” and “our”. Although only controlling her own actions and behaviors, she was always speaking collectively and portraying the interdependence needed to resolve adaptive challenges.

Segment 3:

That summer we collectively built our next steps for our next three years of tackling grading. We were gaining momentum in changing the system and in the beginning of 2019, we rolled out these changes as a team to the entire high school staff with entry points for all staff no matter where they were in their own learning and understanding of grading practices and implication. Each member of staff was able to select three or more of the tenets and approaches, construct their own timeline, get support and coaching from a member of the committee, ... Handbooks and the union were all moving in sync, teachers were sharing successes, students and parents were communicating positively. Then, yep, Covid-19 hit and there were so many mixed messages from MDE and my superintendent about what should or shouldn't happen with course credit, grades and more... Every time something came down the pike, I tried to bring it to the committee, but it was like a light switch flipping up and down, one minute we could do one thing and the next we couldn't. I think I exhausted every communication skill I had trying to keep people informed while also not causing or perpetuating panic or anger. The values that the grading committee and majority of the staff had so amazingly unified under were now being tossed away and replaced with oversimplified directives from

above saying things like, “let everyone pass every course no matter what”. And although I think the committee, staff and I understood why the state and others were delivering these directives, it felt like two conflicting truths, so it was just hard to make sense of... We got through June that year and then spent some time resetting for August, but we had lost all our momentum. We were also trying to do all this hard work through zoom and some on the team had burnt out, so there were just a lot of moving pieces... On my end, I chose to bring a few new people onto the committee which took time and energy to connect with each person on a human level before making the ask of the new-ish committee to collaboratively revise and restart our plan based on where we currently were... The work went on and we did start this year well, but we aren’t through the first semester, so I don’t really know how it is going to play out, not just for this year but also the impact on students and our system for years to come. That is something we will keep working on. Maybe that's part of adaptive challenges, they are never really solved.”

Although the longest of the segments, there are two final key adaptive leadership moves worth highlighting:

- Adaptive Leadership Move #3: *Communicating empathy, building social connection, and valuing relationships as human needs to be met before and during difficult work.* Melonie was cognizant of her staff’s, students’, and the committee’s emotional needs during large scale change and during pandemic times. She intentionally connected with individuals, one on one in authentic ways, seeing people as humans with needs, not just problem-solving machines.

- Adaptive Leadership Move #4: *Constructing systems and encouraging people who believe in iterating or evolving solutions*. Melonie spent time discussing the summer of 2020 leading into a restart of the grading changes. She intentionally communicated that the plans and solutions would need to change based on the current context. She also said, “we’ll keep working on it” inferring that more iterations are likely in the future.

These are not the only leadership moves and adaptive leadership tenets that Melonie’s actions are representative of, however these are the behaviors that are repeated the most across the data sets and are very visible in her story about grading systems.

Support and Constraints

I asked Melonie about support or constraints she may feel in the principal role and what helped or hindered her leadership or addressing challenges. Although her answer first came across as a diplomatic non-answer and then shifted across a wide range of thoughts, I believe what it really told me was more about the nuance, specificity, and/or individual customization that is needed for each principal to feel supported and helped in their role. Melonie said:

“I feel like the answer is ‘it depends’ or it will always have the word ‘some’ – like some of the teachers and some of the parents or sometimes my superintendent is awesome and sometimes the new legislation makes sense and for all those somes, the inverse is also true. Parents can really hinder, staff might vocally not support changes and dissent, my superintendent can really limit me and deflate my ideas or solutions... I’d say it is helpful when I (and the other person) have put forth an effort to have a healthy, good relationship, they usually are in the support category. But, vice versa, without the relationship or a good one, I can think of many times when that has been a hindrance. Maybe that is just called being human...”

In this excerpt from Melonie, she names two-way, healthy relationships as helpful support. In the next quote, she puts those relationships as more helpful than non-human based supports like legislated mandates.

“When I think of things as support or constraints, I guess I’d generalize with like information from organizations and google searches are like supporting but usually legislation, mandate from MDE, the mass sharing of misinformation on social media, I’d put that in the category of things that definitely constrain and hurt my leadership. I feel like I’m answering your questions with like really clear-cut answers, but it is really a lot messier than that. I keep going back to it depends. It depends on the problem, it depends on the context, it depends on my resources, it depends on the people involved, it depends on me or my mood that day. Ha, cut that part about my mood. Just kidding. Ya know, the list is pretty long in terms of being supported or unsupported in my role. I guess that is why your research is probably pretty important. You are probably getting all kinds of different answers from all the principals you interview. Huh, I guess I didn’t know I was even thinking all this until you asked. That is interesting to me in and of itself. Geez, here I am back at learning”.

Melonie further expands on her views of support in this quote and overall, shares her perceptions that the “right” kinds of supports were dependent on many variables including the challenge, context, and individual. So, a support that works in one space or for one challenge or for one individual at one time may not be duplicatable for the next challenge, context or person.

This second statement connects back and further supports a similar finding in Chapter 2.

An Unexpected Metaphor

Within all of Melonie's data as I read and reread it, I found myself drawn to this metaphor. It does not particularly speak to my themes, but it was an unexpected aha from this research that I gained and wanted to share. "Principals are like our screens... with a ton of tabs open. A tab for leader, a tab for mom, a tab for counselor, fire-putter-outer, networker, confidant to the superintendent, legislation and mandate interpreter ... and we click back and forth between tabs not wanting to close any one out because they are all part of our jobs and part of who we are and then, then put Zoom on top of this analogy and now screen share, ha! Others see all your tabs and are like, oh my goooooddd. That's what you do, that is crazy. That is what Covid-19 did, it made my leading and identities visible in a different way, good and bad."

Melonie, then, went on to elaborate on some of the different ways Covid-19 pressed on her identity and leadership. Melonie said some of her common "go-to's" like walking the hallways or bringing staff coffees and checking in one on one, could not be done. Her standard communication structures were different, for example, what used to be a weekly "From the Desk of the Principal" became 15–30-minute zoom "huddles" and fewer emails because she did not want to bombard staff or have them experience such a flux of information alone. Through Covid-19 her own family had many hardships. With six kids ranging from third grade to independent adults, they all needed different things. Her husband had a gap of employment. Multiple family members and extended family got Covid-19. Three extended family members passed away between fall of 2019 and fall of 2020, one of whom was her older brother, and it was due to Covid-19. Through that, Melonie said her faith was really tested and although she knew who she was she also saw herself changing at a more rapid rate than ever before because the experiences she was living were coming at her faster than ever before. I found this quote

especially telling, “My life has not been an easy one. Part of it is being a black woman. Part of it was my choices. Part was my environment... You know, you know some of my story from a young age. And what you also know is that I won’t let life win or get me down. I do think some days Covid-19, and all we’ve gone through, is pretty unfathomable, but then on the other hand, with my life history, I kind of step back and say, I’ll make it. I always do.” I heard this and my interpretation was that due to Melonie’s history of struggle in life and barriers large and small all along the way, she has built or learned to have an identity of survivor or confidence and competence. It seems in some way that her personal identity based on lived experiences has assisted her in coping with Covid-19 and possibly made her able to make sense of or better reconcile her current challenges so that they are surmountable. Interestingly, naming specific personal experiences within identity as a supporting resource was not the common message from other principals within this research study. This is important because Melonie was the only Black woman principal in my larger study, and although Melonie is clear that her story is not a universal story for all Black women principals, it is evident that the other research participants did not draw on their intersectional identity of gender and race as an influencer in their enactment of leadership moves during the pandemic. This does make sense based on Jang and Alexander’s (2022) claim that historically, Black women principals tend to show strong advocacy for and commitment to educational equity, social justice, and community in their principalship. And, circling back to the unexpected metaphor, all those tabs open, switching back and forth –never closing them out– brings me to the incredible resiliency and flexibility humans, especially leaders, have through complex times.

Implications and Conclusions

As I reflect on this deep dive into Melonie's world as a leader and learner, I can deduce some implications and conclusions of this work. First, I conclude there is some level of inseparable connectedness between sociocultural learning perspective and adaptive leadership moves, and the complexity of learning and leading has especially escalated in pandemic times. Identity, context and other variables play a role in leading and learning. Particularly, Melonie's identity as a Black women leader impacts her enactment of adaptive leadership. I also see, now that my research is wrapping up, that in general, research seems to be exploding with stories right now from pandemic times and yet, it is not inclusive in a way that made Melonie feel like her story was or is seen in the dominant narrative. Although I have captured her story and other principals' stories, and I will have that published and documented for years to come, we need to do more capturing and lifting stories, as well as, just authentically connecting with one another.

I hope that as others read this work and the other research being published currently, that they see an opportunity in the field of education, from youth to adult, to intentionally spend more time reflecting on their own lived experiences, learning, and decision-making; and exploring and understanding others' lived experiences, recognizing humanity, and dreaming together to build a space where one narrative is not dominant over another, one space is not right or wrong. This may sound lofty and naive, but Melonie's story was one of hope and inspiration for me. My findings and discussion may not have brought about some mega generalization for all leaders during the pandemic, but I found it rich and authentic in my own learning. It was worth all the time and energy I spent in all of my research to deeply hear her and now magnify one person's story. It was worth it to truly listen to Melonie and see her. More succinctly, I do not have a

generalization that Melonie's decisions, learning, or leading represent others, but what I do have is authentic documentation of her story, not shared or published anywhere else. A true story of inspiration in difficult times.

CHAPTER 5: EPILOGUE

I feel privileged 17 principals allowed me to listen to their stories, be a part of their learning, and uncover parts of their leadership journeys. As I moved through this work during such unprecedented times, each principal's interaction with me and rich responses to my questions empowered me as a leader in my own space to learn more, seek intentional adaptive leadership moves, and get the support I needed to thrive, not just survive. Across the chapters of this dissertation, I explored the interconnectedness of leading and learning, and magnified principals' perceptions of what or who helped and hindered their leading and learning. A common implication across this work is the need for principals to have time and supports for unpacking their own learning identities connected with intentional adaptive leadership. I optimistically hope education is on a trajectory to better, more equitable systems and yet complex pandemic times have set forth more adaptive challenges than ever before demonstrating that this research, and actions based on the findings, need to persist. No other time is quite like now.

I have maintained relationships with many of the research participants and continued to see the enactment of adaptive leadership. I have supported the participants in ways that they have indicated are helpful to them. This is joyful in a time that still has so much turbulence. Just recently one of the 17 principals became a superintendent, another decided to retire, and one other has left the profession and field of education completely. Each of those principals chose to share the news with me in one-on-one conversations, acknowledging the value of our relationship, and the role I have played for them across the years. This research and this group of research participants have changed me, for the better, forever.

Adaptive leaders learn with others, continuously, as they iteratively resolve adaptive challenges and show up for others in authentic ways (Simmons, 2022). The experiences and contexts these principals have endured in the past two years have shaped their learning, identity, and choices in leadership and life. In Chapter Two, I recognized how, across the last five decades, the role of principal has increased in number of responsibilities and complexity of tasks, including things like being an instructional leader; and during pandemic times, the rate at which the role changed accelerated, which made it feel “impossible” to succeed to many of the principals. With that accelerated rate of change in the principal role, principals indicated they needed more and differentiated support to be a highly effective principal or live up to their own expectations of how they wanted to do the role. Additionally, in Chapter Two, and in more depth during Chapter Four, I explored how the role of principal is often enacted and improved through their own learning. Principals leverage different approaches to learning depending on the situation at hand, the broader context, past experience, identity and more. Most of the principals’ stories and responses brought to the foreground tenets of sociocultural learning. Chapter Four also made clearer the interconnectedness of leading and learning and magnified one principal’s specific adaptive leadership moves. Chapter Three was a critical bridge between the general patterns across nine principals and one principal’s lived experiences. By comparing and contrasting the experiences and stories of three principals, I was able to see the complexities of identity, lifting the importance of not reducing someone’s identity to single or simple word or phrases. Principals named that identity, or parts of their identities, can be recognized as supporting or constraining their leading and learning. This part of the research brought me to see leading and learning in a way that I had not truly considered before. Identity was perceived as either in sync or out of sync with the principal’s building, district, or community. That

translated, for these principals, into affordances, generally when in sync, and hindrances or tensions when out of sync. Overall, all these findings together demonstrate the importance of continuing to learn as leaders, and the criticality of customized support for principals to positively contribute to school and students' best outcomes.

I continue to wonder in deeper ways, what was it about supporting principals, particularly in relationship and networking, in a particular context, that was so powerful? With a clearer understanding of this, and more, broader future research around principal support, I have an idea to develop and share an inventory or tool to measure and identify the ways individual principals primarily feel supported. With enough research, collaboration, time and capacity, it might look like the “Five Love Languages” or “Five Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace” by Gary Chapman, but for principals in education. I believe I could account for context, honor identity, and that it would be best implemented with principals and/other educational leaders taking a 360-look at giving and receiving support. Other potential implications of this research range from influencing my individual behaviors supporting principals to state and national systems-change including ideas such as increasing authentic professional learning with and from principals and better integration across education systems so that leadership standards and real practice or lived experience are more so mirrors of each other and manageable, rather than disconnected and daunting. Yet, I am clear that the scalability of this research is somewhat limited without additional capacity, time, and resources. More and more principal voices may be magnified or published daily in formal and informal spaces, but the richness and duration of exploration is something that I know is in my future. I see adding to this research by circling back every two years in a methodical way with the 17 principals to capture a kind of “where they are now” picture. I would look again at what has been learned, experienced, or changed, and what is

current in their context, identity, support, and more. Looking through a longitudinal lens could end up being something the field uses to truly change and improve our system of education.

I do have an understanding that no matter the next steps I apply with my research, there is a potential for another to use or misuse it. In some ways that is exciting, and potentially concerning. To that end, I step back and want to show respect for the researchers before me that I drew on. I hope in their eyes that I did professionally and accurately lift up their work. Specifically, giants like Drago-Severson, Maslin-Ostrowski, Spillane, Heifetz, Linsky, and Gee of which, without their brilliance, I may have not been turned on to do such research myself. Regardless of the future of this research, I want to close with what I believe is the most important part of this research for me. I tried my personal best to hear and honor each of the principal's voices through this process. I want them to know, they are seen, heard and valued.

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APPENDIX A

PRINCIPAL DEMOGRAPHIC & HISTORICAL INFORMATION SURVEY

(Administered via Google Forms - [Link Here](#))

Directions: Please complete the following information to the best of your ability. You may skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

1. Name
2. What is your current age? (Range)
3. What gender do you identify as?
4. Please specify your race(s)/ethnicity(ies) (Check all that apply)
5. Name your completed degrees and what each one is in.
6. What is your marital status?
7. How many dependent children/independent children do you have? (Range)
8. What is your current household income range? (Range)
9. How many years did you teach prior to being an administrator? (Range)
10. How many years have you been a principal (or AP)? (Range)
11. How many years have you been in your current role?
12. In your current position, what level(s) are the building you oversee?
13. Approximately how many years until you are able to or would consider retiring? (Range)
14. Is there anything else you'd like to share to assist in this research?

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW TOOL AND PROTOCOL

ADAPTED from Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski (2018). In Translation: School Leaders Learning in and From Leadership Practice - p.40

Pre-work:

- Obtain Informed Consent signature.
- Set up interview zoom date, time & link.
- Obtain demographic/historic information via email or google form.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Introduction:

[Greetings] Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research study. Before we get started, I just want to confirm that we are recording this interview today. [*Participants respond YES*] Start **recording**. And, that you've completed the informed consent form. Great. Thank you! Do you have any questions for me before we officially get started?

Interview:

As the school leader, I recognize that you face challenges every day. I want to give you a minute to think about your work as a leader in the current context. I realize these times we are in right now are different than anything we've ever seen due to Covid-19. When you think about it, especially in the current context of Covid-19, what is one of the more pressing, specific

challenges you're facing today? This could be something—a problem or a challenge—that you and/or you and your staff are either working on right now or something that you've recently been working on together. And this is the challenge that we'll be focusing on for our time together in this interview. [Probes: Need to make sure we learn the following. Remember we really want to understand the person's story about leading and learning while managing this challenge.]

1. What is the most pressing challenge—name the challenge? *[Dependent on the answer/relevance in the context of Covid-19, consider: When did this become a challenge for you? What do you see as the origin of this challenge (e.g., policy? mandates? Other?)]*

- What happened? How did or are you managing this most pressing challenge?
- What, if anything, gets in the way? What's particularly hard? What is particularly supportive or helpful?
- What are/were the demands placed on you as the leader when addressing this challenge?
[Probes: Cognitive? Interpersonal? Intrapersonal? Emotional? Skill-based?]

2. Can you share a little about how you work with your teachers, staff, families, or others in the community to help them manage change associated with this challenge? [Probes: Professional development? On the job learning? Mentoring? Modeling? Offering different kinds of supports? Engaging in conversation with them? Creating forums for feedback? Input?]

3. What other pressing challenges and priorities are you currently trying to manage during these Covid-19 times? How are you making sense of all of these ever-changing priorities, mandates, and challenges while also needing to make decisions? [Listen for openings about social justice and equity... and if appropriate, probe: Can you tell me more about the statement you just made...]

4. What and who might you see as barriers or constraints to managing these challenges?

Who or what might be hindering resolutions to the challenges? Who or what might be enhancing solutions or supporting resolutions to the challenges?

5. As we move into the last set of questions, I want to learn about how you feel you were prepared to manage this.

- In other words, how did you learn to do what you're doing to manage this challenge? [Prior learning]
- What and who do you draw on now or currently for learning and support?
[Probes: Informal? Formal? Resource/Tool? People?]
 - Any mentors, organizations/networks, in-district/out-of-district admin/colleagues, Superintendent/Supervisor, other
 - Websites, Journals/Articles, Social Media, Books, Newspapers

6. And my last question if you feel comfortable sharing is what have you learned about yourself as a leader from this challenge?

That is all my questions for today. As I reflect on what you've shared, I may reconnect with you and ask for a second interview. Are there any other thoughts you want to share with me in regard to this research or experience? Are there any questions I can answer for you?

Thank you again for your time and that concludes the interview. **[Stop recording, end Zoom meeting, and save the recording in a secure location].**

Post-work: Take 5-30 minutes to revisit shorthand in the notes above and make sure it is legible. Below this line, make any immediate post-interview remarks/reflections.