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Principals' Leadership Practices: A Qualitative Study to Understand Principals' Use of Human-Centered Leadership as a Response to COVID-19

A dissertation proposal submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in

Educational Leadership

by

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The Dissertation of David Sosa is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Principals' Leadership Practices: A Qualitative Study to Understand Principals' Use of Human-Centered Leadership as a Response to COVID-19

by

David Sosa

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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Joni S. Kolman, Chair

Little is documented in the literature about the leadership practices of principals during times of crisis. This study used semi-structured interviews and document collection methods to broaden understandings of principals' decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study aims to highlight the novel challenges faced by principals during the pandemic, how they responded to these challenges, and who and what they prioritized as they made decisions. The findings suggest that these principals experienced instructional, student, and communication challenges between March 2020 through June 2022. This study highlights the way these principals engaged in human-centered leadership, which considers the needs of the people in the school system while

also ensuring goals and tasks are completed. This has implications for policy and social justice where school administrators must exercise leadership beyond the instructional and highlights how actions can positively impact equity and access to curriculum for marginalized students.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Prior to the establishment of the principal's role, superintendents were mainly responsible for overseeing and evaluating a school's performance (Katz, 1968; Rousmaniere, 2013). Bureaucratic responsibilities and functions occupied superintendents' time and energies, including centralizing control over the growing number of schools, establishing a differentiated structure to coordinate roles among teachers, and creating essential qualifications necessary to select competent teachers (Katz, 1968). Although necessary for running the various school communities, the function of the superintendent's role was routine and driven by protocols steeped in established procedures and protocols. As enrollment increased, monitoring, and evaluating students and teachers became an additional focus for school leadership, making it more difficult for superintendents to maintain control (Pierce, 1935; Rousmaniere, 2007, 2013).

The principal's role was not officially created until the late 19th century and without a clearly defined description of their responsibilities. The growing number of students in both the grammar and high schools, initiated by the introduction of compulsory schooling, prompted the creation of the principal role (Rousmaniere, 2013; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Early in the history of the principal role, these administrators wore many hats, which required them to create various community-based events to develop connections with the surrounding community to the school (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2007, 2013). Within these roles, they engaged in submitting work orders to ensure the facility was operational, clerical duties to ensure supplies were on hand, and visited classrooms to ensure teachers were using the appropriate curriculum (Brubaker, 1995; Hallinger, 1992; Kafka, 2009). In addition, principals were positioned as "head teachers" who supervised the organization of courses, engaged students in procedural and uniform recitations including directing plays, overseeing clubs, participating in church events, as well as participating in professional associations (Cuban, 1988; Katz, 1968; Rousmaniere, 2007, 2013; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Principals also engaged in activities that might be more familiar in today's schools, such as disciplinarian, parent liaison, financial manager, and data analyst

(Davis, 1921, Rice, 1969; Rousmaniere, 2007). The principal thus became known as the director of routine processes, which emphasizes the technical role they occupied (Bobbitt, 1924; Bogotch, 2011; Krug, 1972; Rousmaniere, 2013). Although principals were required to be instructional leaders, able to support teachers with student outcomes, they did not occupy this position with the same vigor or even the same precision as with other daily, routine, and procedural responsibilities (Bobbitt, 1924; Mills & Jacoby, 2002).

After the Second World War, conflict developed between teachers and principals because of external pressures placed on administration. Educational trends up to the 1960s forced principals to reject their instructional leader role to assume that of a program and site manager (Hallinger, 1992; Kafka, 2009; Krug, 1972). As a program manager for the various federally funded programs, such as special education and bilingualism, principals dedicated much of their efforts to ensure programs and initiatives were implemented with fidelity and according to prescriptive guidelines and pre-established metric evaluations. This pulled principals in two directions–one as a program manager and one as the instructional leader–creating an increased workload as well as adding to the complexity of the role (Hallinger, 1992; Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Rousmaniere, 2013; Trubowitz, 1971). The increased administrative responsibilities, which were routine in nature and took up most of the principals' time, also created issues for them because they did not visit classrooms and support teachers. Their focus was on the daily responsibilities of reviewing facilities' requests, supervising students during lunch, dealing with union issues, or meeting with angry parents, which required an immediate response.

With the implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) and up to the current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), the pressure to ensure schools perform according to set standards on state and national assessments created additional challenges for principals (Drago-Severson, & Blum-DeStefano, 2013; Gardner et al.,1983). Principals are still obligated to fulfill their daily responsibilities, which are oftentimes

routine or procedural in nature (Hallinger, 1992; Rousmaniere, 2007), but the introduction of standardized state and local assessments forced principals into thinking the process of teaching and leading can be standardized and routinized according to a fixed set of procedures, influenced by external factors focused on student outcomes (Hallinger, 1992, 2015; Shipps & White, 2009).

The current COVID-19 pandemic added additional external pressures and obstacles for students such as fear of contracting the virus, food insecurity, and a lack of instructional support that could not be addressed by the problem-solving skills principals relied on to resolve familiar and routine challenges (Aytaç, 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Kavrayıcı & Kesim, 2021; Viner, 2020). Principals must navigate this tension between prescriptive requirements and the daily unpredictable and non-routine nature, surfacing from the pandemic while also not losing focus of who is most impacted by the decisions they make or are required to make based on policy mandates (Dirani et al., 2020; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Kavrayıcı & Kesim, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Principals' effectiveness has been measured to date based on their ability to increase student achievement on state mandated assessments as well as how successful they implement new district initiatives to compete for decreasing student enrollment. (Ford et al., 2020; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Tintoré et al., 2020). Because of the pandemic, principals also addressed the unique, unfamiliar, and novel circumstances posed by mask mandates, online instruction, social distancing, and the many social-emotional needs emerging from school closures, which have affected our students in ways not fully known to date (Ambrose, 2020; Ball, 2022; Brown et al., 2021; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Kavrayıcı & Kesim, 2021; Mutch, 2020; Viner, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the wide range of knowledge and competencies required to be effective, principals are often described in terms of the routine challenges they face, including those related to instruction (Rigby, 2014; Salo et al., 2015). However, school sites are not stagnant

spaces where only predictable tasks, as well as those associated with curricular instruction, occur. Schools are complex and school leaders must be responsive to a host of novel challenges, including and beyond instruction that arise on a day-to-day basis (De Voto, & Superfine, 2023; Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Wasonga & Fisher, 2018; Woulfin & Wiener, 2019). For example, principals must understand policy and translate that into effective practice, which requires working with adults and with students. They must also grapple with the diversity of the school community, which includes the staff, the students, and their families, considering their political, social, and economic contexts (Drag-Severson et al. 2018; Wasonga & Fisher, 2018). Most recently, principals must account for the potential of gun violence, natural disasters, and a pandemic (Burton, 2020; Dishman et al., 2011; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016; Mutch, 2020; Stough et al., 2018). Thus, this compartmentalized definition of principal effectiveness is insufficient to account for the realities of principals' work within school buildings (Clark & O'Donoghue, 2017; Heifetz et al., 2009; Marks & Printy, 2003).

To date, few empirical studies have considered how principals resolve problems or address unfamiliar and unique situations without proven solutions (Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Wasonga & Fisher, 2018; Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). This creates a dearth of knowledge about the complex role of the principal, and the skills and knowledge they require to be effective school building leaders. In absence of these understandings, the preparation of principals, as well as their professional development, focus on student outcomes (e.g., state testing and student behavior) and teachers' instructional development (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Ford et al., 2020; Hallinger & Wang, 2015). Such studies, including the one detailed in this dissertation, could illustrate how principals deal with the evolving and complex challenges they face at their respective school sites (Ford et al., 2020; Shaked & Schechter, 2019). Although much of the literature addresses areas where principals should focus their attention or describe their leadership as competencies, categories, or

characteristics, they overlook the complexity and demands, which requires principals to respond to novel situations without prescribed solutions (Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Khan & Bullis, 2021; Tintoré et al., 2020). While there is literature focusing on “crisis-related organizational and leadership research,” there is little known about the leadership challenges principals face because of other types of threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic and whether the decisions they make center around achieving specified academic goals to meet compliance issues or whether they center around a more humanistic approach to support people over organizational goals (Dirani et al., 2020, pg. 382; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Mutch, 2020; Smith, 2021; Thornton, 2021).

Conceptual Framework

This study began with established leadership models such as instructional, distributive, and transformational with the intent to unearth how they were at work during the pandemic. What was discovered from speaking with the principals in this study was that, above all else, these principals prioritized the humans—student, families, and staff—as they made decisions. For this study, the concept of human-centered leadership became the lens to focus attention on principals and their decision-making. Human-centered leadership is described by Abdi et al. (2020) as leadership practices based on decisions the leader makes with a true concern for the lives of students and staff while adjusting to the potential variability of a situation. This human-centered leadership can also be seen through a humanizing organizational culture that values each person and their potential contributions or needs (Abdi et al., 2021; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Hsieh, 2023; Khilji, 2022). Kim (2022) states how humanizing leadership requires leaders to develop habits of mind that consider interactions with others, building on trust and well-being. Others define humanizing leadership as a framework, allowing leaders to be responsive during a crisis with culturally responsive decisions, which acknowledge the needs of the people in their care (Hsieh, 2023; Ravitch, 2021). The aim of this study is to further understand this concept by describing three components where human-centered leadership occurred for these principals

through their willingness to support the humans in their school community in their interpretations of what is ethical, the right thing to do; adaptive, responding to novel situation without known solutions; creative insubordination, informally defying organizational directives.

The framework in (Figure 1) used for this dissertation builds on Ravitch's (2021) flux leadership, which focuses on equity, responsiveness, and agile leadership by examining specifically at the ways the principals in this study interpreted the following three concepts: ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination. This framework is meant to help describe rather than delineate a prescribed method for principals to lead their schools and their school community. Each of the tenets included in this framework describes how these principals enacted humanizing leadership practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Ethical decision-making* can be defined as doing the right thing for the common good (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Garza Mitchell, 2012; Leppard, 2016; Schwartz, 2016). For example, Mia, Emma, and Richard felt that any decisions they made needed to be centered on students and students' safety. To illustrate this, Richard stated his decisions "first and foremost [was] supporting students and staff; sharing the safety of students and staff always comes first." These principals took an ethical stance when making decisions, specifically around people's safety. *Adaptive expertise* is defined in the literature as a process where one demonstrates expertise by seeking new solutions to novel situations (Peng et al.,2014). In this study, examples of adaptive expertise used by these principals include developing processes to distribute materials, roll out a new online instructional model, or devise a new communication process. Specifically, John, Sophia, and Frank each learned how to pass out computers and food, train their teachers with new online tools, and utilize new methods to connect with their school community beyond the phone messages of the past with others such as YouTube or other online mediums to engage families.

Creative insubordination is the third and final tenet informing the conceptual framework, which some studies also refer to as creative deviance. Creative insubordination can be defined

as an informal defiance or violation of an organization's rules to fit contextual needs such as the case with the principals in this study and their individual schools (Haynes & Licata, 1995; Lui et al., 2020; Sharma & Chillakuri, 2022; Shukla & Kark, 2020). Creative insubordination, while seen as defying an organization's directives, in this study is a form of initiative an employee undertakes to benefit the organization by producing innovative thinking and problem solving (Lin et al., 2016; Liu & Xu, 2022; Shukla & Kark, 2020). Examples of creative insubordination in this study include decisions made by principals such as Nathan, Mia, and Lucas who each stated they allowed students to come to the school to access the wi-fi because they did not have access to the internet from their home. Nathan acknowledged that he knew his supervisors would not be at the school policing who was on the site, so he allowed a consistent group of families to access the school grounds for the internet and other resources.

These three components provide a framework for understanding the human-centered leadership the principals in this study utilized. The nature of each three components is not mutually exclusive. The three components can coexist or overlap. There are various examples where the principals in this study interpreted each of the components in ways that they made decisions to support students, families, and the staff despite policies and mandates. In so doing, I aim to show how principals lead beyond the traditionally held models, which have been highly researched during non-crisis times and not during a pandemic. Ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination, used as a single factor for principal's leadership or use in any combination with the other tenets, have been researched individually in other moments of crisis or leadership, but it is here they are grouped under a human-centered leadership framework to help explain or describe how the principals in this study exercised leadership during the pandemic.

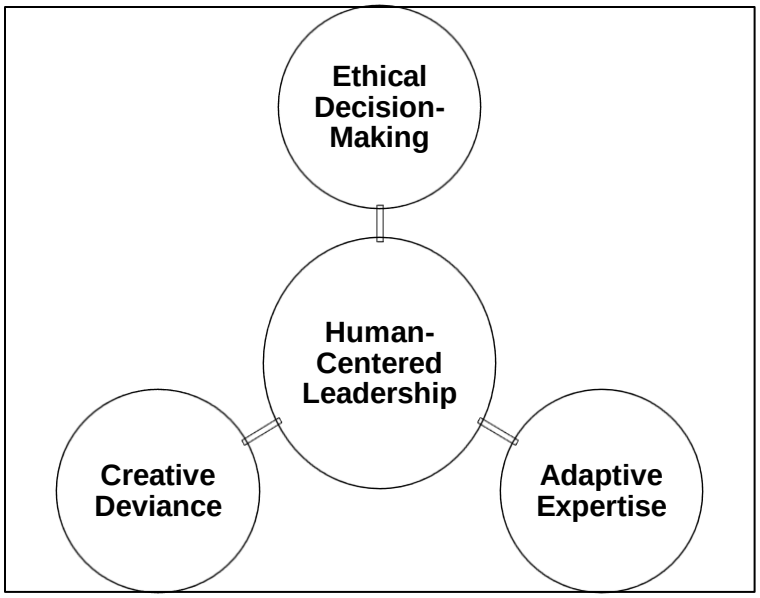

Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework*

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to broaden understandings of how principals' decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their leadership practices and the ways in which their decisions reflect a human-centered approach to leadership. Specifically, I illustrate how these principals responded to novel situations using ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination when leading during the pandemic (Garza Mitchell, 2012; Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Khilji, 2022; LaVenia & Lasater, 2022; Schwartz, 2016; Shukla & Kark, 2020).

Research Questions

This research study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the novel situations these principals encountered in their multidimensional school environments because of COVID-19?
2. How did these principals make decisions when faced with these COVID-19 related novel challenges?
3. On what and who did these school leaders prioritize their attention during the COVID-19 pandemic? Why?

Significance of the Study

The work principals do, and are expected to do, for a school site has become increasingly complex; this was made particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic when principals did not have a prescribed plan to address the various challenges they faced (Aytaç, 2020; Diliberti et al., 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Kavrayıcı & Kesim, 2021). Principals conduct their work based on district leaders' agenda with an understanding that principals are the instructional leaders (Drago-Severson et al., 2018), but principals understand their role as the site leader evolves and fluctuates because of the socio-political climate within their school community, and the crises they potentially deal with require a skill set beyond the training principals are typically afforded (Darkow, 2019; Reid, 2021; Woulfin & Weiner, 2019). Literature on principal leadership has focused predominantly on their role as the instructional leader with a combination of transformational and distributed leadership as forms of effective school leadership (Hallinger & Wang, 2015; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003). Some studies even suggest principals can learn how to accomplish the tasks assigned to their role simply by learning discrete skills (e.g., Anderson & Reynolds, 2015, Hoerr, 2017). This fails to acknowledge how the work of principals is always evolving and complex, and that principals must also address the unknown and the ambiguity in their work. Moreover, principals are not simply making decisions to solve an issue they are faced with. Principals are constantly interacting with students, families, and staff and must consider how their decisions affect the people on their school site. As a result of the pandemic, principals' context has dramatically been altered and expanded beyond the physical structure of the school building to include instruction, technological infrastructure, county and state health mandates, and surfaces questions about *what* or *who* they lead within an equally ambiguous concept of what is the right thing to do for the people they lead (Abdi et al., 2020; Ambrose, 2020; Brown et al., 2021; Garza Mitchell, 2012; Handford et al., 2022; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Kavrayıcı & Kesim, 2021; Khilji, 2022; Mutch, 2020; Schwartz, 2016).

Key Terms

The following definitions will help clarify how key terms and phrases will be used in the study:

- *Domain Knowledge:* Domain knowledge also known as declarative knowledge such as facts, statistics, and other information stored in one's memory, which is the basis of procedural and conceptual knowledge (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014).
- *Procedural Knowledge:* Procedural knowledge is based on one's task performance knowledge through repetition of a given task, which is familiar, static, and addressed through a known process/solution (Hatano & Inagaki, 1992).
- *Conceptual Knowledge:* Conceptual knowledge refers to knowing why and how this works in combination with the procedural knowledge, but one must acquire some procedural knowledge before gaining conceptual knowledge (Kua et al., 2021).
- *Routine Expertise:* Routine expertise refers to the process of developing "speed, accuracy, and automaticity of performance but lack[s] flexibility and adaptability to new problems" (Hatano & Inagaki, 1986, pg. 266).
- *Adaptive Expertise:* Adaptive expertise is the ability to be flexible when responding to unfamiliar tasks or problems, accounting for the potential of variability and meeting new demands with success (Hutton et al., 2017; Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014).
- *Novel:* The concept of novel or novel tasks will be used interchangeably with unfamiliar tasks, exceptional tasks/situations, unusual tasks/situations (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014; Hatano & Inagaki, 1986).
- *Ethical Decision*-Making: A principal's responsibility as a public servant to make choices in the moment between fluctuating circumstances, unknown outcomes, and varying resources to support the stakeholders in their organization and deciding what is in the best interest of the organization, the people in the organization, and the goals. (Garza Mitchell, 2012; Schwartz, 2016).

- *Creative Insubordination/Deviance:* The act of an employee intentionally disregarding an organization's policies or mandates with the intent to safeguard the welfare of the people in the organization (Lin et al., 2016; Mainemelis 2010; Shukla & Kark, 2020).
- *Human-Centered Leadership*: The act of leading with the intent to be flexible, caring, and attentive to the human needs during times of crisis (Abdi et al., 2020; Handford et al., 2022; Khilji, 2022).

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Principals are primarily viewed as the instructional leader, but the daily responsibilities they are faced with force them to prioritize among the most pressing and changing demands of the school site. Most recently, principals are leading their school site amidst the unknown and unpredictable environments such as Ebola, school shootings, or the COVID-19 pandemic (Burton, 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Smith, 2021; Thornton, 2021). Before principals can address instruction, they are sometimes required to establish the optimal teaching and learning conditions, so teachers and staff can provide the instruction necessary to positively affect student outcomes (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Brion, 2021; Weiner et al., 2021). But even within optimal conditions for teaching and learning, principals are faced with challenges that do not fit adeptly within a schema familiar to them, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Darkow, 2019; Diliberti et al., 2021;02 Dirani et al., 2020; Kaul et al., 2022; Stough et al., 2018). Our current understanding of principal leadership does not consider these challenges in a manner that always accounts for those most affected by the choices leaders make.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to broaden our understanding of how principals made decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this dissertation describes how 10 principals responded to novel situations using ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination (Garza Mitchell, 2012; Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Khilji, 2022; LaVenia & Lasater, 2022; Schwartz, 2016; Shukla & Kark, 2020).

Research Questions

The guiding research questions are:

1. What are the novel situations these principals encountered in their multidimensional school environments because of COVID-19?
2. How did these principals make decisions when faced with these COVID-19 related novel challenges?

3. On what and who did these school leaders prioritize their attention during the COVID-19 pandemic? Why?

This review of literature begins with the conceptual framework, detailing how ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination contribute to describing the lens used in this study, human-centered leadership. Next, the literature conceptualizing the principal role begins by defining who the principal is: their traditional role, their role as a manager versus their role as a leader, their role as an instructional leader, their role as a transformational leader, and their role as a distributive leader. The literature review continues with descriptions about how the various leadership models such as instructional, distributed, and transformational attempt to contend with the expectations placed on principals and how decision-making is a by-product of external influences and requirements imposed on both school districts and individual school sites. The literature review continues by describing studies that focus on leadership during a crisis and how these qualitative studies identify potential models for school and district leaders to follow during a crisis. This chapter concludes with essential elements to address the multi-layered and complex organizations principals work in and the equally complex and novel issues they confronted because of COVID-19.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed for this study focuses attention on the human-centered leadership, which is the central aspect of the principals in this study during the COVID-19 pandemic. The framework illustrates how principals lead beyond traditionally held models, which have been highly researched during non-crisis times but not during a pandemic, revealing how the principals in this study focused on the people within their organization above the task or goal-driven vision of their organization.

Human-Centered Leadership

Human-centered leadership provides a dynamic lens to understand how the principals in this study made decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic by highlighting what and who they

prioritized when making decisions (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Garza Mitchell, 2012; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Kahn & Bullis, 2021; Khilji, 2022; Shukla & Kark, 2020; Tintoré et al., 2020). It considers *how* they tackle decisions without clear goals, with limited information, within ethical dilemmas, and/or lack of resources (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Hayes & Derrington; 2023; Khan & Bullis, 2021; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Looking at principals' work through this lens focuses my attention on the *how* and *why* of principals' work, as well as the ways they navigate alternative solutions to novel (unfamiliar) situations such as those they encounter with instruction, with parents, or with district and outside agencies' policy mandates. The COVID-19 pandemic provided the space to understand how principals responded to numerous challenges and competing demands without clear and immediate solutions or with solutions provided to principals, which they decided to venture outside of the guidance provided to them (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Dirani et al., 2020; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Huck & Zhang, 2021). This helps develop understandings of how these principals incorporated various solutions to the evolving and fluid school environment, which was amplified by the pandemic, and what and who they prioritize their attention (Anthony et al., 2015; Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Hatano & Oura, 2003; Kavrayıcı & Kesim, 2021). It showcases their broader areas of leadership beyond the organizationally goal-driven tasks they encounter daily. How then can the principal role be reimagined to account for the novel situations, which have existed throughout the evolution of their role?

The literature on human-centered leadership suggests several influential factors—ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination. In the following sections, I review the literature on these factors and show their connection to Ravitch's (2021) flux leadership, which focuses on equity, responsiveness, and agile leadership. Building on flux leadership, this study utilized humanizing leadership, the sixth dimension of that framework, examining specifically the ways the principals in this study interpreted the ethical decision-

making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination to focus their decision-making on the humans in their school community: the students, the families, and the staff.

Ethical decision-making

Ethical decision-making is one of the three tenets used to help fully describe human-centered leadership. The concept of ethics or ethical behavior is based on moral values one must use to determine the difference between right and wrong behaviors (Edwards & Magill, 2023; Karaköse, 2007). Ethical decision-making should be part of what principals do when they are confronted with choices that will impact people on their school site. While principals are clearly responsible to their district or central office directing them to make specific instructional and logistical choices on their behalf, it is not always clear what principals should do when there is no clear indication of what the outcome will look like or how it will impact people (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016; Garza Mitchell,2012; Karaköse, 2007). The choices principals make do not always have clear outcomes, nor do they oftentimes have clear solutions, but what is clear is that the choice they make should consider how they will serve their students, their families, and their staff (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014; De Voto, & Superfine, 2023; Hayes & Derrington, 2023). Ethical decision-making becomes more pronounced with non-routine challenges or crisis, as illustrated through the recent events of increasing school shootings, natural disasters, and the current COVID-19 pandemic. These novel circumstances compel principals to employ ethical decision-making because it is not about efficiency but rather about equity (Karaköse, 2007; Leppard, 2018; Lowery, 2019; Schwartz, 2016). Principals behaving ethically or unethically is based on moral beliefs, impacted by their worldview. During the COVID-19 pandemic, principals were confronted with decisions, requiring them to make choices contrary to their belief systems but they made choices based on their personal ethical decision-making to serve the people in their school community (Berisha, et al., 2023; De Voto & Superfine, 2023; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016).

Adaptive expertise

Within the complex school structure, principals are faced with novel or unfamiliar tasks, which do not have a clear solution or a known process to resolve the issues (Barnett, & Koslowski, 2002; Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Hatano, 1988). Adaptive expertise is the second tenet of human-centered leadership. Hutton et al. (2017) define adaptive expertise as the ability to be flexible when responding to unfamiliar tasks or problems, accounting for the potential of variability and meeting new demands with success. Furthermore, adaptive expertise is preceded by various stages of cognitive development, which Hatano and Inagaki (1986) claim to develop from accumulating experience in solving problems in one or more domain specific areas. Although adaptive experts need to possess domain knowledge, they do not become adaptive experts simply because they are routine experts (Anthony et al., 2015; Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014; McMullen et al., 2020; Mylopoulos et al., 2018a, 2018b). They have accumulated experience and deliberately practice in a domain area but do not compartmentalize their knowledge, rather they dis-situate the experience and collaborate with others through their practice (Cutrer et al., 2017; Soslau, 2012; Von Esch & Kavanagh, 2018). Adaptive experts organize their knowledge differently and can understand it in the abstract, reflecting on the how and the why a process works to utilize it in an unknown or non-standardized task to become an adaptive expert (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014, 2016; Kua, 2021; Hatano & Inagaki, 1986, 1992; Hatano & Oura, 2003; Soslau, 2012). The adaptive expert operates within the space of unfamiliar and increasing complexity of a situation, making this a process and not a state of being. Adaptive experts continuously learn and adapt to the changing circumstances.

Creative insubordination.

Creative insubordination, who some call creative deviance, was another key characteristic of the principals in this study. Principals who demonstrate creative insubordination know how to work within and against policy constraints and learn how to understand the issues

they face both through their formal training as well as informal experiences, oftentimes driven by ethical choices (Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Haynes & Licata, 1995; Lin et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2020). Creative insubordination, which helps explain how and why leaders deliberately defy policy mandates or constraints, is the third and final of the tenets I use to describe the human-centered leadership framework. Creative insubordination can be defined as a behavior/choice an employee exhibits or makes that is not sanctioned by their supervisor(s) (Lin et al., 2016; Liu & Xu, 2022; Mainemelis 2010; Shukla & Kark, 2020). Within the context of natural disasters, school shootings, or recently because of the COVID-19 pandemic, following prescribed solutions, protocols, or standard operating procedures has become increasingly and repeatedly more difficult for leaders who ethically find such solutions inappropriate because the very people those solutions are supposed to serve can and do more harm to them (Aytaç, 2020; Azambujaa & Islam, 2023; Lin et al., 2015; Shukla & Kark, 2020). Because COVID-19 was an unprecedented and novel situation, county offices of education, county departments of health, district offices, and subsequently principals were unprepared to deal with a crisis of this magnitude, causing leadership at every level to make in-the-moment decisions with the information they had access to (Edwards & Magill, 2023; Karami & Parra-Martinez, 2021; Kavrayıcı & Kesim; 2021; Mutch, 2020). In these unimaginable times, principals need to explore different methods for resolving or addressing the unpredictable, volatile, and multi-layered school environments they lead. Principals will continue to deal with both routine and novel situations, but they have the option to lead with creative insubordination, which they may need to circumvent their predesigned-solutions environment with a more humanistic approach.

Conceptualizing the Principal Role

Conceptualizing what the principal should do has evolved over time, but the literature around the evolution of the principal's role is sparse and difficult to find (Rousmaniere, 2007, 2013). Early principal research is largely ignored because their role was captured in other

capacities such as headteacher, preceptors, principal teachers, as well as superintendents (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013). 18th century principals occupied the role of both a teacher and administrator. Their administrative role focused primarily on logistical matters affecting the daily operation of the school. The principal initially evolved out of a need to administer the daily, weekly, or monthly logistical needs of a school building such as ordering supplies, hiring additional teachers, ensuring the facility was operating properly, or dealing with student discipline (Kafka, 2009; Pierce, 1935; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). By the mid-19th century, principals had increasing pressure to perform according to their community's expectations. Educational reform efforts of the late 18th and early 19th century allowed for a more professionalized view of the principal role because they were needed to interpret educational policy from the district office and implement it within their school. These early descriptions of principals positioned them as "Directors of Routine," (Bobbitt, 1924, p. 14), indicating their role more as the building leader who is involved with addressing issues with known processes, known solutions, and more importantly, known experts (Davis, 1921; Hallinger, 1992; Krug, 1972).

Identifying what principals should do was made clearer with attempts to standardize principal credentialing up the 1940s. Principals prior to the 1950s were not the instructional leaders identified by today's standards because of the lack of accountability and ill-defined role associated with their position (Bobbitt, 1924; Davis, 1921; Goodwin et al., 2003; Rousmaniere, 2007, 2013; Shipps & White, 2009). In the last fifty years, educational reform efforts have continued to bring about changes to leadership models, requiring school and district leadership to reframe leadership styles and practices. As a result, principals are required to analyze, interpret, and implement these policies, leaving little room to acknowledge their school's complex needs beyond the prescribed methods that may not secure the desired results for the school community. With curriculum development in the early 20th century, principals became a central focus, ensuring curriculum was implemented instead of focusing on the other routine

aspects of their duties (Bobbitt, 1924; Davis, 1921; Rousmaniere, 2013). Today, the principal's role has not changed as much as the educational and political landscape in which they operate. Their schools are complex and multidimensional spaces, requiring flexible and fluid leadership described by various roles.

Traditional Role

Principals are defined and subsequently hired for the tasks and responsibilities they are assigned such as managing the learning environment and creating understanding around educational policy and implementation (Edjoin, 2020; Levin et al., 2020; Rousmaniere, 2007, 2013). Principals are primarily known for their effectiveness as former teachers in a classroom, and this seldom includes working with large groups of students, staff, or parents (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013). The challenges school personnel face regularly require principals to use different skills from those used when they were in the classroom or taught in their administrative credentialing program (Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Sebastian et al., 2019). Without the appropriate training, principals often struggle to learn their new role as a site administrator and are defined by their daily tasks of managing the school site. As a result, teachers complain the principal is always championing a new instructional program, a new intervention, or a new system, making teachers feel they have no input and there is no instructional coherence (Elmore, 2000; Huang et al., 2020; Tyack & Hansot, 1982). Principals are guided and evaluated by their professional standards that include implementing district and state mandated curricula and assessments, oftentimes conflicting with their expected role (CPSEL, 2014; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; May et al., 2012; White-Smith, 2012). For example, teachers sometimes feel there is no clear guidance about goals or direction such as how to address student issues in the classroom because of a lack of or inconsistent support from the principal (Kim, 2022; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). There is seemingly a disconnect between a principal's actions and what the school site needs. In addition, there is also tension between skills

required to address varying needs existing on a school campus and skills required to address daily demands and responsibilities of the school, which transcend the routine daily tasks oftentimes occupying the principal's time, which also conflicts with how principals are evaluated and defined with how they are prepared (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015; CPSEL, 2014; Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Khan & Bullis, 2021; Ross & Cozzens, 2016).

An exploration of the literature reveals contradictory and conflicting definitions and concepts attributed to the principal role (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Daresh et al., 2000; Goodwin et al., 2003; Lemoine et al., 2014; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Sebastian et al., 2019). The traditional principal role is defined as the site leader placed in the middle between the district office and the classroom, interpreting policies, promoting initiatives, and addressing daily issues at the site (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013). The principal has been regarded as the middle manager who is charged with implementing educational policies and viewed as the site instructional leader who oversees student learning. The traditional role of the principal is further complicated because of the ambiguous and multivariate nature of their role (Hallinger & Heck, 2010b; Kafka, 2009; Leithwood, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008; Urick, 2016). Whether principals are viewed as the instructional leader, a manager, a mentor, or a leader, defining who they are or what they do becomes increasingly difficult because of the complex nature of their goals and responsibilities (Goodwin et al., 2003; Horng et al., 2010). The demands placed on principals are not new, but the degree in which they are expected to address them has made it more difficult to determine what their role is and equally difficult to identify how they are to fulfill their role(s) effectively. Principals are expected to develop the vision, maintain an orderly environment, and provide the necessary resources for teaching and learning to name a few of their responsibilities as a school building leader (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Hallinger & Heck 2010b; Rousmaniere, 2013; Supovitz et al., 2010). These demands have created confusion about what role principals should occupy to support student outcomes, promote staff development or staff capacity, or create a safe environment.

Principal as Manager

During the 1960s and 1970s, schools fell under more strict control by the district because of state and federal policies. The principal's perspective shifted to the role of a manager, responsible for controlling or administering various programs. This shift meant principals were "responsible for managing federally sponsored, funded programmes designed to assist special student populations" (Hallinger, 1992, p. 35). The research around a principal's managerial role continues to focus on their efforts for meeting compliance criteria and success rates (Hallinger, 1992; Kafka, 2009; Lemoine et al., 2014; Tintoré et al., 2020). Although principals were needed to ensure state and federal categorical programs are implemented within compliance criteria, researchers identified mixed results from principals acting as managers of educational programs (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Tintoré et al., 2020). The studies on principals as managers provide inconsistent results, which state principal effectiveness is based on the school's context, the principal's training, or the type of program being implemented (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Urick & Bowers, 2014). Additionally, the research outlines the needs to supplement managerial leadership styles with other models such as instructional and transformational leadership, but it does not guarantee consistent positive school outcomes (Parylo & Zepeda, 2014; Robinson et al., 2008; Urick & Bowers, 2014). The literature reviewed employed various research methods, including both qualitative and quantitative methods, secondary analysis of previous data, and scoping reviews (Goddard et al., 2015; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014; Robinson et al., 2008; Tintoré et al., 2020; Urick & Bowers, 2014). The conclusions that surfaced from this literature revealed how principals' management leadership is primarily context driven, influenced by school demographics and school needs (Goddard et al., 2015; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014; Urick & Bowers, 2014). The research findings also demonstrate how increasing demands placed on principals requires a multidimensional approach to leadership, rendering management styles less effective without the support of other frameworks and additional coaching (Catano &

Stronge 2006; Robinson et al., 2008; Tintoré et al., 2020). The principal occupying the role of a manager exercises what Hatano and Inagaki (1986) name as routine expertise, which is knowledge developed through a known process and a known solution. But schools are dynamic and fluid organizations, including a mix of both routine and non-routine issues principals must address.

Principals are hired to lead a school, but what the position entails is ambiguous and not clearly communicated. It is critical to define the principal as the site leader to understand the role within the TK-12 school environment (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Goldring et al., 2008; Goodwin et al., 2003; Kafka, 2009; West et al., 2010). Principals have been defined in general terms as managers, supervisors, instructional leaders, and even politicians (Kafka, 2009; Rousmaniere, 2013). Historical roles associated with the principal are further complicated because of the competing demands with the principal's current responsibilities, making it difficult to define their role (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017). Principals have been viewed initially as managers who evolved into the traditional and expected role of instructional leader, which is one who can provide instructional strategies based, in part, on the observations of the classrooms they visit, or other efforts aimed at improving student outcomes (Kafka, 2009; Leithwood, 2017). This distinction reflects more their job responsibilities than it does the principal's role, but they are functions or dimensions commonly associated with the position, which need further explanation to reveal a more complete understanding of the principal's role.

Principal as Leader

Leadership, on the other hand, requires the principal to exercise skills such as communication, relationship building, and developing professional capacity among teachers and staff (Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Lindsey et al., 2018; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Unlike managing schedules or plans, leadership includes interactions with members of the school community. Leadership is diagnosing and acting, as the leader reflects on the context to understand the system (the people) and how certain

decision-making will affect the system or influence or mobilize others (Heifetz et al., 2009; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). The principal as the leader is driven by goals, by outcomes, and by team member needs, requiring more than codified processes or standard operating procedures with known solutions, which do require building capacity in their team members and build culture in their organization (Chance, 2013; Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Jacobson, 2011; Leithwood, 2005; Shaked & Schechter, 2019). Principals who exercise leadership do not rely on one prescriptive model to address the multitude of potential issues that may arise daily. Nor should a principal adhere to one school of thought for meeting the demands and responsibilities associated with the principal role because schools are not predictable or stable environments. Researchers dissect the principal role into both the manager and the leader as a pragmatic method to study how principals perform their duties, but it may not be comprehensive enough to reconcile a leader's expectations, responsibilities, and demands placed on them (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Mylopoulos & Woods, 2017; Spillane & Lee, 2014). As a result of the conflicting needs of various school stakeholders, principals must exercise a different type of leadership (May et al., 2012; Wasonga & Fisher, 2018). This must include decision making that will allow for uncertainty, flexibility, and rely on their routine expertise within domains of knowledge they address daily and reconcile this with the unknown, novel situations, which breach their understanding or expectation about how to resolve issues without predetermined solutions and process (Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Ford et al., 2020; Shaked & Schechter, 2019).

The principal's responsibilities and tasks provide a context to help define or describe the role, but they cannot fully illustrate how one area or even several areas help define the role. Researchers define the principal as a managerial role, but only in service of other functions, and it may overlap with a leadership role, which include elements such as instruction or teacher empowerment, defined as instructional leadership (Goodwin et al., 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010a; Horng et al., 2010). Leadership, researchers claim, becomes more complicated when it

is viewed as an organizational function and not simply a function of the individual (Day, 2000; Sebastian et al., 2019). While the distinction helps shape an identity around the role(s) principals occupy, it is clear the distinctions do not define the principal's role categorically and require the inclusion of various leadership models to address the interpersonal and capacity building necessary for effective teaching and learning (Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Goodwin et al., 2003; May et al., 2012; Urick, 2016). The principal's role is shaped not only by their institutional responsibilities but also by additional demands achieved by exercising leadership, which must also address how they resolve non-routine or novel situations.

Leadership versus Management

The principal as a manager, distinct from the principal as a leader, does help identify what principals do to achieve specific outcomes. They should not be viewed as separate concepts or roles they occupy at different times or even as skills they possess as a preferred position because the research reveals the goals achieved through either supports student outcomes in different but necessary ways. While some aspects of principals' duties require management and administrative skills, it is clear complexities exist in both who the leader is, what they do or is expected to do, and how they address either routine or non-routine challenges (Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Huang, 2020; May et al., 2012; Robinson, 2008; Urick, 2016). Management skills such as creating schedules for professional development, managing budgets, or managing non-instructional staff require the principal to be knowledgeable of technical skills, and they must be proficient or experts at these skills (Lindsey et al., 2018; Marion & Gonzales, 2014; Richardson et al., 2021; Sebastian et al., 2019; Spillane et al., 2009). Management skills can be equated to providing organizational stability by ensuring principals can plan, direct, or standardize processes (Chance, 2013; Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Viewed as a manager, this role provides a general understanding of what principals do, but management goals have a larger impact on the school structure, specifically with instruction and organizational structures, potentially creating optimal conditions for teaching

and learning but not necessarily the novel or non-routine aspects of the organization or how they impact the people in the school community.

Researchers outlining the conflict between the principal as leader and the principal as manager identify additional complexities of the role with both internal and external influences such as communicating with the school district or hiring personnel, adding to their responsibilities (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Kafka, 2009; Urick & Bowers, 2014) and varying expectations, making reconciling the expectations of the role and the daily demands and responsibilities of the role more complicated (Daresh et al., 2000; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014). The difficulty stems from the challenges identified above to have pre-defined processes or solutions and an unknown or unexpected variables or timeframe for completion, complicating how principals resolve these issues (Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Sinek, 2019). The distinction between the principal as a manager or as a leader becomes less useful because a principal's role requires a combination of the two roles. The distinctions are also less useful when job responsibilities cannot be pinpointed toward a set of goals or outcomes specific to the students, the parents, or the district because of the fragmented nature of daily responsibilities (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Horng et al., 2010). The principal as a leader includes vision building, goal setting, and empowering teachers to name a few (Cascadden, 1998; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Goldring et al., 2008; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014). The principal as a leader is not linear like management and requires the principal to include others in the process to achieve the organizational goals.

A principal's role is further complicated with various competing models, competencies, or definitions *of* leadership considered appropriate for the principal's role (Catano & Stronge, 2006; May et al., 2012 Robinson et al., 2008; Ross & Cozzens, 2016). These distinctions help to illustrate the complexity inherent in the evolution of the role, including a mixture of both manager and leader roles, which sometimes conflict with the principal's responsibilities or ethics affecting student outcomes (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Cascadden, 1998; Goldring et al., 2008;

Goodwin et al., 2003; Rousmaniere, 2013; Schwartz; 2016; Urick, 2016; West et al., 2010). The principal is viewed as an intermediary between external entities such as state policy makers, district office personnel, parents and the daily lived experiences of students and teachers, competing with the theory principals should be the instructional leader or any other leadership model they have trained under.

Whether the principal is regarded as a manager or a leader, the goal is student achievement and school progress. Much of the literature presents student achievement as the principal's ultimate and central goal (Crum & Sherman, 2008; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Horng et al., 2010), but external influences such as power dynamics and standards-based accountability make it difficult for principals to support student achievement (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Elmore, 2000; West et al., 2010), which directly impacts student success and the school's educational progress. The principal role has evolved from the building manager to headteacher ultimately responsible for student outcomes and ensuring the school facility runs smoothly (Kafka, 2009; Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017). Although the principal's role as the school site leader is supposed to impact student outcomes, their efforts towards that goal are influenced by factors such as organizational expectations or departmental needs not existing simply within their role as the leader (Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Grunfeld et al., 2021; Khan & Bullis, 2021; Levin et al., 2020).

Principal as Instructional Leader

By the 1980s, management models alone could not sustain or support the student outcomes necessary during the education reform efforts of the time (Hallinger, 1992). It required the principal to assume the role as the instructional leader. Instructional leadership can be defined as those functions promoting or contributing to student learning, which can include managerial skills principals utilize during a school day to promote a positive teaching and learning environment (Goddard et al., 2015; Hallinger, 1992; Marks & Printy, 2003). Instructional leadership, a development of the effective school's movement in the 1980s, has continued to

proliferate the current literature around what principals should do but not without its own issues (Huang et al., 2020; May et al., 2012; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Sebastian et al., 2019). It is elusive because it is not like management where the principal can control certain processes related to improvement (Elmore, 2000; Horng, 2010; Urick, 2016). The term “instructional leader” has been acknowledged as synonymous with anything a principal does to ensure student achievement increases, teachers have opportunities for professional development, and the facility is operating smoothly (Goddard et al., 2015; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Marks & Printy, 2003; Shatzer et al., 2014). Researchers agree that one of the principal’s main roles is that of an instructional leader but acknowledge student outcomes are not consistent or reflective of their practice because principals spend more time in their offices than in classrooms (Grissom et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2020; May et al., 2012). Some of the issues raised in this research focused mainly on the elementary level, neglecting the more complex nature of the secondary levels as well as how instructional leadership alone was insufficient to achieve consistent student outcomes (Goddard et al., 2015; Sebastian et al., 2019). The various studies reviewed utilized similar research methods such as surveys, student demographic information, assessment scores, principals’ daily logs, or ethnographies. The findings from these studies reveal the important role principals occupy as the instructional leader but also indicate how context, a principal's organizational skills, and collaboration with teachers are critical to achieve consistent and positive student outcome (Goddard et al., 2015; Huang et al., 2020; Ross & Cozzens; Sebastian et al., 2019).

Although principals navigate between management and leadership, they must utilize instructional leadership to achieve positive student outcomes. Instructional leadership is elusive because it is not like management where the principal can control certain processes related to improvement (Elmore, 2000; Horng, 2010; Urick, 2016). Instructional leadership, viewed as part of the principal’s leadership role, may be a misnomer because of how it is viewed or perceived by teachers and administrators and how it is executed. The principal as leader must

then be reimagined from the traditional instructional leader role to examine the various systems existing in the school community. The instructional leader considers the structural and dynamic nature of their school site, which allows the principal to interrogate systems of inequality inhibiting, or in many cases, prohibiting student success (Crum & Sherman, 2008; Lindsey et al., 2018; White-Smith & Smith, 2009; Zamudio et al., 2011). As the instructional leader, examining these systems requires both the appropriate language and the strategic processes to implement school improvement, principals can have deliberate and purposeful conversations with stakeholders to bring about the necessary changes (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Instructional leadership becomes more complicated because of these various needs.

Principal as Transformational Leader

The 1990s brought about additional research when transformational leadership became the focus of research for school improvement efforts. Transformational leadership, unlike instructional leadership where the principal leads from the front, is the concept describing how principals lead from the back or alongside their staff to make decisions (Hallinger, 1992; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). For principals, this marked a new perspective to address instructional improvement based on both an individual and collective effort. Leading within this framework requires the principal to create a vision with the school community and readjusting their efforts when the goals are not clear (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). As a transformational leader, principals can differentiate their support for teachers and staff (Brezicha et al., 2015; Shatzer et al., 2014; Wasonga & Fisher, 2018). Although transformational leadership has been a response to the limitations of instructional leadership, the research raises important issues such as the need to incorporate other leadership frameworks to support transformational leadership (Brezicha et al., 2015; Marks & Printy, 2003; Urick, 2016). Researchers argue that separating the various leadership models makes it difficult to understand how to improve instruction (Brezicha et al., 2015; Marks & Printy, 2003; Neumerski, 2012). The research on transformational leadership employed various methods including both qualitative and quantitative methods, surveys,

interviews, and systematic reviews of literature. The discussion and conclusions from these studies communicate the need to integrate leadership models to address the complexities inherent in the school communities (Marks & Printy, 2003; Shatzer, 2014; Urick, 2014; Wasonga & Fisher, 2018). Within this framework, principals must be collaborative and supportive to achieve improved student outcomes (Brezicha et al., 2015; Hallinger, 1992; Urick, 2016).

Transformational leadership, in combination with instructional leadership, is a new evolution for how instructional leadership will be enacted by principals, further demonstrating instructional leadership is an incomplete leadership model attempting to describe the principal role. Researchers determined instructional leadership integrated with transformational leadership increases student achievement more than when principals execute only transformational leadership or only instructional leadership (Brezicha, 2015; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003; Shatzer et al., 2014). When used in tandem, instructional, and transformational leadership have a higher impact on student achievement. While instructional leaders affect the core curriculum, transformational leaders impact teacher efficacy and organizational capacity. Other researchers are still unclear about the effects this integrated leadership has on student outcomes, begging the question as to what form of leadership is best suited to improve student outcomes or build organizational capacity to deal with the internal demands such as classroom instruction or external demands such as state testing (Goddard et al., 2015; Leithwood et al., 2010). Although instructional leadership, with the additional elements or dimensions of leadership practices, provides alternatives to the complex role principals occupy, it is further complicated by factors such as the limitation with instructional leadership.

Principal as Distributive Leader

Because the current definitions for instructional leadership do not outline how leaders improve learning and instruction, researchers have included other roles or practices to support principals in their efforts to improve student learning and build teacher capacity. For example, leaders use distributed leadership as a mechanism to support instructional leadership,

providing opportunities for various stakeholders in the school to make decisions on behalf of students and not rely on a principal to make all the decisions but rather work alongside principals in a collaborative effort (Huang et al., 2020; Elmore, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003; Ross & Cozzens, 2016). The increasing demands placed on schools to perform, and the need to include others in the decision-making process, makes distributed leadership a necessity to increase a sense of shared accountability among the staff to support teaching and learning. The elements contained in various definitions of distributed leadership are the same qualities labeled as "strong instructional leadership," aimed at providing teachers with the support necessary for instructional improvement such as promoting collaboration and developing goals for school improvement (Brezicha et al., 2015; Goddard et al., 2015, p. 526; Urick, 2016). The research, with the various definitions of instructional leadership and strategies for implementing leadership using distributed leadership, indicate instructional leadership alone does not capture the complexity of either the role or the tasks involved to improve student outcomes or teacher efficacy (Brezicha et al., 2015; Hallinger & Heck, 2010a; 2010b). Although instructional leadership aims to improve student outcomes while distributed leadership aims to include the staff as part of the leadership team, neither address the non-routine nature or novel challenges principals face as part of addressing student outcomes or safeguard the welfare of those affected by any of the changes they experience (Abdi et al., 2020; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Hallinger & Heck, 2010a; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014; Wahlstrom & Seashore Louis, 2008).

Effects of Competing Models

Leadership models, either as a single model or in conjunction with instructional or distributive leadership, have been used to expand the effects leadership enacted by principals has on student outcomes (Marks & Printy, 2003; Shatzer et al., 2014). But these leadership models still define the principal's role, or describe their leadership styles, within familiar problems or tasks and a predictable environment with known solutions and experts within these domains. Oftentimes, principals do not have all the information or even the knowledge to solve

or address the myriad of situations with which they are confronted. Consequently, principals make complex decisions based on the competing demands placed on them by both internal and external influences (Ford et al., 2020; Hoerr, 2017; Woulfin & Wiener, 2019). The school environments principals lead are complex organizations where they must employ various practices, most of which they have not had formal training to address (Anderson & Reynolds, 2015). The complexity described in the literature argues for implementing blended models to increase student outcomes but does not fully attend to how principals deal with novel challenges without predefined solutions or how it will impact the people in their school community (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003; Urick & Bowers, 2014). As a result, principals struggle to address non-routine tasks or novel situations with unknown solutions or processes to address these challenges.

When principals are directing their efforts toward instructional leadership, it has less to do with academics and more to do with collaboration, teachers' professional development, culture building, or addressing external influences affecting the working dynamics of the school site (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Lemoine et al., 2014; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014; Sebastian et al., 2019; West et al., 2010). It is difficult to identify effective practices when several areas such as vision building or collaboration are included as dimensions of both instructional leadership and distributed leadership, much less define what instructional leadership is. The definitions become conflated with competencies, sub-dimensions of one leadership model or another, leaving the practitioner with little guidance about what or how these practices influence student outcomes or teacher efficacy (Leithwood et al., 2010; Urick 2016; Urick & Bowers, 2014). The principal's role as the instructional leader, or other designated leadership role, cannot be reduced to a handful of disparate models or practices without understanding the daily leadership practices as a more comprehensive measure for meeting the demands of a school, which may include other models of integrated leadership or the context where principals exercise their leadership.

Leading in a Crisis

Principals have led under various conditions that are not always optimal. Principals deal with a crisis based on their experience, anecdotal information, or specific training. The literature around leadership lessons learned and protocols used during crises conclude that at the heart of this leadership is the necessity to keep students and staff safe (Burton, 2020; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Goswick et al., 2017; Stough et al., 2018). Because natural disasters are not always predictable and no one is able to guess the impact it will have on property or people, leadership that safeguards those in the charge of school principals is a critical component for training school leaders. Principals cannot prevent a tornado, a hurricane, or other natural disasters, but they along with district leaders can better prepare for the potential aftermath such as school closures, loss of property, or loss of life (Dishman et al., 2011; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016; Kaul et al., 2022; Weiner et al., 2020). The research further explains that successful leadership in a time of crisis is heavily dependent on how leaders prepare at the various levels and addressing the context of their schools to make better decisions to safeguard students and staff (Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016; Stough & Lee, 2018; Zheteyeva et al., 2017). These qualitative studies presented their findings through interviews, which revealed that the successful principals and school leaders considered the physical realities their school community was experiencing and displayed ethical decision-making to ensure the choices they made considered the students and staff (Burton, 2020; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016; Grinyer & Thomas, 2012). The current COVID-19 pandemic disrupted entire schooling systems to an extent not yet fully understood, but leaders responded according to believed best practices, policy mandates, and restrictions, requiring them to lead their school organizations in specific ways (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Kaul et al., 2022; Weiner et al., 2020).

Complex Organizations

Schools operate with some predictable systems such as bell schedules, assemblies, and meetings, but a school includes people and processes, which are not always as predictable nor can they be anticipated (Drago-Severson et al., 2018; Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Ford et al., 2020). Because schools are affected by internal and external influences with various systems dependent on one another, principals must adapt and focus their leadership on immediate needs simultaneously with long-term goals based on their vision for the school, students, and teachers in the system (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016; Hallinger & Heck 2010a; Shatzer et al., 2014). While challenges exist with defining who the principal is, they operate in an organizational reality, conflating the expectations placed on them by the daily reality and the expectations placed on their formal role as the principal, which oftentimes does not include novel situations (Goldring et al., 2008; Huang et al., 2020; Leithwood, 2017). Principals perform their duties and carry out their responsibilities based on improving student outcomes (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Shatzer et al., 2014; White-Smith & White, 2009). A principal may strongly desire to visit classrooms each morning or attend a departmental meeting, but they may have to attend to a parent or other immediate need, prohibiting their attendance and making it difficult to fulfill their daily tasks as the site leader. They exercise their leadership by developing the school's mission, monitoring instruction, establishing a positive school culture, or making decisions to support student outcomes, which are tasks without clear processes or solutions (Goddard et al., 2015; Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Kua, 2021; Marks & Printy, 2003).

As complex organizations, schools operate in due part to the interacting variables such as student and teacher demographics, leader education and experience, and instructional leadership, complicating how principals make decisions (Clark & O'Donoghue, 2017; Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Huang et al., 2020). Although principals attempt to lead with a student outcome focus, they must accept the tension between the various competing

internal and external influences placed on them and adapt or forced into ethical dilemmas, further creating a role conflict between managerial/organizational requirements and other competing forms of leadership (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Goodwin et al., 2003; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Hallinger & Heck 2010a; Schwartz, 2016). A principal's focus on exercising leadership does benefit from addressing both managerial and organizational responsibilities as a strategy to ensure teachers and staff have the necessary tools, skills, or conditions essential for student learning. Apart from the myopic perspective that certain leadership models, such as instructional leadership is a single factor influencing student outcomes, dismisses the direct influence a principal has on establishing the conditions for professional development, providing time for teacher collaboration, and allowing others to make decisions based on the dynamic and complex nature of a school (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Goddard et al., 2015; Sebastian et al., 2019). The principal role, viewed in isolation of their dynamic fluid context, is not a complete or comprehensive view of the type of leadership and decision-making process required to lead a 21st Century school. The schoolwide mandated school closures in 2020 is a perfect example how a school principal must adapt to unknown circumstances without any precedence, leaving them to create up solutions as they go because their prior training did not prepare them to make these new decisions (Huck & Zhang, 2021; Thornton, 2021).

COVID-19 School Context

The school's context has a significant effect on how leadership is or can be exercised, especially when considering whether it is developing personnel, managing the organization, or promoting certain instructional strategies. The leader performs their duties in unknown situations without clear strategies for resolving issues within an unpredictable environment until they become more familiar with the school site and personnel (Daresh et al., 2000; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Goldring et al., 2008; Sebastian et al., 2019). Traditional measures affected by elements such as state and district common assessments or single measures of school

success such as course grades are unreliable to identify students' needs beyond academics. The context is further complicated by factors such as a principal's experience, grade level differences, teachers' professional needs, or external influences such as district or county office of education policies (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Cooper, 2009; Hallinger & Heck, 2010b; Huang et al., 2020). Leaders must account for demographic changes and direct their leadership efforts towards addressing complex issues of social justice or equity, which do not have clear methods or strategies for addressing needed solutions, which transcend leadership models identified above, specifically when they relate to a natural disaster, school shooting, or the COVID-19 pandemic (Ambrose, 2020; Cooper, 2009; Darkow, 2019; Dirani et al., 2020; Hallinger & Heck, 2010a; 2010b; Huang et al., 2020; Kaul et al., 2022). The pandemic has further highlighted the complex and multidimensional school environment, illustrating how leadership models such as distributed leadership place the principal at the center of the decision-making process or the identified point of contact for taking on more roles to address the needs of the campus (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Coe, 2009; Lumby, 2013, Spillane, 2012, Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Various leadership models, focusing on only curriculum or lesson delivery, cannot fully capture other student and staff needs affecting student outcomes because principals need to exercise additional skills to ensure teachers, for example, are part of the decision-making process to support students, build teacher and staff capacity to improve instruction, and develop their leadership to address emergencies such as responding to an active shooter, wildfire, or pandemic (Burton, 2020; Dishman, 2011; Mutch, 2020). Spillane and Diamond (2007) argue for leadership as a practice rather than leadership as a role or responsibility (Cited in Brown et al., 2021, pg. 156). COVID-19 *is* a series of novel events adding to the complexity of the school environment, which forces principals to be responsive to the unique challenges they face while also ensuring they adhere to the prescribed solutions imposed on them from the numerous external agencies such as County Health Departments, County Offices of Education, state organizations, and school boards.

Summary

Reviewing the literature reveals how the principal's role has been conceptualized to establish how their role has evolved over time. This literature defines the principal as a leader and illustrates how researchers have conflated the various definitions because of scholars attempting to define it through context, through the principal's background, or through the school's needs. Within the space of an instructional, transformational, or distributive leader, the literature provides explanations about how principals enacting leadership within these roles can have specific student outcomes. The literature also describes the school site as complex with many layers of responsibilities and competing goals imposed on the principal, some of which are demands outside the control of any agency or governing body such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, contradictions exist within the literature, exposing the inability of any one leadership model, or a combination of models, to fully explore both the complexities of a principal's role and the dynamic nature of a school site, requiring a principal to utilize a more human-centered leadership and address the ever-present novel circumstances in today's public schools and ensure students are learning the skills to be successful for a work environment that is constantly evolving and a world affected by crises without known solutions or known experts. The literature on the three tenets of the human-centered leadership framework (ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination) presents the necessary lens to investigate how principals can leverage their adaptive expertise to deal with unfamiliar conditions or situations in the absence of known solutions, processes, or experts with a more humanistic perspective.

Today's schools require a principal who can leverage their adaptive expertise to confront unpredictable, multidimensional, and complex environments replete with novel circumstances such as a global pandemic, commanding their immediate attention. Understanding a principal's decision-making process in terms of the complex and dynamic

nature of how they address the pressing challenges of the pandemic, requires an understanding related to a principal's adaptive expertise beyond the multiple leadership roles they are expected to occupy (Axelsson, 2018; Brown et al., 2021; Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014; Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Heifetz & Linsky, 1994; Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Human-centered leadership provides the lens to view how these principals enacted this type of leadership through their willingness to support the humans in their school community in their interpretations of what is ethical, the right thing to do; adaptive, responding to novel situation without known solutions; creative insubordination, informally defying organizational directives. Human-centered leaders can transcend their routine decision-making process to deal with novel circumstances because they do not compartmentalize their knowledge and are able to reflect on why their process works, continuously reframing their conceptual understanding of their procedural knowledge. Principals understand their roles are evolving and will need support as they address the many challenges facing education beyond the current pandemic (Azambujaa & Islam, 2023; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016; Ford et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020). The next chapter will outline how the study will be designed, using a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews and document analysis to help demonstrate how principals describe the novel challenges they face during the COVID-19 Pandemic and what and who they prioritize their attention and why.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Because principals experience a myriad of issues and challenges in their roles, it has become increasingly more difficult to execute their duties. The conflicting traditional definitions of the principal role, a misperception of the principal as a leader, and an exploration of the complex performance of leadership, demonstrating how any of the leadership models identified in the previous chapter cannot fully address the dynamic and fluid nature of a school require a more comprehensive exploration or study of human-centered leadership development (Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Garza Mitchell, 2012; Khilji, 2022; LaVenia & Lasater, 2022; Schwartz, 2016; Shukla & Kark, 2020; Wasonga & Fisher, 2018; Woulfin & Wiener, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative study is to broaden understandings of how the ten principals' decision-making priorities reflect a human-centered approach to leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. I aim to describe and understand, through the research design, how principals addressed the novel challenges brought on by COVID-19, which they were confronted with, through a human-centered leadership framework.

This chapter begins with a description of the proposed setting, participants, data collection methods, data analysis process, validity, and positionality. It concludes with the limitations of the study design. The following are the guiding research questions:

1. What are the novel situations these principals encountered in their multidimensional school environments because of COVID-19?
2. How did these principals make decisions when faced with these COVID-19 related novel challenges?
3. On what and who did these school leaders prioritize their attention during the COVID-19 pandemic? Why?

Method

Qualitative research methods were selected for this study to gain insight and investigate how school principals practice leadership through a human-centered lens (Flick, 2018; Mertler,

2019; Patton, 2015). Two methods for data collection were used for this study: semi-structured interviews and document collection (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2019). Participants were invited to participate in one semi-structured interview (Seidman, 2019). The interview was the primary source of data collection. The interview was approximately one hour in length. School records such as demographics and other data were also collected from the schools and districts websites (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rapley & Rees, 2018).

Setting

This study draws on the experiences of principals from four districts during the COVID-19 pandemic within a large Southern California County. There are approximately 3.1 million residents who live in the county. Approximately 600,000 students from the age of 4 to 18 are eligible for enrollment in the many elementary and secondary public-school districts, and approximately 131 charter schools, in the county. Sixty-three percent of residents' primary language is English, approximately 11% is Spanish, and approximately 21% are bilingual. This is approximately 43.5% of the total students eligible for enrollment. The per capita household income for families within the county reported in 2019 was approximately $38,000 with approximately 10% of these households living in poverty and an average household earnings of $56,000 (census.gov, 2019). From the total eligible number of students, over 261,000 English learners qualify for free or reduced-priced meals. In several examples, school sites have over 65% of the student population identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged. Several school sites in this county not only struggle to support the high number of students identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, but they also struggle to support the many undocumented family members struggling to get citizenship and they have ongoing issues with law enforcement affecting family unit stability. There are also over 3000 students in the foster care system in this county. Maintaining or recruiting a qualified teaching staff who is willing to work with the changing demographics of their neighborhoods has also been an issue in the past, but it has become an increasingly more challenging since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants

Purposeful participant selection (Beitin, 2012; Schreier, 2018) for this study was used to identify ten principals from TK-12 public schools within a Southern California county. I recruited principals who: (1) are currently serving as site principals in a Southern California county; (2) have served as principals for at least three full years; (3) and principals from four different school districts. Selecting principals with a minimum of three years' experience allowed me access to participants who have had time to grow into their role as principals and not be overwhelmed by daily tasks that are new to them but not necessarily novel (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Lemoine et al., 2014; Parylo & Zepeda, 2014; Sebastian et al., 2019; West et al., 2010). Selecting participants with a minimum number of years' experience provides me a specific frame of reference to identify potential commonalities among the various sites.

Principals' Profiles

The ten principals[1] who were participants in this study work across four different school districts and in schools of varying sizes and types (Table 1). They have between 4 years to 16 years as principals and, except for two principals, each has prior experience as an assistant principal or as a dean. This was done purposefully because I was asking questions about the decisions they made as principals beginning with the 2019-2020 school year, so each participant needed to be a principal during the first three years of the pandemic. All participants were classroom teachers prior to taking on leadership roles. Many of the participants previously had educational assignments outside of their teaching and administrator role such as coordinator, instructional coach, and department chair. Most of the participants also have experience outside the field of education, which is as varied as the school contexts they currently work with. These include retail, customer service, information technology (IT), and other experiences that inform how they work in schools.

[1] All participants were assigned a pseudonym for their personal name, their school's name, and district name.

Table 1: *Participants' Background*

Pseudonym	Principal Experience	Assistant Principal Experience	Teacher Experience	Teaching Discipline Experience	Educational Assignments	Prior Education Experience
Frank	5 Years	0 Years	15 Years	Multiple Subjects, Elementary, Sped	Resource Based Teacher	Probation Officer
Mike	4 Years	0 Years	13 Years	Math, Science	Coordinator	Various Science Positions
Emma	12 Years	3 Years	10 Years	Math	Director, Program Specialist, Curriculum Coordinator	None
Ellen	4 Years	4 Years	16 Years	Multiple Subjects, Elementary and Sped	Literacy Coach, Curriculum Coach	Retail, Information Technology Technician
Mia	5 Years	4 Years	5 Years	Multiple Subjects, Elementary	Instructional Coach	None
Sophia	4 Years	3 Years	12 Years	Multiple Subjects, Elementary	Union Rep, Admin Designee, Grade Level Lead	Political Campaigns, Program Coordinator
Nathan	13 Years	1 Year	17 Years	Sped, Math, Social Studies	Department Chair	Print industry, Culinary
John	10 Years	3 Years	17 Years	Science	Department Chair	Archeologist
Richard	16 Years	1 Year	7 Years	Multiple Subjects, Elementary	None	Recreation
Lucas	8 Years	2 Years	3 Years	Math, Science	None	Customer Service

Frank. Frank is the principal of Drake Elementary School in the Township Unified School District. He has been at his current site for 21 years. He started there as a general education teacher. At the beginning of his career, there were a lot of teacher layoffs happening, so he decided to move into special education. He spent approximately nine years as a special

education teacher. He described his first role as an assistant principal, which his district identified as a school base resource teacher that did not require him to obtain an administrative credential. After a year, he was appointed as interim principal of his current site because his principal was going on leave. A year later, his district determined his principal would not be returning, so his superintendent officially appointed him as the principal. Frank is in his fifth year as principal at Drake Elementary. Frank also has law enforcement experience prior to becoming an educator. He was a probation officer at a juvenile hall. He believes being at one school as long as he has, has allowed him to be part of the community but believes it could be seen as a disadvantage because he does not have experience at a wide variety of schools.

Mike. Mike is the principal of Beach Alternative High School in the Township Unified School District. He has been at his site for the past four years as the principal. He has been in education for 23 years. Thirteen of those years he spent as a middle school teacher. Six of the years he was both a teacher on special assignment and a curriculum coordinator at his central office. He started at the central office as coordinator of both instruction and grant writing that included the Career Technical Education (CTE) programs. His role included both writing and monitoring the grants in both the CTE and math programs. Mike also has experience prior to becoming an educator in various science positions.

Emma. Emma is currently the principal at Kingston High School in the Township Unified School District. Before becoming an administrator, Emma was a math teacher for nine years and the math department chair for two years. She has been at her site for the past five years as the principal. Prior to her current role at the high school level, she was a principal at the middle school level for seven years at two different schools. Emma spent one year as a dean at the middle school level and two years as an assistant principal at the high school level. She has been an administrator for a total of 19 years in different capacities that includes being a director of secondary curriculum, a program specialist, and a site curriculum coordinator. As the director at the district level and program specialist, she conducted professional development for

teachers with a focus on mathematics and science instruction.

Ellen. Ellen is the principal at Rock Elementary School in the Township Unified School District. This is a K-8 school located on a local military base. She has been at her current site for the past four years as the principal. She has been a principal for a total of four years and an assistant principal for five years. Ellen was a teacher for 14 years. She was also in various leadership roles such as a grade-level leader, school site council member, parent/teacher organization (PTO) member, and has been on several academic committees. After participating in these roles, Ellen focused on literacy and became a literacy coach at both the school site and district levels. She was also a literacy coordinator for early literacy in her school district.

Mia. Mia is currently the principal of Waters Elementary School in the Central Unified School District. This is Mia's fifth year as principal. Prior to becoming a principal, Mia was an assistant principal for four years in the Longridge Unified School District. She was a teacher for five years in this district before assuming the role as an assistant principal at one of the magnet middle schools before becoming a K-12 instructional coach for one year. She was an assistant principal for four years at two different schools in this district and then moved over to Township Unified School District before assuming her current role at Waters Elementary. This is her fifth year at this site.

Sophia. Sophia is currently the principal of Lands Elementary School in the Central Unified School District. She started in education as a substitute teacher. Sophia was a teacher in grades kindergarten thru sixth grade with additional experience teaching combination grade levels in a single year for approximately 12 years. She has additional experience working in learning projects such as Odyssey of the Mind, which is a creative problem-solving program that involves students from kindergarten through college. Sophia was also an assistant principal for three years at the middle school level. She is in her fourth year as principal at Lands Elementary School. Sophia has experience in leadership roles besides being an administrator such as her role as a board member on the Regent's Education Foundation Board to support Asian and

Pacific educators to become leaders in education. She has also been a union representative and grade-level lead.

Nathan. Nathan is currently the principal of Deer Valley Continuation High School in the Central Unified School District. He has been a teacher for seventeen years prior to becoming an administrator. During this time, he was a special education teacher most of his career, working with students with individual educational plans (IEPs) identified with an emotional disturbance. Prior to becoming an educator, he worked as a printer and taught martial arts. At one point in his early career, he thought he wanted to be an astronaut but could not because he did not have 20/20 vision and could not qualify. Nathan started his career in education as a social studies teacher and then as a special education teacher. He began working in a treatment center for severely traumatized youth for about five years in a middle school in Colorado and then in a high school for approximately eleven years. This is Nathan's sixth year at Deer Valley and his fourteenth year as an administrator. He has held other leadership roles in education such as a department chair of his special education department at different sites.

John. John began his teaching career later in his life because his first career was in archeology. John stated that he realized he could not support a family with his current salary and without any benefits. He decided to earn his Master's in education and began teaching. He began working as a teacher in a neighboring Southern California county continuation program. John began assuming additional responsibilities at this site to support his principal such as writing grants and managing various forms of documentation under Title I, which is a provision to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families. He was also a department chair. He was at this site for approximately six years and was named teacher of the year in his fifth year, assuming a full-time pseudo administrator position, acting as a part-time assistant principal of the various continuation programs his district had. Eventually, he became a dean and then an assistant principal. After six years he became the principal of a charter school for

approximately three years, whose focus was on early college completion. In total, John has been a principal for ten years. John is currently the principal of Ventures High School in Iris Valley Unified School District, which is a traditional high school, but it is small in population by comparison to the neighboring high schools. As a result, he must assume various leadership positions because he does not have an assistant principal. John currently holds a doctorate degree in educational leadership.

Richard. Richard began his educational career immediately after graduating from college. Richard is currently the principal of Susan Kort Charter School in the Iris Valley Unified School District. Prior to attending college, he worked as a recreation leader at several elementary schools. Richard was also a substitute teacher for approximately a year before becoming a full-time teacher. He was hired in a neighboring Southern California school district to work in an elementary school, working at this site for approximately seven years. Richard has served in other leadership roles such as serving as a union representative, serving on leadership committees, and serving on principal advisory committees. He earned his administrative credential while attending school in the evenings while teaching at his first school site. He was first hired as an assistant principal in 2005 at an elementary school in his current district of Iris Valley. After a year, he was hired as the principal at Susan Kort Charter school for two years. He was moved to another elementary school and returned to Susan Kort Elementary in 2010.

Lucas. Lucas' journey to his current role as principal of Elevation Middle School in the Riverview Unified School District did not begin until after 20 years in customer service-related fields as a manager and owner of his own business. He has been a principal for approximately eight years, all of which have been in his small district. Lucas completed his administrative credential by his third year of his teaching experience. He did not become an educator until he was 40 years old. He was a teacher for 3 years before he became an administrator. He stated he always intended on becoming an administrator. He currently works in a district of

approximately 4,000 students. He has been the site administrator for eight years at his middle school that started with about 80 students and currently has a student population of 120. His junior high school has seventh and eighth grade levels only. Lucas has been at his current site for his entire career. He began his administrative career as an elementary teaching assistant principal (ETAP).

Data Collection

Qualitative research methods were used to illustrate how principals' decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their practices and the ways in which their decisions reflect a human-centered approach to leadership (Abdi et al., 2020; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Khilji, 2022; Ravitch, 2021). Qualitative methods were used to allow for a deeper understanding of these principals' experiences. It allowed me the opportunity to explore, in depth, sensitive and complex issues through their perspectives in a safe and confidential space. Qualitative methods provided me the flexibility to collect the data and analyze it, gaining insight and allowing me to develop a clearer understanding and connect these principals' experiences with a potential conclusion (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Drew et al., 2008a; Flick, 2018; Maxwell, 2013 Mertler, 2019; Patton, 2015; Rapley & Rees,2018; Schreier, 2018). Two methods for data collection were used for this study: semi-structured interviews and document collection (Grinyer & Thomas, 2012; Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2019; Stanko & Richter, 2012). First, participants were invited to participate in one semi-structured interview (Seidman, 2019). The interview was the primary source of data collection. The interview was approximately one hour in length. Second, school records such as demographics and other data were collected from the respective school and district's websites as well as other online state resources.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to use an open-ended and flexible approach to gather information about how the principals in this study approached decision-making and the leadership they utilized, focusing on a human-centered approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Drew

et al., 2008a; Patton, 2015; Rapley & Rees,2018; Schreier, 2018). The interviews provided a consistent framework across each of the principals participating in the study. The interview protocol used for interviews was open-ended and allowed me the opportunity to gain a better understanding of each principal's perspective during the timeframes being investigated and allowed the principals the opportunity to share their experiences and gain insight into their specific context (Beitin, 2012; Brinkman & Kvale, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2019).

Pilot Interviews. I conducted semi-structured pilot interviews with two different principals from two different districts. In the first pilot, I focused on how the principal interpreted the questions, how I would conduct the interview, and determined if the questions would help answer the research questions. This pilot interview served the purpose to allow me to get acquainted with the questions from the interviewer's perspective. One concern I had with the main part of the interview questions with this first principal was how she responded to question #1, the instructional and technological questions in a similar fashion. I believe she interpreted the questions to mean the same thing. For example, when prompted with the following: 1(ai), tell me about instructional challenges you faced during this time; and 1(aii), tell me about technological challenges you faced during this time, which I asked separately, this principal may have interpreted them to mean the same thing. When I got to the technological challenge, she included it as part of the instructional challenges. Because the four sub questions are the same for the three timeframes I am investigating, she continued to respond the same way, combining both instructional and technological challenges to mean the same. I conducted the second pilot interview with a principal from Sand Valley Unified School District. The second pilot interview was redesigned based on how the principal responded to the first pilot interview. With the second interview and protocol, I experimented with asking questions differently. For example, with the background information, the first principal responded to the initial prompt by answering the four sub questions and added more context relevant to her development as a leader with training and experience she has accrued over the years. The main section needed to be

clarified more clearly before I could let the principal respond. Question #4a read as follows: *What challenges, if any, surfaced for students and families from systematically disenfranchised communities (English learners, foster youth, special education, low socioeconomic) because of COVID-19?* This sub question revealed the redundancy in responses because both principals interpreted this sub question and sub question b (*How do you believe the pandemic affected students from marginalized groups such as English learners, foster youth, and students from low socio economics?*) to mean the same and could not distinguish or accurately separate the meaning between the two sub questions. The same was true for Question #4 (c) and (d). Question #4c asks the following: *How have your systems made you responsive, if at all, to marginalized students during the pandemic?* Question #4d asked the following: *To what extent, if at all, have you ensured all students benefit from the policies and directives initiated by the pandemic, specifically marginalized students?* Both principals could not distinguish the difference between the two sub questions. Therefore, I determined that I would eliminate the current (a) and (c) questions to avoid the redundancy shown in both pilots. I also made one change to make it more conversational, but it did not change the content of the protocol significantly. To make it more conversational, I decided to sound less formal and simply acknowledge the participants' responses after each question, which felt less mechanical.

Participant Interviews. A single semi-structured interview (Appendix D) was conducted with each principal. All interviews were completed over a three-month period from September 2022-December 2022. The interview began with me getting to know the participants, their schools and districts, and their basic decision-making processes during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included questions about the number of years they had been a teacher, their leadership roles, the school settings they have worked in, and the number of years they have been a principal at their current site. The second part of the interview focused on their decision-making during three distinct time frames of the COVID-19 pandemic: March 2020 to June 2020, August 2020 to June 2021, and August 2021 to June 2022. I asked specifically about their

decision-making in terms of at-promise students and how the pandemic affected them, and what they did to address these challenges. Lastly, the principals were asked what challenges have remained the same regardless of the pandemic. They were prompted to specifically describe and explain their challenges around the following areas: instructional, technological, safety, and communication. These interviews all took place via Zoom, and the data collected was initially stored on a password-protected, work-issued laptop. It was then moved to a locked space in my home or school office. Initially, I reread each transcript to identify any identifying information and replaced it with the pseudonyms I created for the participant, the school, and their respective districts. I also used member checks by having participants review their interview transcripts to ensure the Zoom transcript aligned to the audio recording and to each participant's lived experience during the pandemic (Kaiser, 2012; Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2019). I solicited responses to my request to have each participant review their transcript, and I had six of the principals respond via email with corrections and additions to the initial part of the interview, which asked about their educational and professional backgrounds.

Document Collection

In addition to the interviews, available artifacts such as the respective district and school websites, school accountability report cards (SARCs), newsletters, meeting agendas, presentations, and letters to parents were collected from district or school websites. Records such as demographics and other relevant data were collected from the websites for each principal's school site and district to better understand their respective school context (Brown, et al., 2021; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell 2016). Document collection was limited to include only digital artifacts accessible to the public (Rapley & Rees 2018; Tight, 2019). From the school and district websites, I also retrieved other context-specific information including the size of the school and district, student population by demographic, COVID operations reports (reports outlining each school's COVID infectious status updated daily), and emergency preparedness information. The websites also informed me about the challenges the schools or districts faced

during the pandemic and any actions the schools took that were documented publicly. I was able to view past practices beyond the COVID protocols districts have adopted and placed on their current websites based on what I reviewed from the districts' County Office of Education (SDCOE 2022). I was able to gain a better understanding of each participants' context in relation to the documents collected (Khalil et al., 2020; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analyzing these documents in relation to each school's context provided me with a unique understanding of the multidimensional aspect (e.g., external organizations' communication, inter-district communication, COVID-19 protocols, and distance-learning protocols) and challenges principals faced during the first three years of the pandemic (Gill, 2020; Rapley & Rees 2018; Tight, 2019). I collected most demographic data from the most recent school accountability report card (SARC), which describes each school's assessment data, curriculum used, facilities' conditions, and other data identifying the school within a specific timeframe each year in February for the 2021-2022 school year.

Data Analysis

As mentioned above, I interviewed the participants, took in-the-moment jottings, and wrote reflective memos for each interview (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020). Thus, data analysis began immediately after the first interview was concluded through the end of the study. Following the completion of each interview, I wrote a memo to reflect to provide initial ideas to my reactions to the participants in the interview process (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These reflective memos provided me with a written account of my initial thoughts, and I used them to support me when I engaged in analysis following the collection of all data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lempert, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). Once each individual interview was completed, I obtained the transcripts from my Zoom account. I conducted this process by downloading the transcripts from the Zoom transcript feature onto my computer via Microsoft Word, which is the default for Zoom, and analyzing them by hand (James & Bushner, 2012; Stanko & Richter, 2012). I read over and cleaned the transcripts for accuracy and, at that time,

removed any identifying information. I also reread my handwritten notes taken during the interview and removed any identifying information from those documents as well (Kaiser, 2012; Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020; Seidman, 2019). After the initial rereading of both the transcripts and my interview notes, I wrote a memo to reflect on the data collected to determine if any concepts, general wonderings, or initial revelations emerged.

Open coding

Immediately after writing the initial memo, I began the coding process, which included first and second cycle coding. Coding allowed me to begin the data analysis process and continue reformulating perspectives, which was an ongoing process throughout data collection. In this first phase, I engaged in open coding (Creswell, 2012; Drew et al., 2008a; Miles et al., 2020), focusing on what the participants said or how they related to the various elements of ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination. This provided me with a starting point to analyze and organize participants' interviews according to these emerging codes. After the first round of open coding, I wrote memos to capture if any concepts, general wonderings, or initial revelations developed within each participant's transcript. I engaged in a second round of open coding to continue to compare and analyze differences or similarities within or among the codes in each participant's transcripts and refine existing codes assigned. I reviewed the emerging codes from this second round and organized them into categories that were initially based on the questions asked within the interview protocol, e.g., instructional, technological, safety, at-promise populations (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2016). I began with the initial theoretical codes and progressed to substantive codes to unearth how the participants described the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Writing a second memo for this second round of open coding was necessary to begin second cycle coding, which allowed me to surface additional substantive categories.

Pattern coding

The open-coding and memoing process allowed me to create pattern codes (Drew et al., 2008a; Flick, 2018; Saldaña, 2016), which allowed me to group the various codes identified in the initial phase into smaller groups of categories (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020). This process was more purposeful in identifying connections and commonalities within and among the various codes initially assigned to participants' responses and allowed me to group the open codes into smaller categories. In the last phase of this second cycle coding, I progressed to axial coding (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2016) to identify connections and commonalities, not just among the various codes initially assigned but within and among the various participants. This helped identify how each of the participants connected to both one another and the concepts of ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination (Allen, 2017; Garza Mitchell, 2012; Grunfeld, 2021; Gube & Lajoie, 2020; Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Hsieh, 2023; Khilji, 2022; LaVenia & Lasater, 2022; Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020; Schwartz, 2016; Shukla & Kark, 2020). In conjunction with coding, I began the process of restorying, which is the process of analyzing the transcripts according to the emerging themes and patterns and created a story to examine the initial data (Creswell, 2012, Drew et al., 2008a).

Document analysis

Each of the documents collected underwent a similar analysis process as the interviews. I wrote one reflective memo to capture initial ideas, responses, or general wonderings related to the various artifacts such as school and district websites, school accountability report cards (SARCs), and newsletters. I focused on the school's context with regards to the pandemic and how challenges and issues were addressed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lempert, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). After reviewing each of the websites and SARCS, I collected the data for each district and school. I placed all demographic data on a Google workbook onto separate sheets. I also included sections on emergency preparedness, COVID dashboard (this was a common feature on many district websites), and a COVID prevention program. I was able to compare each of the four districts and the ten different schools to determine how the various organizations addressed

COVID-19 challenges using protocols. In some instances, evidence of protocols existed at the district level and linked on the individual school websites to reference the district website. I placed the data for each district was placed on the same Google sheet as their respective school, and I was able to view each individual school and district on the Google sheet to identify how, if at all, each school utilized policies or mandates to guide or instruct their respective school community on these policies.

Validity

To mitigate validity threats throughout the study, I selected principals from four districts for a comparison across principals' decision-making and avoided my district to avoid personal biases and reactivity when interpreting data (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2019). Purposeful selection of principals at charter or public TK-12 levels may impact my understanding and interpretation of the findings but will focus primarily on ow principals' decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped their leadership practices and the ways in which their decisions reflect a human-centered approach to leadership (Abdi et al., 2020; Aytaç, 2020; Daniel, 2012; Drew et al., 2008b; Patton, 2015; Ravitch, 2021). This allowed me to interpret participants' responses from the various school sites, generating a potentially more informed interpretation of the data (Maxwell, 2013). I also explained at the beginning of the selection process, up through the end of the study, how each participants' identity will be kept anonymous, so they feel free to respond to the interview questions. My interactions with the participants during the interview process may affect or distort the meaning of their responses to the interview questions (Seidman, 2019). The interviews provided me an understanding of these participants' perception of their lived realities during the pandemic, so I could determine the authenticity of their responses. And lastly, I have certain biases that will influence how I interpret participants' responses to the interview questions. While I may not be able to separate myself from my subjectivity as a LatinX, male, as well as other identities I occupy, I can be aware of my positionality as I interpret the data collected to reduce the potential effect of my biases (Lillrank,

2012; Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020).

Positionality

As a researcher and current principal, I acknowledge my position and subjectivity with relation to the principals I interviewed. This was an ongoing process throughout the research study (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). I also have experiences as an assistant principal at both the high school and middle school level, working in various capacities such as overseeing and supporting academic departments, facilities, sports programs, master schedules, and supporting the counseling department at a comprehensive high school. As an assistant principal, I had to make the best decision I could with the information I had or was provided. Because I have been exposed to many circumstances repeatedly, I can retrieve a mental process from my experiences to solve issues. For example, when a student has been identified as someone who may have contraband on their person such as a controlled substance or a weapon, I know how to approach the situation to include but not limited to how I will address the student, how I will conduct the search, and how I will inform the parent regardless of whether I confiscate any contraband or not. I follow a process that falls in line with California Education Code and guidance provided by the County Office of Education and school district policies and procedures. These processes do not always consider the people affected by these guidelines. This positionality did provide a context and an undeniable influence on the beliefs I hold, the perceptions I have, and the assumptions I made based on how the participants view their environment through the responses to the interview questions I will ask. For example, my positionality as the cis-male son of Mexican immigrants allowed me to see how my parents trusted and respected my teachers as a legitimate institution tasked with the responsibility to educate me. My parents believed education was extremely important and the key to obtaining a good career and not simply a job where one is simply trying to survive.

Like the participants in my study, I have been a teacher, department chair, and intervention's coordinator. While serving in these roles, I have been confronted with familiar and

routine circumstances where I could refer to someone on campus or at the district office with more experience or access to someone who knew how to address the challenges I could not negotiate. It was not until I became an intervention's coordinator that I began to experience unique and novel circumstances where I did not have a method, a process, or an expert to address them with. For example, dealing with student trauma such as human trafficking is not something site coordinators or administrators deal with, and it was nothing I had been trained to work with. I had to collaborate with our school resource officer, the principal, and district personnel to determine how to support our students and their families with these challenges.

When I served in the Marine Corps, I had to follow strict protocols to perform my duties. We had a standard operating procedure (SOP), guiding us to complete various tasks. Not only did we have these SOPs, but we were also further guided by desktop procedures outlining how to perform specific tasks within a role such as how to fill out forms as part of a task within a specific role. These desktop procedures and SOPs guided predictable and recurring tasks and duties through known processes and known experts. These too did not address the human aspect or potential impact choices made by leaders would have on the people. But the Marine Corps had another guiding principle called "Commander's Intent," defined in our combat maneuvers doctrine, *Warfighting.* Commander's Intent allows Marines to exercise initiative, thereby creating space for Marines to act in the absence of communication and respond to changes in the environment to achieve the goals of the mission. This experience has guided me to react to changes in the school environment differently than my colleagues in a similar role. I have been trained to be creative in arriving at a solution in instances where I do not have all the answers and where I did not have access to an expert. The following study reflects my interpretation of principal leadership through the analysis of several interviews conducted with principals, which has been influenced both by my positionality and collective experiences as an administrator at the middle and high school level as well as within the military (Brooks et al., 2014; Carter & Bolden, 2012; Lillrank, 2012).

Limitations of the Study Design

While this qualitative study design captures the experiences described by these principals during the pandemic, there were limitations to what I learned (Maxwell, 2013). This study has limitations due to the small size of participant sampling and focus on one geographical area, and it did not account for the perspectives and experiences of principals from more than one county (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020). The findings may limit our understanding of the experiences of principals during the pandemic and should not be seen as representative of other principals' experiences (Aytaç, 2020; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2019). First, only ten principals were selected for the study, limiting viewpoints and experiences from principals from more schools with potentially varying experiences who could provide a larger sampling to provide findings that could be more generalizable, but each principal did have an opportunity to tell their story to explain how they addressed novel situations during the COVID-19 pandemic (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2020). Second, although participants were selected from four different school districts and from three school levels, it included only one traditional high school with more than 2,000 students. The other high schools were alternative educational sites, and one other traditional high school had an enrollment of approximately 300 students. Participants from a larger sampling of schools to include schools with a demographic representative to the average school size at the three levels (elementary, middle, and high) would potentially provide different results to draw more generalizable findings, which could include different methods for addressing novel situations with a human-centered leadership practice. The interviews were conducted over video conferencing, limiting the face-to-face interactions, which did not provide other elements of in-person communication that could potentially provide additional information about the participants' responses (Stanko & Richter, 2012). Although video conferencing may be a limitation, the transcription feature on the program allowed me the capability to transcribe the interview quickly and easily.

Summary

The purpose of this methodology chapter is to provide a thorough description of the research design utilized to answer the three questions about how human-centered leadership describes principals' decision-making practice, specifically how they address the novel challenges they face because of the COVID-19 pandemic and who or what they prioritize during their decision-making. The criteria explain where and how participants were selected with a rationale aimed at principals serving a specific demographic of students. Data collection methods are explained to include how interviews were structured and administered. Included in the interview description are the reflective memos I wrote immediately after each interview as well as member checking to obtain participants' feedback on the content and accuracy of the transcripts. Document collection methods are also outlined, describing which documents were analyzed as well as the rationale for collecting documents as part of the data collection methods. An integral component of the chapter is the data analysis section outlining in detail how the interviews and documents were analyzed, specifically coding and memo writing to help draw conclusions and answer the research questions. The chapter proceeds with an explanation of potential validity threats and how I help mitigate these through purposeful selection in at least two different districts and multiple grade levels. My positionality will affect how I interpret the results based on my personal background and current educational experiences. Finally, the limitations of the study due to participant sampling, size of the sampling, and the interviewing protocols using Zoom, limit my ability to generalize the findings. Each of these factors have the potential to constrain my understanding of these principals' experiences during the pandemic more broadly.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study sought to better understand principals' decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. I collected data on ten principals, representing elementary, middle, and high school levels and who are from four different districts. This chapter describes the findings from this qualitative study. The following are the guiding research questions:

1. What are the novel situations these principals encountered in their multidimensional school environments because of COVID-19?
2. How did these principals make decisions when faced with these COVID-19 related novel challenges?
3. On what and who did these school leaders prioritize their attention during the COVID-19 pandemic? Why?

Through these findings, I illustrate how these principals engaged in *human-centered* leadership, using adaptive expertise, ethical decision-making, and creative insubordination, when faced with novel challenges. This chapter begins by overviewing the challenges the participants in this study faced. It then turns to presenting the findings [Instructional challenges: Training, COVID Restrictions, Scheduling; Student Challenges: Disengagement, Student Behavior, Attendance; Communication Challenges, Articulating Guidelines, Self-Managed Solutions, Flexible Decision-Making, District-Driven Decisions, County-Driven Decision].

Instructional Challenges

Each of the principals in this study encountered novel situations related to providing students with equitable access to education. The principals in this study describe the ways they engaged in human-centered leadership as they addressed access for students through training, instruction, and student support. One of the main leadership challenges faced by these principals during the first phase (March 2020-June 2020) of the pandemic was instructional. They had to create a plan on how to assess what their staff knew about distance learning tools, how to train their staff with the required online tools provided by their respective districts, and

learn how to use the online tools to ensure they and their staff were ready when required to return in a distance learning model because they would not be allowed to return to in-person instruction due to the COVID restrictions. These principals were tasked with running a virtual school, which they had never done before. This was all against a backdrop of state, county, and district policies related to public health. The participants provided access for students through specified and sometimes unauthorized protocols, but they also ensured their leadership focused on the people and not just the solutions. Access for students was a major challenge the participants faced, which help demonstrate how they reconciled ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination to show how people were the focus of their leadership.

Training

During the first phase of the pandemic (March 2020 to June 2020) each of the principals identified a main novel instructional challenge as the lack of teacher proficiency with technology and a lack of knowledge of online teaching and learning platforms such as Zoom, Canvas, Google Classroom, and Flipgrid. Because online or distance learning was new to traditional schoolteachers who taught in a classroom in front of a classroom full of students, these teachers, according to John, Mia, and Richard, had some experience with Google Classroom for some assignments but not enough experience with technology to conduct successful distance learning. While some of the challenges appear to be routine in nature, as will be seen in the following sections, they were not prepared to meet those challenges at the magnitude in which they existed and affected them, their staff, and their school community. For example, training staff with new programs or providing professional development is not new to principals, but having to learn the technology and instructional tools essential to provide students online instruction has added an additional exigency to their already demanding workload. They also understood that their teachers struggled with the new technology and new platforms they were going to use in their respective districts and demonstrated their own vulnerability by learning

alongside their staff, reassuring them staff that everyone was learning, and no one was an expert. The structures they built around learning new online protocols illustrated their adaptive expertise to create solutions to novel circumstances to ensure they helped mitigate some of the anxiety their staff were feeling.

Nathan, the principal from Deer Valley Continuation High School in Central Valley Unified School District noted that, “Everybody was learning to Zoom all at the same time. Everybody was trying to come up to speed on the different learning platforms like Nearpod and Google Classroom.” He explained that he extended his teachers grace to implement what they could, using their own timeframe, because he knew they needed more time than the district was providing. Nathan further explained that he accepted the reality that some teachers would struggle more than others. He clarified that despite the time constraints provided by the district to begin online instruction by a certain date, he worked with his staff to ensure they felt confident about what they were being asked to do, since it was new to all of them.

Emma, Richard, and Lucas explained how the logistical challenges to train an entire staff for a distance learning model was entirely unique. They had no idea how it was going to unfold because it was not only unique to their specific school context, but it was novel across the entire country. These experiences appeared to be common across both Township Unified School District and Central Unified School District. Emma, the principal from Kingston High School stated,

> So, from March 2020 through June of that year I think the biggest challenge was the technology challenge for both teachers and students. We had some teachers that were already very knowledgeable about technology and picked it up very quickly. But technology-wise for many of our teachers, that was a huge challenge for them. Just learning how to use the platform and other apps that would be beneficial. In classes like math or science or many of our hands-on classes like woodshop or auto shop, virtually for many of our teachers, was a big challenge.

Both Richard, the principal of Susan Kort Charter School in Iris Valley Unified, and Lucas, the principal of Elevation Middle School in Riverview Unified School District, also explained how their teachers had to learn how to use online technology resources alongside their students.

The principals in this study needed to keep in mind that supporting teachers involved more than just providing professional development and new instructional models. It was about reassuring them and allowing them to implement the online learning platform within a timeframe that considered their students' needs and not merely the district's goals. Richard stated that he himself was "training teachers and providing professional development on Google Classroom and online resources that they could utilize for online instruction." Lucas explained that his teachers were learning about the technology at the same time they would access the applications. He stated, "And so, once you are on, you are learning about the new virtual option, Google Meet or Zoom." Each of the principals experienced the challenge to teach everything to their staff virtually using technology, and no one had done that before, so they could not look to a model to emulate or an expert to learn from. The principal's role here was to support teachers as much as they could with professional development on a platform and with tools they had little to no experience with.

Through their experience with the shift to online learning during COVID-19, the principals in this study were keenly aware of their staff's challenges, but they continued to support them through a human-centered approach, considering the people impacted by the decisions they made as the principal.

COVID Restrictions

Several principals (Nathan, John, and Mia) explained how they went undetected with the decisions they made, specifically with having their students or families on campus for either obtaining technology or instructional support during the first phase (March 2020-June 2020) of the pandemic because of the COVID-19 restrictions. Nathan, the principal of Deer Valley Continuation High School, explained how he supported families in the following response:

> So, I kind of flew under the radar and let kids come in for a couple of hours at a time. I was the only one here, anyway… And so, as soon as I could, I started getting individual kids on campus for four chunks of time, usually two hours sometimes three, and those were the kids that earned some credit for the most part because they were here, and I could answer questions for them.

John also allowed his teachers to work on the local Native American Reservation to work with the students. He stated,

> We offered tutoring out on the reservation, where some of our most impoverished students live. Despite the fact that probably was by the letter of the law prohibited, we did have several teachers that volunteered to go out there because it was the right thing to do, and it really helped to re-engage a lot of those kids.

Mia, the principal of Water Elementary School, explained how she allowed her teachers to come to the school to retrieve materials for instruction. She stated,

> So, there were a couple of times when people would ask if they could just come in and get their stuff out of their classrooms and take their desktops and things home with them. At that point it's kind of do whatever you need to do.

Mia explained that she was limited in what she was officially allowed to do, so she made decisions despite what her district allowed her and other principals to do, relying on creative insubordination to illustrate her focus on a more human-centered approach. She noted that they, “were trying to do things on the sly because we knew that our families needed things, but those were decisions that we were not really allowed to make from our district office’s standpoint.” Mia explained how the first few months of the pandemic, her families struggled to get access to the internet, so she let many of her students on campus to access the school’s Wi-Fi connection. Some of the families stayed in their vehicles in the parking lot and accessed it that way, and others had to use the conference room to access the Wi-Fi. She noted, “So we did like opening up the conference room for them, of course, so they could be inside the building and use our Internet.”

The participants in this study were forced to engage in creative insubordination, opposing their respective district’s and outside agencies' mandates around COVID safety protocols where the participants described processes they instituted, which included how they supported their students, their families, and their staff. The pandemic did not necessarily create a space for developing new processes for principals to make decisions as much as it highlighted how principals were making decisions based on the input, guidance, and restrictions imposed

on them because of the pandemic. Within the district mandates, principals operated under a compliance-based model, requiring them to follow academic and health and safety protocols from their district as best they could but also serve their school's needs. The policies and procedures communicated to districts, which was then filtered down to individual schools, was challenging in two ways. First, the policies changed often, making it difficult to be consistent. Second, although respective districts and other agencies provided guidance on implementation parameters, principals had to create systems without any existing examples as models to emulate.

The data illustrates how the principals relied on their experience as leaders and more importantly, it begins to demonstrate a level of frustration they felt with outside organizations beyond their school district, who they believed were disconnected with the lived reality on the principals' respective campuses. This becomes more prominent as the participants describe their solutions to novel situations, which oftentimes contradicted their district and outside agencies mandates and restrictions, illustrating how they prioritized the people in their school community over the policy mandates and restrictions.

Scheduling

During each of the three years investigated in this study, Emma and other principals stated that the instructional challenges they experienced was due in part to limited access to students because of the schedules created to mitigate COVID exposure. The principals' interviews suggest that a focus of the instructional challenges was around the schedules aimed to support students and keep them safe from exposure to COVID-19. These principals were able to adapt to their circumstances and center their decision-making on mitigating the negative impact their decisions would have on the students and staff. For Emma, these schedules separated students into half days, limiting the time students had access to teachers and vice versa. She stated,

> And so, hybrid meant that kids were only on campus two days a week for a shortened amount of time and that became instructionally challenging because now teachers are not seeing their students as often as they would, and how much content can you get in when you're seeing them for a much more limited amount of time?

Emma's challenge was both not knowing whether students were getting enough hours of instruction because of the distance learning model and not having students in class for more than two days a week, which she believed impacted student engagement or their ability to access instruction consistently. Mia explained that while the hybrid schedules were meant to help with COVID exposure, it added to the instructional challenges. She explained,

> But then it was the whole scheduling thing with the hybrid. You had a cohort who was going to be coming in the mornings and another in the afternoon, and then they [District Leadership] decided that was going to be too tricky like the cleaning schedule. It's coming Mondays and Tuesdays, and then virtual. Who's coming at what point?

Mia believed that the complexity and inconsistent schedules may have contributed to families not wanting to send their students to school, which reduced student engagement across all of Mia's grade levels, which is another challenge discussed below.

Lucas struggled with supporting his students with special needs through either the hybrid models or a pure distance learning model because these students needed one-to-one support, but there were either not enough aides to support or the students did not have support at home to log into their classes. He explained,

> From a student we are students with disabilities. How do I still maintain the one-on-one support for some of those, and setting up a schedule and then teaching my instructional aids how to use Zoom and get them involved with our instructional time all within a regular school day?

Lucas was frustrated because he felt powerless, like Nathan, the principal of Deer Valley Continuation High School. For example, Nathan explained his students did not do well online and needed extra support that was not available to them, so they did not log on or never turned on their screens.

The various instructional schedules created confusion and frustration for students and

parents, which impacted the quality of instruction teachers could provide based on the time they had with students. Because of the COVID-19 restrictions, principals had to create schedules with certain criteria that made supporting students a significant challenge. For example, John explained,

> We had to create our bell schedules with a certain criterion. You know, we think we can have fifteen kids in a class. This is what our bell schedule looks like to accommodate the fifteen that's going to be here in this particular class, and also the other forty-seven that are going to be home.

John and other principals (Nathan, Mia, Ellen, and Frank) each provided a detailed explanation about the physical distancing required in classes, the amount of time students and teachers could be in a class, the tracking of students from one location to the next, required seating charts, and other requirement that made creating schedules too difficult to sustain long term. Nathan was frustrated by how quickly information changed, requiring him to change his communication about schedules from one day to the next. He described his frustration as follows:

> The real challenge would be Wednesday I would say, this is our protocol. And then Thursday morning I'd get a new protocol from the district. I was like we literally had a staff meeting yesterday. You couldn't have got this to me yesterday? You know my staff meeting schedule. Now I have to call another staff meeting and say, now we have to do XYZ, you know a new thing that we're doing, and so that was probably the biggest challenge.

The principals in this study struggled with what appeared to be traditional or routine challenges, but the number of issues with training, attendance, and scheduling did not allow them to address these challenges with past best practices because they were contextually not appropriate. The situation required the principals to consider more than training or schedules required for the distance learning model. Teachers needed reassurance and grace from the principals so they could feel safe in knowing they had the time to learn and implement the distance learning model as they gained more confidence with the online tools. The participants in this study worked towards addressing the instructional challenges not simply through achieving specific goals but understanding the complexity, operating between what their districts

expected from them as principals and what they believed their teachers needed during the uncertainty. Their interactions with their staff and their willingness to listen to their needs made them more able to support their staff. What the principals suggest through their interviews is that as they considered the resources needed, and they focused on the needs of the teachers and the students.

Student Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the shuttering of schools, was a situation that none of the principals in this study had ever encountered. It created a host of novel situations such as learning new online technology platforms and ensuring their staff was trained, dealing with student disengagement in the form of not logging into their classes or keeping their cameras off during synchronous, online instruction, and student conduct during both structured and unstructured time. For instance, Sophia, Frank, and John struggled with not only the learning platforms, but they had also struggled to ensure their staff and students had access reliable devices as well as access to the internet. Frank stated,

> We had to make sure that everybody had devices, and we had to make sure everybody had access to Wi-fi This time, too. We had mobile hotspots, I believe, through Verizon too and any families who were having trouble with that.

The novel conditions brought on by COVID-19 meant these principals had to navigate the various issues concerning students' conduct, including engagement and attendance to continue supporting the students in their schools while also balancing the need to follow the policy mandates from their respective district and outside organizations who dictated how they would operate their individual schools. The principals in this study demonstrated how they were able to reconcile ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination to enable them to address the novel challenges they faced and focus on the students, families, and staff they serve. Their decision-making processes provides insight into how these principals prioritized a human-centered approach to leadership.

Disengagement

Student disengagement was prevalent in the three years of the COVID-19 pandemic investigated in this study, but it morphed in each of the three years. Notably, in the first year, students simply did not turn on their cameras or did not log onto their classes. In the second year, many did not return to the hybrid schedule of online and in-person learning. By the third year, student use of personal electronic devices was a key factor prohibiting them from engaging in school. During the first phase of the pandemic (March 2020-June 2020), several principals (Lucas, Emma, Nathan, and Richard) deduced that many of their students would not log on or could not complete assignments because of additional responsibilities they had at home, given the demographics and culture they knew about their school community. Equipped with that knowledge, they understood they had to make adjustment and be mindful of the students and their families' needs outside of the school requirements. For example, Richard identified student disengagement by explaining how older siblings took on the role of caregiver "that prevented students from accessing instruction." This was a similar challenge Lucas experienced because secondary students became the caregivers when parents went to work or disengaged because they were home alone and simply did not log on to their classes. Lucas noted:

> And so, it would be up to a 12-year-old to get themselves up and log into school that day without any kind of parental guidance, suggestion, or forcing them. Well, as you know if you're 13 years old, you have a choice of watching TV or playing video games or logging in and listening to your teacher talk you're going to choose the former, you know, you went on, just to see your friends basically.

Both Richard and Lucas struggled to get students engaged either because the students chose not to attend virtual classes or had other responsibilities, making it difficult for them to attend classes consistently.

Emma, Nathan, John, Richard, and Lucas each stated that teachers approached them to ask for strategies to get students logged in, turn on their screens, or turn in homework, but each principal struggled because they did not have experience in this new teaching and learning

model. Emma said,

> That was a big challenge for teachers trying to teach a black screen. For many of our kids when you're teaching and you can see the aha, or you can see the confused look on their faces that tells you whether you need to go left or right, stop back up, slow down!

Emma, as well as Richard, Lucas, and Mia, could not identify a workable solution to support the vast percentage of their staff who struggled to get students engaged. Each of these principals explained what they could easily do for their staff was to reassure them to continue to reach out with consistency and engaging lessons, so the teachers would not get discouraged. Their current instructional model was unique to everyone because students and teachers were not accustomed to learning through either an online synchronous or asynchronous learning model. She reflected on her own teaching and the importance of “reading the room” to make the necessary adjustments to the delivery of the instruction. Without the physical cues she said, teachers struggled to determine whether students were getting the information or not. For Nathan, the principal from Deer Valley Continuation High School, he explained that his students became disengaged during the second phase of the pandemic (August 2020-June 2021) because they could not learn through a traditional distance learning model. He stated that his students were not successful in traditional settings, and now the traditional online learning model, which was uniform across his district, placed his students back into a traditional model. His students needed even more support or a different type of support to keep them engaged.

The principals in this study prioritized the emotional well-being of both the students and the staff by removing the typical pressures with instruction by reassuring the staff they did not have to adhere to a scope and sequence and remind them to extend both the students and them grace. Their ethical decision making illustrated their compassion for their staff, allowing them the space to acknowledge they would not be getting the same results from students in the distance learning model or even when the students returned to in-person learning until after an adjustment period they were still unsure about how long it would take.

Student Behavior

The principals in this study responded to these student challenges such as student behavior with a human-centered leadership because they did not rely on past practices, which focused on traditional punitive consequences but rather on restorative and inclusive practices to reengage their students with positive solutions. When students returned to in-person instruction in the third year of the pandemic, student misconduct was another major issue referenced. Students' behavior, although not a unique or unfamiliar issue, presented itself as a novel circumstance to the principals in this study because of the large number of incidents occurring and the lack of resources available to address students' needs such as access to social workers, mental health providers, or substance abuse cessation programs. The principals identified a key aspect of students' misconduct was due to what they believed or observed to be a regression of behaviors.

A few of the principals, Emma, John, Ellen, and Richard, believed the number of widespread behaviors such as drug use, fights, or tantrums made the situation unique and unfamiliar within their experience as educators. Richard indicated that "there's no doubt that there was definitely some regression during that time when they couldn't socialize with their peers." Richard believed that students' inability to have access to their peers was a big factor in the behaviors he and his staff observed when the students did return to in-person instruction, and that it was impacting their learning. Lucas experienced similar behaviors (e.g., unprovoked screaming, tantrums, use of personal electronic devices) that oftentimes resulted in physical aggression between students. Although physical aggression is not unique or unfamiliar to school environments, the increase in number of incidents between students was something the principals interviewed had never experienced before and felt ill-equipped to address with the lack of personnel or programmatic funding such as social workers or other mental health providers. For Lucas, he framed this as a problem of student mismatch with the situation and approached it from a different lens. He focused more on ethically based responses. He said,

> [W]e recognized quickly that we were seeing behaviors that seem to be delayed. For the length of time, we've been out for a year and a half or two school years. So, we're having seventh graders that would have temper tantrums or just behaviors that you would expect them to mature out of by seventh grade. and we started saying this is the same kind of thing you would see in fourth or fifth grade. But we're seeing it in seventh grade.

Lucas believed the students had lost their ability to resolve conflict on their own and resorted to physical aggression, which he blamed on their isolation from their peers and not being on campus.

During the second (August 2022-June 2021) and third phase (August 2021-June 2022) of the pandemic when students began returning to in-person learning, these principals were faced with an unanticipated challenge where many students had not been exposed to basic school protocols (e.g., mealtime, recess, arrival/dismissal, emergency drills) for varying reasons. Students required a refresher or new instruction on student behavior in school. Lucas and Richard both tried to support students to relearn or retrain them how to be students in school. Ellen, the principal of a K-8 school, had to train students in basic protocols such as going through the cafeteria and the playground rules. Because the students had not been physically at school, Ellen had the additional challenge of teaching not only kindergartners but also the first and second graders the basic protocols, making it more difficult because she had to work with three grade levels as opposed to just one. Although the process historically had been conducted by the teachers, with the COVID restrictions and limited movement, per the teacher memorandum of agreement through the union, it forced her to teach each of the grade levels these basic school protocols. She acknowledged that students needed to be extended grace when they were not acting appropriately because they had not been taught otherwise. Her decision to begin teaching students the basic protocols to mitigate behaviors, she noted, was to support both the students and staff and allow everyone time to learn and reacclimate to the school environment, and it was the right thing to do and consider the peoples' needs in her school community. She further noted, "We could not rely on any previous schooling to give us

scaffolds, so that poor second grader had never gone to the cafeteria and didn't know what to do with the tray." She also had to address the inappropriate behaviors students were displaying, not only with the primary grade students, but with middle schoolers who were struggling with their trauma, which she believed was due to a lack of social interactions during the quarantine of all students. She described it as follows:

> We had all of that where our middle schoolers came back more traumatized by not having that social interaction. Our first and second graders came back with behavior problems, crazy behavior problems where parents had whatever problems they had gone through because they had been locked down in that house. It had affected those kids.

Ellen was in a unique position with these challenges because it affected both her elementary school-aged students with not knowing how to function in school and her middle schoolers in other ways, manifesting through inappropriate behaviors (e.g., physical aggression; temper tantrums) in and out of the classroom.

When students returned to in-person instruction during the third phase of the pandemic (August 2021-June 2022), the principals in this study identified student trauma or a lack of social skills as factors contributing to misbehaviors, which the principals could not actually pinpoint. Mike, the principal from Beach Alternative High School, claimed that students needed additional counseling support, "because of the emotional distress that they've suffered or something, whether it be suicidal thoughts or just a lack of social skills and getting along with people or acclimating to the environment." Sophia said students were not turning in their work, which she did not see as defiant as much as she believed it was due to not being able to adjust to school, just as Mike believed. Nathan did not express the same high level of inappropriate behaviors as did other participants, but he did explain how students returned with more immature behaviors:

> When they came back, we saw some immature stuff and then handled that, you know, within the bounds of our discipline code, but I think all educators, all school personnel in general have found that the kids are less mature. They lost a year of social emotional growth with their peers, and they're struggling to catch up. And so, they all seem a little younger.

Nathan does feel that in the last full year, students are making progress and their behavior is

returning to more age and grade-level appropriateness. He also acknowledged that ethically, he could not hold students accountable in the same way he had done before because students needed time to reacclimate to being in school since they had missed so much time out of school because of the COVID-19 restrictions and quarantines.

John believed students were misbehaving because they did not know how to conduct themselves as students and did not know the basic school procedures and policies, so they needed to be taught explicitly how to be students. He stated, “So we, basically you know, teach kids study skills and time management. You know all the things that kids probably would have learned naturally through the last couple of years and re-engaging with it and teaching it more explicitly.” John instituted a symposium within the school day to ensure students would have access to this type of learning. John too implemented a more ethically-based response to student misconduct by creating new programming for the students. Emma, on the other hand, described these inappropriate behaviors as an escalation of behaviors they had seen prior to the pandemic. She noted,

> But now kids seem to be bolder than they would and maybe say things a little bit more to other students or staff that maybe they didn't say before. So, we were dealing with those challenges as well. So, things such as a teacher may ask a student to do something and the student may respond: Well, you know I don't have to, or why do I have to do that? Whereas before you know it was almost at a low level of disrespect that the teachers were used to seeing. So, we are just trying to transition back.

Emma indicated that she believes the behaviors are due to social media and the unstructured time students had while they were quarantined and doing distance learning. She stated how she and her team would need to communicate the behavioral expectations at the beginning of each semester and provide explicit directions on the school rules and policies. Because of the various restrictions and information available, the principals in this study had specific options, determining how they would respond to the challenges they encountered. The participants focused on a different set of methods to make decisions, which were supposed to be based on guidance provided by their respective districts, which was sometimes directed by outside

organizations. These principals demonstrated that they could respond with a clear focus on their respective school community with the intent to support all students, especially their most vulnerable.

Not only Ellen, Lucas, and Richard, but also for the other participants in this study, it could have been easier to rely on past practices of suspending or penalizing students in various ways. What the principals suggest through their interviews is that as they considered the training needed, they focused on the needs of the people—the teachers and the students—first and foremost. These principals adapted to the novel situation at hand and considered the ethics of the situation.

Attendance

In describing student conduct issues that arose during the first phase of the pandemic, attendance was often cited as a major issue. Although attendance challenges existed prior to the pandemic, each of the principals reported an increase in these challenges for a significant percentage of their student population. As these principals addressed issues of attendance, they focused on the potential social emotional factors contributing to chronic absenteeism. Although these principals assumed the issues with attendance, in the first phase (March 2020-June 2020) of the pandemic, were due to quarantining, they were not equipped with the interventions necessary to address these exceptional situations. For example, one issue had to do with the students not being on campus. Nathan stated, “So obviously the instructional challenge was, they're not here, and we're an in-person profession. For most of us, we didn't get into this to be in a virtual school, right? So, we had to figure out how to deliver instruction in a distance model.” Nathan also explained that a large part of students not attending classes during the first phase of the pandemic had to do with quarantining either because the teacher would get sick, or the students would get sick. As a result, students would not log into Zoom classes for days at a time. Nathan noted:

> The big instructional challenges at that time had to do with the quarantines. When I had a teacher out for ten days, you don't know who you are going to get as a sub, and so I would have people in here who had no idea how to teach the content that they were teaching. So basically, for ten days there was not much going on in certain classrooms because the kids were essentially on their own.

Nathan understands the importance of attendance but acknowledges the need to exercise a different way to address it, requiring him to make decisions and address how to support the students and not lean into the disciplinary methods he has used in the past. He needed to consider the students sitting before him and not just how to improve attendance rates or solutions to correct attendance.

John, the principal of Ventures High School, leads a traditional high school but with a small student body of 315 students. He had similar challenges with his students during the first phase of the pandemic (March 2020-June 2020). John explained the following:

> So, we were trying to address various things during that period (March 2020 - June 2020) and trying to figure out ways to inspire kids, to be online and continue to learn even though, like I said, we weren't really holding anybody accountable. We probably lost twenty of our kids between the first part of April and May just because they realized at that point that it really didn't matter what they did. They were still going to get a B or a C, whatever they had prior to the shut-down. A lot of those kids we didn't ever got back.

John's school enrollment is small and having a low number of students not attending school had a significant impact on his overall student attendance. Unfortunately for John, the challenges with attendance were not addressed at the same level of the other participants because of the size of his school.

Each of the principals have experience dealing with chronic absenteeism, and they had resources available to them to address traditional chronic absenteeism, but this was not routine and required these principals to think beyond traditional solutions. According to the principals' interviews, the findings suggest that as they addressed attendance issues, they continued to focus on the students' social emotional needs as a restorative practice instead of defaulting to disciplinary consequences. It was not that the principals simply disregarded old methodologies or practices to address the various student challenges described above because they did not

have the resources to address them. The findings suggest they made decisions with an understanding that their students were experiencing trauma caused by the lack of in-person instruction, unpredictable quarantines, and an overabundance of unstructured time while the students were quarantined. These principals' understanding of the social impact COVID-19 had on students was the impetus for their behaviors, which heavily dictated how they responded to the student challenges they described. Their responses to the student challenges they experienced were predicated on what they believed was right for the students that was grounded in their ethical decision-making process, demonstrating their human-centered focus.

Communication Challenges

When novel challenges arose, such as creating new process for communicating or developing guidelines, the principals in this study made human-centered decisions based on where the school community was. The principals were provided some minimal guidance from their respective districts in the early stages of the pandemic, so they had to figure out how to disseminate the essential information to teachers without the traditional structure. When the principals were asked how they ensured they were flexible or adjusted their expectations during the pandemic, the principals had similar responses regarding student needs. John, the principal from Ventures High School, explained how he had his teachers, in those early days of quarantine, record themselves doing lessons to reach students in distance learning. He stated, "They were going to record themselves doing their lessons that were going to go out to the kids." He indicated that this was both a positive and drawback to COVID. It was positive because they had to be flexible with how they would provide instruction, but it was also a drawback because this allowed only asynchronous engagement where students were unable to interact with the teacher or other students. Nonetheless, John as well as other principals adapted to the needs to focus on the people in their school community.

Articulating Guidelines

When students were provided a choice to continue online instruction or return to in-person instruction during the third phase of the pandemic (August 2021-June 2022), John and other principals in this study (Mia, Ellen, Frank, and Nathan) modified classes or adjusted instructional goals to meet the unfamiliar challenges they faced. They did not abide by strict standards of performance but rather abided by an understanding that they needed to meet both students and staff where they were academically and emotionally. For example, Emma explained how providing instruction during distance learning forced her and her staff to rethink their expectations of both instruction and student demands. She stated,

> So, while we normally have all the standards that we're trying to touch on, we know that there are key standards and skills that students need in order to be successful in the next class, so I asked all our folks to take a step back. We knew we were not going to be able to touch on everything, especially during the hybrid schedule, when we were only seeing students for a limited amount of time here on campus, and just focus on those key standards and those key skills, so that when they came back full-time hopefully, they had the necessary content and skills.

Richard, the principal from Susan Kort Charter School, had a similar response as he explained that they “tried to modify work as needed for some of these students and modify timelines for when assignments needed to be turned in.” For both Richard and Emma, they modified their expectations based on what they were experiencing with students and teachers.

Lucas explained that he too had to remind teachers to set reasonable expectations for both students and for themselves. He stated, “[Teachers] feel pressured to finish a curriculum or finish the book. Look, we don’t need to do that. We just need to continue to show growth.” Lucas further explained that because teachers saw the students for less time, their expectations for student outcomes must be modified. For example, Lucas stated that he advised his teachers to scale back assignments and that students would take about a year to regain the ability to reacclimate to the appropriate levels needed for transitioning into high school. He stated,

> And so regardless of the pandemic, we still have kids whose job is to get ready for high school. So, the overall expectation really hasn't changed. We just have a little bit more work to do and by making sure that we hear the kids and realize

> what they each need. And we have our relationship, and that's not going to change. It is just more important.

Ellen also stated that she had to communicate with her staff, that due to the unique and uncharted territory of distance learning, they had to lower their expectations regarding academic rigor during their distance learning or hybrid learning in the second and third phase of the pandemic. Because the teachers did not have access to the same resources such as parents who were instrumental in supporting the lower grades when they were allowed on campus, it highlighted how under-supported schools are. She stated, “So we had to train the teachers to lower their expectations and start building up the culture in that classroom, and we'll go in baby steps.” Ellen explained that she had to remind the teachers that students had been out of practice with sitting in a structured classroom and did not have the necessary skills to function under the same conditions.

The principals emphasized how their expectations for students was a key area they were flexible with their decisions and communicated this to teachers, demonstrating their ethical decision-making and devised plans, taking into consideration how the people affected by any decisions would react to stricter policies. It further highlighted how these principals demonstrated how their decision-making focused on the students, as well as the teachers.

Self-Managed Solutions

The principals in this study relied on adaptive expertise to find new solutions to novel circumstances as well as exercised creative insubordination, prioritizing students, families, and staff when making decisions. In the early stages of the pandemic, processes for distributing materials, supporting students, and providing guidance on teaching and learning were not available, and principals had to devise these protocols that contradicted district mandates. A significant challenge raised by the principals related to materials distribution given the restrictions during the first phase of the pandemic. They demonstrated adaptive expertise by creating new protocols for delivering Chromebooks, food, and other supplies students and

families would need, especially in the first phase (March 2020-June 2020) of the pandemic. For example, Mia, the principal of Waters Elementary School, “tried to figure out how to get materials with a drive-thru or pick up process. We had to do it on the down-low because our district was still trying to figure out a protocol for everybody to do.” She was committed to ensuring the students received support and used creative insubordination to achieve that. John, the principal from Ventures High School, used the tribal annex to help him distribute materials, breaking away from the district policy to avoid public spaces outside of school with students and families. According to him,

> So, we reached out to the tribe. They have a student health center in a student education annex out there, and we were able to work with the staff there to basically provide Chromebooks, hotspots, and other materials to those kids with a schedule that was convenient for those families. That helped us get some materials out to some kids that wouldn't have necessarily had them.

An example of creative insubordination in support of students surfaced in discussions of promotions and graduations. Although different from instructional materials distribution, many of the principals in this study stated that they thought it was important for milestone occasions to be celebrated as a means of supporting students. All ten of the principals in this study established protocols for student promotions and graduations to navigate around the COVID-19 restrictions, which did not allow for students or families to be on campus for any type of event. Despite principals being told not to have contact with students and families, some principals devised plans to ensure they could provide as many of the typical experiences their students were accustomed to having. John, the principal from Ventures High School, explained that he and his staff decided to go to each graduating student’s home to celebrate graduating seniors:

> So, my office staff and I decided that we were going to go to every senior's house, leaving them kind of a care package. Give them, you know, some nice kind of graduation stuff and invite them to a drive-thru graduation that year, and make sure that the staff that went with me had gloves and had masks. You know everything that we could, and that we were communicating with parents that we were coming out. We really didn't want them to answer the door. We just wanted to knock on the door, leave the gift, and then disappear.

John’s use of the drive-thru graduation was an example of the principals in this study innovating

new processes and demonstrating creative insubordination to ensure they could address the novel challenges they faced because of COVID-19. It not only demonstrated that they understood what was at risk for going against what they were told to do by their district or other outside agencies, but it also demonstrated the need to ensure their school community could benefit from traditional events during a time of crisis and continue to connect with their students and families.

The principals also felt a need to provide their outgoing eighth and twelfth graders with as close an experience to graduation as possible because they did not want them to miss out on this experience. These principals stated that they were thinking about creating positive memories for students and creating events they could hold onto despite having to quarantine and not have access to some of the typical end-of-the-year celebrations.

Flexible Decision-Making

According to the principals in this study, they were faced with various communications challenges without clear or proven solutions, so they relied heavily on adaptive expertise through flexible decision-making. Other participants described how they addressed the unique challenges without using previously used methods. Not only were these principals attempting to adhere to the proposed health and safety mandates, but they were also able to make some adaptive choices to demonstrate their human-centered leadership. For example, Frank, the principal of Drake Elementary School, explained how he had to create a way to disseminate COVID-19 safety protocols to both his students and staff. He explained that he had to create a video to explain the new safety regulations:

> We took one of the *Little Mermaid* songs, and I dressed as Ariel, and you can check it out on my YouTube link on my email signature. But we did a video for the kids to say welcome back. And as we did that, we went to all different staff members, and everybody sang a little part to share how we wash our hands. So that was kind of a lot of fun to just get us to connect a little bit and do this whole thing together.

Mia explained that she created videos to distribute information instead of doing regular emails

with a lot of print and used the videos to provide the essential updates to the school community. As a result of not being able to communicate or reach out to families because the families recognized the school's number on their caller ID, she decided to use a phone application to change the school's phone number to ensure parents would respond to the messages. She stated,

> So then eventually we were able to get some app that it would look like you're not calling from the school. And so then, when they call back, we've got their number, so communication with the families was better once we were able to call them from home.

Because Mia had important information to provide parents, she needed to ensure her communication was being received, which forced her to modify the traditional methods of calling parents, and the phone application allowed her to improve the necessary communication with parents. This was an example of her flexibility and innovative ability she utilized to show that her school community was more important than simply going through the motion of using her traditional methods to communicate or contact parents. It was important for her that her families received important updates to keep them connected with the school community and provide them with the necessary resources to make their current circumstances a bit more tolerable. The participants not only had to create new procedures for the novel circumstances they faced at their respective sites, but they also had to circumvent their district's mandates to meet their students' and staff needs.

District-Driven Decisions

Because each agency, institution, or organization had different requirements, and the individual schools had specific contextual needs, it became a challenge for principals to navigate among the various compliance issues. Each of the government agencies, including the County Office of Education, had requirements they communicated to each of the school districts, which the districts interpreted to fit their individual district's needs and filtered that information to the schools in their district. Participants made decisions based on the guidance

and direction they were provided by their respective districts, which oftentimes restricted their ability to make decisions for their school sites. The principals made decisions specific to their school sites by adjusting what they were required by their districts. For instance, in John's district, they were provided instructions on how to assess students in the first few months of the pandemic, John stated,

> At that point, the decision was made that we weren't going to hold kids accountable for any additional learning for the rest of the year, and we were going to hold them harmless, as far as grades went, whatever grade they had as of I think it was March 13th was going to be their report card, and we communicated that.

John further explained that it was important for him to communicate with his staff that they would still be doing instruction and begin organizing how online instruction would look like. Although John and his team planned what instruction would look like at their specific site, the district and other stakeholders provided direction on how they would create their schedule and how it would look like for each of the schools in his district.

Frank, the principal from Drake Elementary School, claimed that his district provided direction from the beginning, including how materials would be distributed and how to communicate with the school community. He stated, "We got a lot of information from the district level right away. Here's where we're going to go next. We're going to try to get materials into kids' hands. Communicate with our families through blackboard." Ellen, who is also from the same district as Frank, stated, "And really our district told us we really want to supply families with communication that we're with them, that we're beside them, that we are in a relationship together." Nathan, the principal from Deer Valley Continuation High School in the Central Unified School District, communicated to his staff that they had to change the instructional delivery model from Google Classroom to Canvas, a learning platform many of the districts in this county were required to use. He stated, "But then the district said everybody's got to do Canvas so that forces the Google classroom teachers to push things into Canvas." Although these principals were required to implement various learning platforms and provide instruction

specific to what their respective districts mandated, they continued to communicate and reassure their staff to proceed with an understanding and latitude that this was all new to everyone and no one was expected to be an expert and implementation of policies and protocols was contingent upon various factors such as the ability to connect to the internet, available resources, and the necessary learning needed for implementation.

The participants also explained how they disregarded the health and safety guidelines provided by their respective districts to conduct home visits. In one example, Lucas, the principal of Elevation Middle School, indicated in his response to the safety and public health challenges he faced the following explanation:

> One of the main ones was making sure that my families that relied on us for food and for meal service were still able to take care of them. For many of them, we had to deliver to homes because they don't have a working car. They couldn't get to us to be able to pick up meals.

Frank, the principal of Drake Elementary, also disregarded his district's policies by conducting home visits to support with technology issues. He stated,

> I can remember doing a lot of home visits with my assistant principal where we go troubleshooting with families on how to log on. This was maybe a few weeks into the year with families that we hadn't heard from, but we were having a lot of issues connecting. So, we did that at the beginning.

Although these principals struggled to support their students and staff because of their districts' policies, they created new solutions outside of their expertise and outside of what they were allowed to do. These participants continued to make decisions they felt were ethical, using adaptive expertise and executing creative insubordination to show how at the center of their decision-making were the people in their respective school community.

County-Driven Decisions

These principals made decisions against a backdrop of constantly evolving policy mandated from the County Office of Education and the Health and Human Services Agency. The data makes clear that when these principals were faced with making decisions based on either their respective district or outside agencies, the focused on the people in their school

community to ensure their decisions did not negatively impact them. The principals were required to institute these processes or systems and apply them to their respective site, adding to the multitude of challenges they faced regularly as part of the impact COVID-19 had on them and their school community. Although the mandates, restrictions, or guidance were provided for principals, they each had to implement these new processes without any reference besides the general guidelines they were provided. The data on how these principals navigated policy mandates particularly showcases all three components of human-centered leadership—creative insubordination, ethical decision-making, and adaptive expertise—at work.

The district guidance and mandates were not restricted to instruction but also included health restrictions imposed on school districts by the County Department of Health. Health and safety decisions were heavily dictated by outside organizations who provided this information to districts who then provided this guidance to their respective schools. Richard stated, “Of course we need to look at guidance that was provided to us by the county office of education who received that information from the county health and human services agency (HHSA) as well as district requirements.” Richard’s decision-making process in this area was guided by what the County Office of Education required, based on the COVID restrictions the HHSA provided. Given these restrictions, he had to employ processes with input from his site union representatives. He stated, “We had to take into consideration working with the teachers’ union as well. So, there were many factors that played a role in that decision-making process.” Lucas, the principal from Elevation Middle school, also explained how the unions played a large role in deciding how instruction would be implemented. Lucas explained some of the frustrations he experienced because of the teachers’ union input:

> I would have liked to see an opportunity for kids to Zoom into the classroom on their off day, on their non in-person day. It wasn't even an option because I think there are some kids who would have liked to Zoom in and see the kids that were in person that day, but our union made that not an option, so we didn't.

Ellen described her district’s decision-making process as follows:

> The decision-making process was very much, here comes the Southern California County's expectations. The superintendents of each district had their coordinators or their assistant superintendents providing these are the steps that we're going to follow, and we all follow the same steps, even the way that we were doing outreaches.

Sophia further explained that “Whatever directives are coming from the Southern California County Office of Education, and making sure that everybody was safe, we were following the correct protocols and following the decision tree and all of that information.” Mike had a similar explanation about how he followed his District’s protocols when he stated, “Our staff, in the distance learning format, followed the district policy whether it was social distancing, wearing masks, or wiping things down after contact.” In response to how she addressed public health and safety questions, Mia expressed that her district provided guidance on what they were allowed to say to families about COVID guidelines, which she also stated changed all the time and she needed to communicate that to parents.

Although many of the circumstances surrounding principals’ decision-making were guided by outside agencies, they did implement their district’s vision accordingly. But it was not as simple as implementing policies or procedures. The principals in this study were guided heavily by their school community’s need for normalcy, which informed how they reconciled their decision-making between their school and other agencies such as the district office or the County Office of Education. For example, the principals indicated they knew they needed to modify student expectations due to the amount of time students had not attended school. They also understood that following outside agencies mandates were not logistically feasible for their respective school sites, and they needed to be innovative when creating solutions such as using online communication tools to stay connected with their school community. The complex and fluid nature of their individual school site made it increasingly difficult over the three years to follow protocols that limited schools’ abilities to support students, families, and their staff. The principals in this study described their decision-making process in areas where they did not seek district approval and executed their duties within the scope of their role as the site leader,

focusing again on the students and staff while adapting new protocols and disregarding policies and mandates.

Summary

This study aimed to describe principals' leadership practices during times of crisis, using the human-centered leadership framework introduced for this study. Combining ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination to contribute to the human-centered leadership framework, I was able to answer what and who the participants prioritized their attention when making decisions. During the semi-structured interview, each principal responded to several questions asking them about to describe the novel situations they encountered because of COVID-19 and how they responded to these challenges to help illustrate what or who they prioritized their attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data revealed that the participants described instructional, student, and communication as the major challenges they faced because of COVID-19. The participants described how these challenges affected their respective school communities and the impact it had on their systems and the people in their school community. Their responses to the challenges demonstrated how they focused on the impact it would have on the human aspect of their systems. They responded to the human need they observed in each of the three areas of challenges they identified by reassuring their students and family as well as their staff. They were able to do this by providing them resources for both physical and emotional needs. First, the participants explained they provided physical resources using the prescribed protocols they were provided by the various organizations, and when they could not adequately support their school community within the restrictions imposed on them, they took matters into their own hands and used creative insubordination to go outside of the policy mandates and develop new protocols using adaptive expertise. Ultimately, the participants began from an ethical decision-making model to determine that doing things the right and authorized way was not always doing the right thing for the students, their families, and their staff. The participants in this study demonstrated their use

of a human-centered leadership informed by ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination to ensure they were able to support their school community. The next chapter will provide an overview of the study, discussion of the findings through the lens of the framework chosen for this study, implications for social justice, implications for principal leadership, implications for policy, implications for research, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion to the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion

As we emerge from the unknown, uncertain, and unfathomable of the pandemic, education will have an opportunity to respond to the aftermath of COVID-19 with humanizing practices that can mean many things to different stakeholders. Humanizing practices allows for the space to allow people to be flexible and attend to the most urgent needs of the members in the school community (Abdi et al., 2020; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Khilji, 2022). The pandemic placed principals in a unique position to interrogate their pedagogical goals, their district leadership, and simply question the intent of the decisions they were required to execute, forcing them to choose between people and goals (Dirani et al., 2020; Handford et al., 2022). Although not mutually exclusive, goals can be achieved in service of the people these goals are intended to benefit. The pandemic created the space for the principals in this study to be guided by ethically-driven decision-making where principals acted on behalf of the students, staff, and families in their school community because they were accountable them, and the findings suggest they were compelled to keep them safe and provided with the necessary tools to be successful during each phase of the pandemic: distance learning, hybrid learning, in-person learning (Handford et al., 2022; Kim, 2022; Ravitch, 2021). The pandemic has created fertile ground to (re)develop leaders who will question their assumptions, their training, and the social constructs, which have forced them into fixed structures where compliance mandates have been the goal (Karami & Parra-Martinez, 2021; Khilji, 2022).

This chapter reviews the findings from this study and offers implications for social justice, implications for principal leadership, implications for policy, implications for research, the recommendations for future research, and the conclusion of the study. The following are the guiding research questions:

1. What are the novel situations these principals encountered in their multidimensional school environments because of COVID-19?

2. How did these principals make decisions when faced with these COVID-19 related novel challenges?
3. On what and who did these school leaders prioritize their attention during the COVID-19 pandemic? Why?

Overview of the Study

A qualitative research design was used to answer the three questions about how principals made decisions based on what they encountered and who they prioritized during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ten principals across four districts with a minimum of three years' experience as a principal serving at either the elementary, middle, and high school levels participated in the study. The schools they led varied in student population, location, and the type of school (traditional or charter). Each principal participated in one interview conducted via Zoom. Reflective memos were completed after each interview, after rereading transcripts, and after reviewing each participant's respective online district and school data. Data analysis through notetaking during the interview, several rounds of coding, and subsequent memo writing helped me draw conclusions and answer each of the three research questions above.

Human-Centered Leadership

This research study was conducted to better understand how principals lead beyond the traditional goal-oriented or task-filled agendas researched in other fields such as instructional, distributive, and transformational leadership models. While each of these models have provided additional direction and tools necessary for principals to lead their school communities, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for principals to exercise or utilize a different form of leadership not often spoken about. The findings from this study reveal how the participants used skills demonstrating their instructional leadership, their distributive leadership, or expertise in management or leadership discussed in Chapter 2, but it also revealed how these discrete skills were not enough when trying to account for the impact some decisions would inevitably have on students, families, and staff. The findings from this study highlight the way these

principals engaged in what I refer to as human-centered leadership which considers the needs of the people in the school system while also ensuring goals and tasks are completed.

Adaptive Expertise

From the outset of pandemic, the principals in this study were challenged with various leadership crises. In March of 2020, the county office of education, department of public health, as well as other government agencies directed the closure of schools, forcing district leaders and principals to develop plans to create a distance learning model for their students. Although the participants in this study stated that they did not receive much guidance from their respective districts, they led the effort to determine how to communicate with their staff and train them to use the new online learning platforms or other online tools for distance learning. The principals in this study were forced to create new protocols for delivering essential items like food and Chromebooks to families as well as supporting their staff's efforts to provide learning through a distance model despite the challenges that no one knew how to do this, so the principals in this this study needed to develop new processes in the moment. As discussed within adaptive expertise, these principals were flexible and reflective on what would work or not work, given their unique context and circumstances (Aytaç, 2020; De Voto, 2023; Gill, 2020; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Viner et al., 2020). Not only were the participants exploring new and untested solutions to the novel circumstances they faced, the findings around what principals identified as novel reveal that the participants oftentimes went beyond the basic expectations from their respective districts to meet their school's needs. For example, some of the principals extended timeframes for families to get materials such as books, Chromebooks, and food beyond the scheduled times to accommodate families without transportation or who had to work during the designated times of distribution. What was made clear with these participants was their commitment to provide students and teachers with the necessary resources for their success and developed any new system that would better serve the needs of the students and their families. These principals encountered several barriers, and they continued to address

them with a community-driven leadership focused on people and not tasks.

Facing novel situations is not new to a principal's role, nor is it new to a school environment. The literature on adaptive expertise, which focuses on how an individual responds to unprecedented, unknown, or unique situations allows leaders to venture outside of the task-driven solutions that relies on their routine expertise (Axelsson, 2018; Anthony et al., 2015; Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014; McMullen et al., 2020; Mylopoulos et al., 2018a, 2018b). The findings are consistent with the literature on adaptive expertise and suggest how principals created solutions to their novel situations, but it also reveals how their decisions were based on how to support students. For example, they created an entirely new way to promote and graduate their students to provide as much of a normalized end of the school year as possible. They recreated a discipline protocol to account for students' learning loss, both with academics and behavior. They further explained how they knew students and teachers had been impacted by the school closures and needed time to reacclimate, to readjust, and relearn how to interact in the school structure with new protocols resulting from the COVID restrictions. The findings build on the concepts found in Khilji's (2022), which discusses the need to create a safe psychological space where leadership development is not precise or predictable. These participants' use of adaptive expertise was a tool to demonstrate a more human-centered leadership because they realized their traditional proven solutions were not going to support students or their staff and needed to be flexible as they addressed various challenges.

Ethical Decision-Making

The principals in this study stated that they understood the potential impact their decisions would have on their school community if they approached it strictly from a goal-oriented mindset instead of a human-centered leadership approach. The literature on ethical decision-making revolves around how decisions impact the people leaders serve (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Fletcher & Nicholas, 2016; Garza Mitchell,2012; Karaköse, 2007). The decision-making evidenced in this study was not predicated on traditional

methods but rather on the participants' understanding district and outside agency goals did not always coincide with their school's contextual needs. For example, Ellen chose to disregard district instructional protocols by reducing or eliminating interventions for larger groups of students because it could create avoidable COVID-19 exposure, so she made changes to create smaller classes. Although she was bound by instructional protocols, she continued to be student-centered as opposed to task-centered. This type of ethical decision-making is consistent with the research Begley (2006) describes, which notes how there is no one clear way to lead or make decisions in an ethical manner. Each of the principals had their unique brand of challenges, and their decision-making reflected the choices between doing things right or doing the right thing.

The principals in this study were making difficult decisions with various stakeholder needs throughout each stage of the pandemic, and the choices they had to make forced them into making ethical decisions. The interesting aspect of the findings was the participants' willingness to disregard instructional expectations especially when their students returned and needed to have higher expectations, according to the districts' directives. For example, Nathan, the principal from Deer Valley Continuation High School, made the choice to not hold students accountable the same way he had prior to the pandemic. He believed students needed more than learning how to be students before they could perform at their appropriate grade level. Another example was Lucas, the principal from Elevation Middle School, stated his students needed more time reacclimating to the school environment when they returned from quarantine in the second year of the pandemic. This allowed him to interrogate his exclusionary discipline protocols to support students to stay in school. The findings on ethical decision-making in this study are also consistent with Begley (2006), and it builds on what other researchers argue that ethical decision-making is not an exact science and heavily dependent on context (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Berisha et al., 2023). The participants in this study were confronted with various forms of ethical dilemmas, which were exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19. This required them to

execute ethical decision-making to demonstrate a more compassionate form of leadership.

Creative Insubordination

Because COVID-19 created a host of novel challenge, a main impact to the educational environment was the effect it had on the people in the school community. The principals had to rely on either their respective district's mandates or COVID restrictions imposed by external organizations such as the County Office of Education or the County Department of Health, which did not always consider their school's contextual needs. The principals in this study stated that they were instructed to follow strict instructional guidelines, but the principals reported that the district mandates did not consider the actual time needed for implementing initiatives or the psychological impact COVID would have on the fidelity of any implementation plan. The principals had to execute creative insubordination when deciding to go against their district school closure mandates that did not allow teachers on the campuses, but the principals opened their campuses to ensure teachers could work, get supplies, and support students with technology needs. These principals continued to focus on their community when making organizational decisions. The literature on creative insubordination links the ethical decision-making used by leaders to disregard mandates and policies to serve their organization's needs resembling the decision-making these principals exhibited during the pandemic (Azambuja & Islam, 2023; Lin et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2020). The principals in this study viewed their work as important, which empowered them to be creatively insubordinate with the solutions they instituted to support the students, parents, and staff in their school community.

The findings in this study build on the concept of creative insubordination by Shukla & Kark (2020), which describes the conflict between school principals and central/district office decisions. Creative insubordination allows principals to disobey central/district office policies to fit their school context needs. For example, the principals in this study were provided strict guidelines on how to operate everything on their campus such as cleaning, social distancing, online instruction, and issuing supplies and food. Notably, the principals in this study each had

varying responses to these restrictions, regardless of whether it came from their district or outside agencies. These principals decided to conduct home visits for families who could not attend their school's supply distribution days or were having problems connecting to the internet. The principals would visit homes or allow their teachers to conduct these home visits. The findings suggest that while the principals were aware of the district and outside agency goals, they could not always reconcile these goals with their community's needs. COVID-19 did not always present the principals in this study with novel situations as much as it did force them into ethical dilemmas, which subsequently led to creative insubordination (Haynes & Licata, 1995; Lin et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2020). These findings further build on the concept that creative insubordination initiated by these principals are examples to show leaders positively attempting to impact their organization by serving the people on their school sites (Shukla & Kark, 2020). This suggests creative insubordination can be an effective resource, promoting a more human-centered leadership, which principals can use when faced with conflicting goals such as serving people versus completing tasks.

Implications for Social Justice

Reoccurring events such as school shootings, natural disasters, and the events of the COVID-19 pandemic have illustrated the inequity that surfaces when school communities experience tragic events, which may affect a significant portion of the students. It is not enough for principals to conduct classroom visits and provide teachers feedback, create testing schedules, or hire new teachers to replace retirees or transferring teachers. School administrators must exercise leadership beyond an instructional leadership focus and consider how their actions can positively impact issues of inequity and access to curriculum for marginalized students (Lindsey et al., 2018; Zamudio et al., 2011). What then is the role of the principal, and how do they accomplish this if one chooses to narrow the scope within student achievement, specifically issues of equity, social justice, or closing the achievement gap? The argument cannot be reduced to one aspect of a school or student outcomes but rather a

perspective or mindset that looks at addressing the school community as part of a larger context with students, families, and staffs, resulting from principals' inability to exercise leadership because there is a limited understanding of schools as complex environments that require one "to evaluate leadership in process rather than wait until the outcome is clear" (Brion, 2021; Heifetz, 1994; Kafa, 2021; Kavrayıcı & Kesim, 2021). Addressing issues with equity or issues with social justice must be tackled from a leadership perspective that examines not only the principals but also examines the school communities as complex systems to generate novel solutions based on anything from context, constraints, and team member ideals and values (Khilji, 2022; LaVenia & Lasater, 2022; Schwartz, 2016; Shukla & Kark, 2020).

Implications for Principal Leadership

Educational leadership is studied and taught as a matter of prescriptive methodology and often as a matter of characteristics, which may not capture the complexities of principals practicing leadership or the multifaceted nature of a school site. Leadership must be studied with an understanding that there may not be specific models to adopt (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Kua et al., 2021; Peng et al., 2014), but rather practice leadership as a collection of strategies or dispositions learned through daily practice (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Kafa, 2021; Garza Mitchell, 2012; Shukla & Kark, 2020). Leadership performance may dictate how principals exercise their role, depending on the school's context (Brion, 2021; Edwards & Magill, 2023; Kafa, 2021; Urick & Bowers, 2014). Although a principal may have learned how to lead in various situations, a new context may contain a complex set of challenges such as a powerful union, a distinct curriculum, or a unique location, which adds to the complexity of leadership not necessarily taught in any credential program or experienced at a previous school site by a principal. Leadership is a dynamic process, which is constantly evolving due to the internal and external influences and pressures school communities experience. And administrators must evolve and adapt to these conditions. The implications for leadership are dire, and the work

necessary to achieve the results our students and school communities desperately need will involve risk-taking with the potential for leaders to be placed in situations to make ethical decisions, affecting real human lives, and learn to operate during times of crisis.

As a site principal, human-centered leadership will be an essential ability to possess and respond to the various needs presented on their multi-dimensional and complex school site with equally complex and multi-dimensional external variables and influences, creating additional tension among the various stakeholders, creating novel situations principals must address while also maintaining a clear focus on what and who they should prioritize (Bohle Carbonell et al., 2014, 2016; Barnett, & Koslowski, 2002; Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Drago-Severson & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2018; Grunfeld et al., 2021; Khan & Bullis, 2021; Levin et al., 2020; Weiner et al., 2021). These leaders have significant experience to help them address unfamiliar problems based on how they can connect various experiences from different areas of their knowledge such as organizational, personnel, experiential, creative, adaptive, and ethical (Kahn & Bullis, 2021). With the COVID-19 pandemic, principals were faced with novel issues such as unprecedented teacher shortages, mask mandates, creating a distance learning platform from nothing, and debates over whether to teach critical race theory in schools (Ball, 2022; Gill, 2020; Jones, 2022; Meckler & Natanson, 2022; Tully, 2022). While some previous solutions may work to address some of the elements in these situations, principals have never had to deal with the challenges of the pandemic of the magnitude they are currently experiencing.

Credentialing programs, job descriptions, the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSELs), and traditional research indicate principals need to have certain discrete skills to lead effectively, but what this study with these principals has shown, with an opportunity to study what happened in a major crisis and novel event, is these principals made decisions based their primary focus on what people needed. They chose to meet peoples' needs by sometimes disregarding policy mandates and providing what their students and families needed. These principals created new solutions for challenges no one had ever

experienced. They made clear choices between doing things right according to the restrictions and mandates and doing the right thing, which was to serve their students, their families, and their staff. We learned from this study that principals at any grade level need to be able to navigate within ethical dilemmas to make the right choices for their school community; principals need to have the fortitude to exhibit a level of creative or positive insubordination to disregard authority to ensure people's needs are met; principals need to be adaptive experts to create solutions in and during novel situations. Credentialling programs and the CPSELs need to reflect more of the skills the principals in this study demonstrated during real life-changing events, which had a more human-centered leadership approach. Training for current and new principals needs to be reevaluated to reconcile what many are now calling our turbulent school environments as the new normal with a leadership model relevant to a principal's daily reality. What can be learned from this study is the need to support school leaders to be better leaders for humans.

Implications for Policy

Human-centered leadership has implications far reaching the context of the current pandemic. District and school leaders are being confronted with an opportunity to interrogate the pre-pandemic era and institute different policies, which allow leaders to view outcomes or goals in terms of the people they will affect and placing the needs of the humans before compliance mandates (Abdi et al., 2020; Handford et al., 2022; Kim, 2022; Ravitch, 2021). Policies in place prior to the pandemic illustrate how marginalized groups and other vulnerable populations were negatively impacted by the pandemic because the educational infrastructure was ill-equipped to respond to both their material and emotional needs that required leaders the freedom to innovate without the fear of punitive consequences (Liu, et al., 2020; Ravitch, 2021). Potential policy changes around how principals are evaluated will need to be reconsidered to include a focus on Standard 3: *Management and Learning Environment*; and Standard 5: *Ethics and Integrity* of the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (CPSEL) to

determine the need to include aspects of leadership in a crisis as well as the ethical choices principals make that are oftentimes outside of the instructional leadership model (CPSEL, 2014; Stough et al., 2018; Viner et al., 2020). The implications for policy will be tied closely to the implications for research, which will dictate research outside the traditional instructional leadership model that focuses on student outcomes such as attendance, discipline, or test scores.

Implications for Research

Within the scope of human-centered leadership influenced by the factors used in this study, implications for research will have consequences that require scholars to venture outside the traditional models that do not fit the evolving contexts where principals lead (Leppard, 2018). Ethical decision-making as an influential factor of human-centered leadership will also have implications on certain aspects of human-centered leadership to ensure leaders understand the impact this type of leadership model can have on principals' autonomy and innovation (Haynes & Licata, 1995; Liu et al., 2020). Although studies included in this dissertation help define, explain, or even support human-centered leadership, the three tenets identified (ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, creative insubordination) may be investigated as prosocial behaviors, indicating how they can validate human-centered leadership with implications on principal training either on the job or in credentialing programs (Khilji, 2022; Leppard, 2018; Shukla & Kark, 2020). The implications for research will have an ongoing impact on how school leaders are trained long after we recover from the pandemic. For example, because adaptive expertise is still in a nascent phase within TK-12 school leadership, and it does not yet have a validated measurement tool within the TK-12 education sphere, researchers will need to explore it as a viable leadership model during times of crisis, both during informal and informal training, highlighting contextual learning environments either in credential programs or on the job (Kua et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2007; Peng et al., 2014).

Recommendations for Research

Future research involving a human-centered leadership practice should include a larger pool of principals to include more schools and more districts. This will allow research to be more generalizable. Research should also focus on gendered responses to determine whether there is a difference between female and male principals. This may impact how new administrators or veteran principals can be trained. Because this study focused on principals' responses to novel circumstances, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be critical to identify how principals navigated crises in different settings such as natural disasters, school shootings, and more studies around how principals navigated within the pandemic to help locate commonalities, if any, existing among the various principals' responses. Credential programs have been researched in the past, but new studies should be conducted to help locate programs that have modified their curriculum to support aspiring administrators to learn to lead in times of crisis. Another area can be district and counties' reception of creative insubordination as an acceptable leadership practice under the human-centered leadership model introduced in this study. Lastly, while the human-centered leadership framework used in this study utilized ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination as tenets contributing to the framework, research with ethical decision-making informing how, if at all, principals resorting to creative insubordination has any correlation to or influences adaptive expertise. COVID-19 has impacted principals' practice in many ways yet to be determined.

Conclusion

This qualitative study aimed to develop a broader understanding of principals' leadership practices during the COVID-19 pandemic beyond the traditionally and heavily researched leadership models such as distributive leadership, transformational leadership, or instructional leadership. My specific aim was to gain an understanding of how principals used ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination to inform the human-centered framework I adopted for this study in response to novel situations encountered by the principals

in this study when addressing issues related to COVID-19 (Garza Mitchell, 2012; Gube & Lajoie, 2020; Hatano & Inagaki, 1986; Khilji, 2022; LaVenia & Lasater, 2022; Schwartz, 2016; Shukla & Kark, 2020). Although principals face many challenges and address them using various practices, human-centered leadership can render visible how principals practice leadership using a balance of ethics, competency, and creativity during times of crisis, specifically during the pandemic (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Bagwell, 2020; Brown et al., 2021; Pusic et al., 2018), and how they attempt to resolve ill-defined problems without predefined solutions (Drago-Severson et al., 2014; Shaked & Schechter, 2019; Spillane et al., 2009; Yoon et al., 2015). The changing school environment and unpredictability of the school day challenges commonly held beliefs that principals have all the answers, which has been highlighted by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Aytaç, 2020; Thornton, 2021). Human-centered leadership as a lens to interrogate principals' practice during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a different perspective on how principals navigate novelty, ambiguity, and complexity through an interconnection among ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination to identify what and who they prioritize their attention when making decisions (Anderson & Weiner, 2023; Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Brezicha et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2007; Mylopoulos et al., 2018a, 2018b; Weiner et al., 2021). We look to principals to be the experts in various elements of their role, their day, or using discrete skills, but we do not seek them out to be experts in serving the people in their school community. COVID-19 highlighted the need for principals to lead their school communities through ethical decision-making, adaptive expertise, and creative insubordination to demonstrate a leadership, focusing their attention on the needs of their students, families, and staff. Principals *can* lead with a more human-centered approach to better serve their school communities.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Email to Colleagues

To:

Subject: Principals' Leadership Practices

Hello,

I am seeking assistance with my dissertation study, "Principals' Leadership Practices." Would you be willing to help me distribute this call to your principal colleagues? Also, if you know anyone interested in this study, I would be grateful if you could forward this information directly to them. For this study, I am looking for principals to participate in my study who are currently principals at a school site. They must be principals working at either a public or charter school only. They should have a minimum of three years of experience as a principal because I am asking questions about the decisions they made as principals, beginning with the 2019-2020 school year, and proceeding through the 2021-2022 school year.

Best,

David Sosa

Hello,

My name is David Sosa. I am an assistant principal at a comprehensive high school in San Diego County and currently a student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership in the School of Education at California State University San Marcos and the University of California, San Diego. I am seeking participants for my dissertation study, "Principals' Leadership Abilities." I am interested in finding out more about how principals identified and resolved challenges they faced during the COVID-19 Pandemic, specifically from March 2020 through June 2022. For this study, I am looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

- Currently working as a site principal at either a charter or public-school TK-12

- Have a minimum of any combination of three years of experience as a principal

Participants interested in participating in the study should email fjgarret@ucsd.edu, and I will provide them with more information about the study. For questions about this study, please call me at (951) 240-9189 or email sosa004@cougars.csusm.edu I greatly appreciate your support!

David Sosa

Doctoral Student - Cohort 16

Joint Doctoral Program - Educational Leadership

University of California, San Diego

California State University, San Marcos

Appendix B: Participant Solicitation Email

Principals' Leadership Practices: A Qualitative Study to Understand Principals' Use of Adaptive Expertise as a Response to Novel Challenges

Dear Principal,

My name is David Sosa. I am an assistant principal at a comprehensive high school in San Diego County and currently a student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership in the School of Education at California State University San Marcos and the University of California, San Diego.

Your name was shared with me by (_____) who believes you fit the criteria for the principals I hope to interview for my research. You are invited to participate in a research study to broaden our understanding of principals' leadership practices by describing the ways they leverage their decision-making within their school building during COVID-19. Specifically, I aim to identify the challenges principals describe and how they respond to them.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will participate in a one-on-one interview with me, the researcher, via Zoom during an agreed upon and scheduled time. The interview will last approximately one hour and will be audio recorded.

There are minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study and your identifying information will remain confidential. You will be given a detailed description of risks and safeguards should you elect to participate. Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty. You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

Should you be interested in participating, please reply to this email, so I may schedule a time to meet with you and send an official information sheet about this study.

I look forward to the possibility of hearing about your leadership experiences.

Sincerely,

David Sosa
Doctoral Candidate
CSUSM/UCSD
Sosa004@cougars.csusm.org

Appendix C: Principals' Leadership Practices during Covid-19

Dear Participant,

My name is David Sosa, and I am a student at California State University San Marcos and the University of California San Diego in the doctoral program for educational leadership in the College of Education at California State University San Marcos. I am conducting a research study to identify the challenges principals describe they experienced during COVID-19 and how they respond to them. The purpose of this form is to inform you about the study.

PROCEDURE:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1) Participate in a one-on-one interview with me, the researcher, via Zoom during an agreed upon and scheduled time, lasting approximately one hour and will be audio recorded only with no option to video record to ensure confidentiality of the participants. Furthermore, each participant will be provided a pseudonym to add on their zoom name as they log on to safeguard their identity.

RISKS AND INCONVENIENCES:

There are minimal risks and inconveniences for participants in this study. These include:

1) Being uncomfortable answering the interview questions.
2) The time you spend participating in the study may be considered an inconvenience.

SAFEGUARDS:

To minimize these risks and inconveniences, the following measures will be taken:

1) Participants can skip any questions they feel uncomfortable answering while completing the interview. Participants may also halt or cease the audio recording at any time.
2) The interview will be scheduled at a time that is convenient to the participant.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Interviews will be conducted during hours where only the researcher is present in his home or

school office. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications.

Your personal information will be used only to communicate and schedule meetings and obtain additional clarifying information but not as part of the actual research. You will be informed that your information will be confidential for the entirety of the study and through publication using pseudonyms. You will be asked not to state your name or any identifying information during the interview. Your name will not be used; responses will be confidential and pseudonyms for all names, including of institutions and departments, will be applied immediately to the interview transcripts and all materials provided. Only my advisor and I will have access to the data. Data will remain confidential and stored only on my laptop. The laptop is password protected as are the files of the interviews. Transcribed interviews will also be password protected and no hard copies will be made of any of the data. Once data has been analyzed and the final dissertation is completed and approved, it will be deleted from my computer permanently.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty. Your decision whether to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher or any of their institutions.

BENEFITS:

While there are no direct benefits to participating in this study, your participation will help increase understanding regarding the factors and variables describing how principals make decisions and how these processes affect school community outcomes.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

If you have questions about the study, please contact me at (951) 240-9189 or e-mail me at sosa004@cougars.csusm.edu. You may also contact my project advisor, Dr. Joni Kolman at jkolman@csusm.edu. Please keep a copy of this information for your records. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the IRB Office at irb@csusm.edu or (760) 750-4029.

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUR RECORDS

Appendix D: Final Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in this interview. The purpose of this study is to better understand the challenges that principals faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they addressed those challenges.

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty. You may also skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This interview should take approximately one hour. [Review the consent form]

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? [Discuss questions]
If you have any questions at any point during this study, you should feel free to ask them. I will be more than happy to answer your questions. What pseudonym would you like to use in this study? Please enter that as your zoom name now. Do I have your permission to begin recording the interview?

Background Information:

For the first part of this interview, I want to understand more about you as a leader in your current position.

1. Tell me about your journey to become a principal at this school. (Follow-up questions may be needed to obtain additional information about each participant if they do not provide this with the first question)
    a. How long were you a teacher before becoming an administrator?
    b. Describe leadership roles you have played?
    c. In what school settings have you worked?
    d. How many years have you been a principal at your current site?

Interview Questions:

1. We experienced many challenges during the Pandemic, and I want to focus on some areas. Specifically, the last 2.5 years have been a time of change in schools. I'd like to

start by asking you about your experiences from March 2020, when schools closed down, through June when school ended for that year.

   a. I'm going to ask you about challenges in four areas during this time period. For example,
      i. tell me about instructional challenges …
      ii. the technological challenges …
      iii. the safety/public health challenges …
      iv. and communication challenges you faced during this period.
   b. Have you ever had to deal with making decisions like this before? Describe your decision-making process when faced with the challenges you identified above.

2. Now I'd like to talk about your experiences during the first academic year of the pandemic, August 2020-June 2021.
   a. I'm going to ask you about challenges in four areas during this period. For example,
      i. tell me about instructional challenges …
      ii. the technological challenges …
      iii. the safety/public health challenges …
      iv. and communication challenges you faced during this period.
   b. Have you ever had to deal with making decisions like this before? Describe your decision-making process when faced with the challenges you identified above.
3. Next, I'd like to talk about your experiences in the last academic year, August 2021-June 2022.
      i. tell me about instructional challenges …
      ii. the technological challenges …
      iii. the safety/public health challenges …
      iv. and communication challenges you faced during this time period.

b. Have you ever had to deal with making decisions like this before? Describe your decision-making process when faced with the challenges you identified above.

4. I want to get a feel for how you have been able to support the student groups who have historically struggled academically and socially. Our at promise students struggle in school for various reasons, and the pandemic made this more visible.
    a. How do you believe the pandemic affected students from marginalized groups such as English learners, foster youth, and students from low socioeconomic status? (RQ 1)
    b. To what extent, if at all, have you ensured all students benefit from the policies and directives initiated by the pandemic, specifically marginalized groups such as English learners, foster youth, and students from low socioeconomic status? (RQ 2)
    c. To what extent, if at all, have you adjusted or been flexible with student expectations during the pandemic, specifically regarding academics and discipline? (RQ 3)
    d. Explain how your experience or knowledge, prior to the pandemic, helped guide your approach when adjusting with regards to academics and discipline? (RQ 3)
5. As a result of the pandemic, we have experienced a lot of change or been forced to change how we address our daily procedures.
    a. What challenges have stayed the same, regardless of the impact of the pandemic?
6. Is there anything else you would like to say that you have not yet discussed?