

LEADING THROUGH A PANDEMIC: NOVICE PRINCIPALS' PERSONAL
LEADERSHIP JOURNEYS DURING COVID-19

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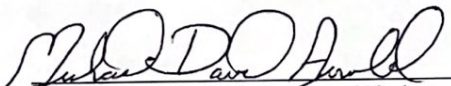
KELLI LORAIN HARTMAN

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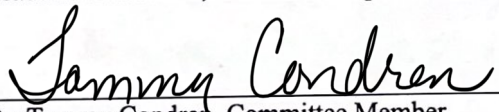
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LEADING THROUGH A PANDEMIC: NOVICE PRINCIPALS PERSONAL
LEADERSHIP JOURNEY DURING COVID-19


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LEADING THROUGH A PANDEMIC: NOVICE PRINCIPALS' PERSONAL
LEADERSHIP JOURNEYS DURING COVID-19

A Dissertation

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Doctor of Science

In

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By

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Dr. Mick Arnold, Dissertation Advisor

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Author and pastor John C. Maxwell once said, “A great leader’s courage to fulfill his vision comes from passion, not position.” This process to complete my dissertation could not have been complete without passion, a passion to turn a dream into reality. As a child, my life was not always easy, but I always had dreams. Dreams that one day I knew would come true if I worked hard enough. I knew this because one of the hardest working people I knew was my grandfather Jack Jacobson. One day I told him I would graduate, and we would have a doctor in the family; he never let me forget. Many of nights I wanted to give up on that dream, but I always knew I had made a commitment to him. He never gave up on me, there was no way I could ever give up on myself. Thank you, grandpa, for your unwavering love and support; I miss you every day. I always aim to make you proud. This one is for you.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences, leadership evolution, and decision-making criteria of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri during the crisis known as COVID-19. Using Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, the researcher examined the participants' perceptions of their leadership growth through the formats of mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states. These perceptions were based on leadership growth in their areas of managerial, instructional, innovative, visionary, and relational leadership. Principals in their first 3 years as principal during the onset of school closures in the spring of 2020 were selected for this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, participant self-reflections were collected, and district wide archival data were included such as reentry plans, student handbooks, faculty handbooks, and School Return to In-Person Learning and Continuity of Services Plan (SRCSP).

Keywords: COVID-19, Self-Efficacy, Leadership Evolution, Rural Novice Principals

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The success of an organization can be traced back to the effectiveness of the organization's leader and more specifically to the leader's perception of their ability to meet or exceed the demands of the job (Bandura, 1997; Fisher, 2020; Money & Pacifici, 2020). In schools today, building principals act as educational leaders addressing multiple situations every single day by identifying and assessing the risk, predicting how it will unfold, planning, and taking needed action (Marcus, McNulty, Henderson, & Dorn, 2019). Leadership by the principal is a crucial component to many successful operational procedures within a school (Fullan, 2016; Jordan, 2020; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Salazar, 2020; White, 2021). Demands and expectations placed on building-level principals continue to evolve (Crawford, 2019; White, 2021), moving the administrative role from more of a management position to an instructional leader, increasing responsibility for the success of every part of the organization (Barkman, 2015; DeWitt, 2020; Fullan, 2016; Hallinger, Hosseingholizadeh, Hashemi, & Kouhsari, 2018; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Salazar, 2020; Van Vooren, 2018). In an average school year, principals as educational leaders are faced with making many decisions and a heavy workload that consists of tasks such as driving quality instruction, following state and federal standards, providing staff professional development, and creating a positive culture (Fullan, 2016; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; A. Maxwell, & Riley, 2017; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Van Vooren, 2018). Building principals are second only to teachers when it comes to facilitating learning (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Meyer, Espel, Weston-Sementelli, Melton, & Anguiano,

2020; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018), but are identified as the most influential participant in any school organization since they set the tone for the vision and mission in the building, set teaching expectations, establish the building's professionalism, and lift team morale (Brown, 2019; Kaufman et al., 2021; Marzano et al., 2005; Parson, Hunter, & Kallio, 2016). Accelerated demands and increased accountability are still expectations regardless of the context of the school organization, its location, or even years of service of the administrator.

School locations identified as rural school districts may face responsibilities and opportunities unique to their communities. Research highlights the need for government entities and educational stakeholders to assist in addressing these needs (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2014; Van Vooren, 2018). In rural school districts, many leaders are faced with additional pressure from a small social community, where principal involvement is elevated to involve multiple roles and expectations in the school and community (Hayes, Flowers, & Williams, 2021; Preston et al., 2014). Rural principals are expected to be active participants in not only their school but also their community as well. Preston et al. (2014) described the role of the administrator as being "more than just a job, it's a lifestyle that tends to be closely watched by many local community members" (p. 3). Rural principals' leadership not only encompasses the students and staff, but at times reaches into the community. Rural principals may be looked upon and held accountable for the wellbeing of the community (Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Hayes et al., 2021). Community expectations are high for principals in a rural district and principals must be willing to work with a variety of stakeholders (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Hayes et al., 2021; Preston & Barnes, 2017). Challenges may arise when

leadership decisions or educational initiatives are different from the community consensus.

Resources are scarce in rural communities and rural principals are expected to be the experts in multiple areas. As compared to urban or suburban principals, rural principals are expected to wear many hats (Hayes et al., 2021; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). At times they may serve as a substitute teacher, kitchen cook, or step in for the janitorial staff. There are fewer people to share the task and rural principals are faced with a heavy, diverse workload that can cause them to overextend themselves quickly regardless of their years of service (Preston et al., 2014). At times, they are the only administrator within their district at their building level and must look outside of the district to share ideas, gain mentorship, or solicit educational partnerships for resources. Just one or two of these added pressures can be a challenge for rural school principals and can be especially challenging for novice leaders (Spillane & Lee, 2014).

Novice principals promoted within their current school district or taking their first leadership role within a new district are faced with elevated workloads (Salazar, 2020) and on average have been out of their principal preparation program for anywhere from 4 to 8 years (Davis, Gooden, & Bowers, 2017). The workload is not simply in sheer volume but in diversity and unpredictability of the tasks at hand (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Additionally, novice principals face a stronger sense of responsibility to achieve desired academic achievement than they did in their previous role (Salazar, 2020). At times, district and state accountability policies centered on student achievement and high-stakes standardized testing can escalate their perceived pressures. Novice principals find themselves saddled with multiple managerial tasks when many enter the field to enhance

the academics by being more of an instructional leader (Salazar, 2020; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Some novice principals may start out doing their best to keep their head above water but being proactive by preparing for a crisis is not always on the top of their mind.

Weick (1988) defined a crisis as a “low probability/high consequence event that threatens the most fundamental goals of an organization” (p. 307). Since the start of the 21st century, the frequency of dangerous events such as school shootings, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters has continued to increase (Drake, 2018). Events such as a pipe bursting in a classroom, missing students, abuse allegations, or death of a staff member can cause a crisis situation in a public school setting (Torley, 2011). In January of 2007, the United States Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education) provided states, communities, and local school districts with updated crisis planning guides to help prepare for unexpected events with goals to save lives, prevent injury, and minimize property damage. Districts were encouraged to create a crisis team and brainstorm ways to prepare for natural disasters, severe weather, fires, chemical or hazardous material spills, bus crashes, school shootings, bomb threats, medical emergencies, student or staff deaths, acts of terror or war, and outbreaks of disease and infections (Eliadis, 2019). While many district plans addressed influenza, they were soon faced with a crisis unlike anything they had experienced before (Coletrain, 2020). Even the most detailed plans school districts created were challenged by the events of COVID-19 (Harris & Jones, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Pollack, 2020).

COVID-19 was an unexpected pandemic impacting every community around the world over a 6-month time frame from October 2019 through March of 2020 (Bajaba, Bajaba, Algarni, Basahal, & Basahal, 2021; Flaxman, Hancock, & Weiner, 2020;

Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Not only did this cause issues financially (Rosenbaum, 2020; Suntrup, 2020) but also it took a toll socially and emotionally on everyone within communities (Eisman et al., 2020; Panchal, Kamal, Cox, & Garfield, 2021). Fear of death and imminent sickness was on the minds of individuals across the nation and the world (Alicandro, Remuzzi, & La Vecchia, 2020; Kantis, Kiernan, Bardi, & Posner, 2022; Taylor, 2020) leading to schools being set up for unprecedented challenges when faced with finding ways to successfully educate our youth (Huguelet, 2020). COVID-19 has impacted how teachers teach and how students learn. It became an unprecedented roadblock as new leaders entered their role as administrators. According to a survey conducted in 2020 by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), 45% of school principals stated the pandemic has caused them to consider retirement earlier than expected, an increase from the average 19% of principals that turn over each year (L. Maxwell & Superville, 2020). In rural communities the percentage of principals who wanted to move on to a new location for the 2021-2022 school year is even higher (Levin, Scott, Yang, Leung, & Bradley, 2020). With the exit of seasoned leaders, many new principals are left with limited support and role models. With limited support and research results from NASSP of 19% of new principals leaving schools every year, and almost 50% of new principals leaving within 3 years, districts spend significant time and money investing in developing administrative leaders (Tran, McCormick, & Nguyen, 2018). A research study conducted by Fisher (2014) identified principals had their highest levels of self-efficacy their first year in a position, however their levels tended to drop each year following until approximately their 10th year in their position with years 6 and 10 being the lowest.

There was no manual, guideline, or procedures for leading through the COVID-19 pandemic (Coletrain, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Adding a national pandemic to the expectations of a novice principal was just one more task added to the already growing list. Every leader's leadership approach and vision needed to evolve. Demands from central office administration and from staff contributed to additional workload and expectations, causing stress both at work and at home (Harris & Jones, 2020). To drive student achievement and keep educational organizations running efficiently during a crisis, educational leaders need to be strong, astute, adaptive, and innovative leaders regardless of their years of service. Every educational leader faced the impact of COVID-19 and its effects on their educational leadership journey. Facing challenges such as teacher and staff morale at an all-time low (Greene, 2020; Lightfoot, 2020; Perez, 2020; Will, 2021) and student learning loss (Barnum, 2020; Tan, 2020) were added to the tasks principals faced. A principal's sense of self-efficacy is his or her perception of their capabilities to create a vision and implement a plan to achieve desired outcomes in the school they lead (Bandura, 1986). Bajaba et al. (2021) implied educational leaders who have a higher self-efficacy when it comes to leading through a crisis would have been more motivated to lead and perform during the events of COVID-19, increasing their success rate when dealing with the challenges of their role.

In this chapter the reader will be introduced to the theoretical framework guiding this research study, the problem statement, and research questions. Novice principals experienced a crisis during their first few years many individuals have not faced, with limited opportunity to build a strong foundation of understanding. The significance of this study will also be explained, as well as limitations, delimitations, and assumptions

with the goal to address these in the designed controls. Finally, a summary of this research study will be introduced, and details of the remaining chapters shared.

Theoretical Framework

Phenomenological research seeks to explore the lived experiences and capture the feelings of individuals during a phenomenon occurrence to better understand the event as a whole (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2021; Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015). Rooted in philosophy (Creswell & Poth, 2018), phenomenological research examines the daily life of individuals presenting both a biased and unbiased approach to specific experience (Bayram & Balyer, 2021). Experiences recorded by the researcher become a source of information that others may learn more about through evaluation (Bayram & Balyer, 2021). Additionally, phenomenological researchers provide a foundation for understanding how individuals experience a specific situation (Moustakas, 1994).

One of the fundamental characteristics of phenomenology is the concept of intentionality (Peoples, 2021; Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015). Intentionality is related to consciousness. Individuals take the experiences or events that are occurring around them and they make a deliberate decision to act. Decisions are not just made without thinking (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015), especially in a crisis situation. Bandura (1986) would identify this as triadic reciprocal causation, decisions are made by the individual after evaluating environmental factors, reviewing the behaviors of others in the same situation, and drawing on prior experiences, memory, and plans that have been made. Building administrators are making a multitude of decisions on any given day; these decisions are even more important during times of crisis (Flaxman et al., 2020; McLeod & Dulsky,

2021). Novice principals must develop declarative and procedural knowledge in order to improve their self-efficacy when making these decisions (Bandura, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to identify lived experiences, personal decisions, and evolution of leadership of rural novice principals during COVID-19. In order to identify common themes presented in the literature review and answer the researcher's questions on how leadership evolved for rural novice principals during COVID-19, the researcher used a Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory (SET) as the theoretical framework to guide this study. This framework was selected since it deals directly with an individual's perceived capabilities to be successful in their experiences based on the opportunities given to develop their procedural and declarative knowledge (Bandura, 1977, 1997).

Bandura's (1997) SET points out the importance of personal perception of one's ability to be successful in a task, outcome, or situation. Self-efficacy theory is one part of Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT), which implies that every individual is competent and capable of reaching success if they have personal self-efficacy and have been provided with the opportunity to develop self-efficacy as they pursue and achieve their goals. self-efficacy theory does not imply that individuals who are successful through a crisis situation are inherently better, it just means that individuals who may be experiencing challenges may not have been given the opportunity to build leadership competencies and obtain mastery experience in this area (Bandura, 1997). Bandura implied that it is the responsibility of the government and society to provide opportunities for everyone to improve their self-efficacy by giving them experiences to practice personal mastery, providing people with skilled feedback and encouragement, the ability

for individuals to witness the success of others, and encourage them to identify their physiological and emotional states when working to achieve their goals (Bandura, 1977, 1997).

Rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri were new in position when the pandemic known as COVID-19 started. They have been given different opportunities to gain mastery experience before starting their new leadership role. Novice principals were given the opportunity to develop their emerging principal leadership skills working with organizations like the Missouri Leadership Development System (MLDS). The researcher identified common themes that aligned with the components Bandura suggested help build rural novice principals' self-efficacy and leadership competencies to identify how their personal leadership evolved during the pandemic known as COVID-19.

In multiple types of organizations including education, research shows effective leadership is the catalyst to develop, maintain, and instill success within the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Current novice administrators face challenges they may not have anticipated in their preservice preparation programs (Hayes et al., 2021). By capturing the lived experiences of novice principals during this critical time, identifying their personal growth in leadership competencies, and their perception of their self-efficacy, one may contribute to current research and provide a foundation for further principal preparation that leads to a more successful educational environment for students, especially during a time of crisis. Only a few studies, such as Hu, He, and Zhou (2020), Bajaba et al. (2021), and Yuan, Ye, and Zhong (2021), have dived deeper into the elements of effective leadership during this unprecedented time of a crisis.

Problem Statement

Multiple research studies have been conducted on the necessary skills for effective school leadership (Barkman, 2015; Chitpin, 2020; Gulmez & Isik, 2020; Mahfouz & Gordon, 2021; Norqvist & Ärlestig, 2021; Sebastian, Allensworth, Wiedermann, Hochbein, & Cunningham, 2019; Wang, 2021), along with the importance of the role of the principal to drive student achievement. Research suggests one of the fastest ways to negatively impact student growth is through the constant turnover of leadership (Levin et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2020; M. Miller, 2009). Principals are leaving their positions within the first 3 years at a rate of 15% to 30% (Bayar, 2016; Dhuey & Smith, 2014). Assuming principals remain in their schools for some length of time, their actions are likely to affect student outcomes (Levin et al., 2020; Meyer et al., 2020; M. Miller, 2009). Research exists on the successes and challenges of principals in rural areas (Hayes et al., 2021; Preston & Barnes, 2017; Preston et al., 2014). Wiczorek and Manard (2018) even discussed the challenges centered on instructional leadership for novice rural principals. However, little research addresses the rural novice principal, their experiences during a crisis, and how their leadership evolved during this crisis, especially around their perceived self-efficacy beliefs.

Novice principals within their first 3 years on the job were faced with the task of acclimating to their new leadership role and meeting the needs of their community. Additionally, they were given the responsibility to lead during a time of a high degree of uncertainty and ambiguity centered around the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2020). From the onset of concern in early 2020, through the spring shutdown and finally to reopening the 2020-2021 school year, novice principals were faced with the same

multiple challenges as seasoned leaders, but with little to no experience and varied levels of self-efficacy.

The problem is rural, novice principals entered into their role and were expected to develop their leadership competencies along with addressing the added stress and pressures of a global pandemic with little to no time to gain experience. Novice principals are entering into their role with their highest levels of self-efficacy (Fisher, 2014) but leaving the profession at high rates within the first 5 years of their principalships (Meyer et al., 2020). Rural novice principals in the State of Missouri were at varied levels of ability as educational leaders during a national pandemic and many were considered first responders to this national crisis (Osmond-Johnson, Campbell, & Pollock, 2020). The stress of a global emergency caused all principals to shift their job responsibilities (Pollack, 2020; Superville, 2020) and created considerable challenges for school district leaders during the pandemic known as COVID-19 (Harris & Jones, 2020).

Exploring the lived experiences during a national pandemic of these novice principals through a qualitative phenomenological study could help expand the current research. This may include leading through a crisis and potentially impacting the preparation and further professional development of principals in the future. By identifying which resources and competencies rural novice leaders found most impactful on their leadership evolution, this research may help to enhance preparation programs and potentially decrease the number of principals leaving within or after the first 3 years.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify the lived experiences of novice principals during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural districts across

the State of Missouri and using Bandura's SET gather an understanding of how their leadership evolved and decisions were made during a time of crisis. At this stage in the research, novice principals are defined as principals that had been in their position for fewer than 3 years. The COVID-19 pandemic was generally defined as an illness caused by a novel coronavirus, now called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV), which was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, and which quickly spread, causing a worldwide pandemic (Dardas, Khalaf, Nabolsi, Nassar, & Halasa, 2020; Kavrayici, 2021). Knowing this information may help expand the research on how to prepare future leaders for these unprecedented leadership opportunities and hopefully improve the retention of novice principals in the future. There is little to no research that examines rural novice principals' experiences during a crisis.

The context for this research was determined from the lived experiences of principals during the 2019-2020 academic year prior to the school closures in the spring of 2020, during the closure, and during the 2020-2021 school year. More specifically this study examined the personal experiences, decision making, and foundations of leadership growth in rural district administrators in the state of Missouri who were in their first 3 years of principalship. Using Bandura's SET and the MLDS's emerging principal competencies the researcher examined common themes from participants and identified ways to contribute to the lack of literature in this area. This was done with a goal of sharing a broader perspective on how to better prepare and assist novice principals when entering rural communities.

Research Questions

How did the leadership of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri evolve during the crisis of COVID-19?

- a. What leadership behaviors and skills did rural, novice principals identify as crucial for leading and learning during COVID-19?
- b. What support systems did rural, novice principals identify as most impactful for leading and learning during COVID-19?
- c. What unexpected obstacles did rural, novice principals encounter during COVID-19 that impeded their building's vision?
- d. What leadership strengths did rural, novice principals identify within themselves following COVID-19?
- e. What were the perceptions of rural, novice principals regarding their ability to lead and learn during COVID-19?

Significance of the Study

Current educational research on the COVID-19 phenomenon has centered around distance learning and instructional methods (Borup, Jensen, Archambault, Short, & Graham, 2020; Chennamsetti, 2020; Ellis, Steadman, & Mao, 2020; Huber & Helm, 2020; Kavrayıcı & Kesim, 2021). The current research on educational leadership during COVID-19 has focused on leadership decision making and ethical dilemmas (Harris & Jones, 2020; Houpp, 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021), Little research exists on the skills needed to be an effective leader at this time (Bajaba et al., 2021). Research on novice principals leadership has been conducted in urban schools (Spillane & Lee, 2014) and in rural schools (Bayar, 2016; Wiczorek & Manard, 2018,) but there is limited research in

the area of crisis leadership evolution, especially during a pandemic. This study's phenomenological focus expands educational research on how leadership evolved for rural novice principals in the state of Missouri during the crisis of COVID-19. By using Heidegger's (1927/2011) phenomenological framework for methodology, the researcher worked to capture what resources and experiences helped rural novice principals gain self-efficacy and grow their leadership competencies. This research may provide a more detailed perspective into the experiences educational leaders faced during the pandemic known as COVID-19. With a better understanding of what novice leaders identified as beneficial to their success and personal growth, educational preparation programs and districts may be able to provide a more beneficial developmental process or professional development that will help solve the problem of novice principals being inadequately prepared to lead during a time of uncertainty and crisis. In a more global perspective, by providing documentation of lived events for these leaders during an unprecedented time in history, future researchers may gather a better understanding of the event known as COVID-19 as a whole (Peoples, 2021).

COVID-19 is a worldwide pandemic educational leaders of today have never faced (Flaxman et al., 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021). School leaders were faced with leading through ever-changing and turbulent times, acting as the guide for how to navigate the new normal for teachers, parents, students, and staff (Huck & Zhang, 2021; Weiner, Francois, Stone-Johnson, & Childs, 2021). During these challenging times, timing is critical; principals and educational leaders must assess the situation quickly and take appropriate action (Hayes et al., 2021). Many decisions needed to be made quickly and with little to no information or guidance from federal and state organizations (Harris

& Jones, 2020). Like all principals, novice principals in rural districts became key decision makers in this process. With little experience they were expected to make quick decisions, unlike anything they may have learned during their principal preparation program (Harris & Jones, 2020; Pollack, 2020; Superville, 2020). The recording of these experiences and the impact on the school leader's educational environment may be important to future leaders and researchers to examine the growth of novice leaders during a challenging time.

Definition of Key Terms

Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19). Disease caused by severe respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). A novel virus first officially reported in Wuhan, China, by the World Health Organization (Dardas et al., 2020; Khan, 2021).

Lived Experience. “The term used in phenomenological studies to emphasize the importance of individual experiences of people as conscious human beings” (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 314).

Novice Principal. One who has been employed in the role of site [building] principal in the amount of time [<3 years] (Gentilucci, Denti, & Guaglianone, 2013).

Phenomenological Study. “This type of study describes the common meaning of experiences of a phenomenon (topic or concept) for several individuals. In this type of qualitative study, the researcher reduces the experiences to a central meaning or the ‘essence’ of the experience” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 314).

Phenomenon. “The central concept being examined by the phenomenologist. It is the concept being experienced by subject in a study, which may include psychological concepts such as grief, anger, or love” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 314).

Rural District. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021) classified schools into four categories: Urban, Suburban, Town, and Rural. For this study both rural and town district classifications were included as “rural.” They present similar characteristics and are more than 5 miles or less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area (NCES, 2021).

Limitations

All research faces limitations. Limitations affect the research study but are not controlled by the researcher (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This study was limited by the following:

1. Random sampling could not occur.
2. The sample size was small due to the nature of the research and time constraints.
3. The participants in this study reported their personal experiences from recall and based on time since the experiences, thus information may have been limited.
4. The inexperience of the novice researcher could have been a factor in data collection and analysis.
5. The design of this research was interviews, which limited the amount of information that could be covered.
6. In a qualitative study, participant and researcher bias may be a factor. In this study, the researcher was a novice principal during the time of COVID-19.

7. Novice principals may have different experiences in preparation programs and experiences prior to entering their role.
8. The comfortability of the participant and their personal level of anxiety regarding COVID-19 may have played a factor in data and experiences they were willing to share.

Delimitations

Delimitations help the researcher to set guidelines or boundaries for their study. It helps to provide a more streamlined process, allowing the study to be narrowed to a significant topic, controlled by the researcher (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The researcher set the following delimitations to narrow this study:

1. Participants were only selected from rural districts across the state of Missouri that participated in the MLDS Emerging Leader Program.
2. Participants selected were in their first 3 years of principalship.
3. Selecting Bandura's Self Efficacy Theory as the theoretical Framework.
4. A narrow sample size of participants was identified from a specific population of school leaders. These delimitations included community size, building grades served, and years of service of the principal. This was to address only the experiences of novice principals.
5. By selecting qualitative as a research design and selecting interviews as a method, the researcher delimited the responses that may have been collected. This method was chosen to create a personal aspect and more open-ended questions with the opportunity for follow-up.

6. The researcher selected a specific research problem and focus. Responses were targeted to these research questions.

Assumptions

Assumptions for this study were as follows:

1. It was assumed participants responded open and honestly to questions provided.
2. It was assumed all participants had experienced similar challenges and opportunities for growth during COVID-19.
3. It was assumed participants had the same understanding of efficacy and leadership skills.
4. It was assumed novice principals were provided with support during COVID-19.
5. It was assumed principals entered their role with similar experiences in principal preparation programs but with varied times.

Design Controls

The researcher aimed to capture the lived experiences and how leadership evolved of rural, novice principals during the global pandemic of COVID-19. While COVID-19 was experienced by all districts across the State of Missouri, there were many different perspectives and factors that affected the lived experiences and impacted the leadership evolution of novice leaders. By better understanding the experiences of rural, novice principals, the researcher aimed to gather additional knowledge that would contribute to current research about the preparation of school leaders.

In this qualitative phenomenological research study, nine Missouri rural, novice principals were selected that met the researcher's established criteria for the study. To control limitations presented within this study, the researcher selected K-12 principals from the participant pool located within multiple regions across the state using the Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDCs) as designated areas. By using the RPDCs, a more accurate description of the lived experiences of the targeted population was given. Since one of the limitations is no random sampling, by reaching out to principals across the state the data pool was broadened. Districts were all similar in size and identified as a rural district. All principals willing to participate worked in a public K-12 school and were within their first 3 years of principalship. Background demographics were collected to identify the variety of principal preparation experience as well as provide a foundation for potential opportunities within the study. Participants were sent a request to participate via email and willingly accepted the invitation to participate in the study. The researcher was sure to provide a detailed description of the research purpose and criteria, so participants had a clear understanding of the topic to be discussed and welcomed questions in an effort to calm nerves, anxiety, or concerns about the recall of this period. The intent was to set participants at ease when discussing the events of COVID-19. Participants were able to select an online platform or a face-to-face interview. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed and coded. As confidentiality was ensured to all participants, it was assumed that participants' answers were truthful and to the best of their ability to recall. Participants had the opportunity to view transcription and provide additional clarity or information to their personal satisfaction, addressing the potential limitation of the inability to recall information that happened

over the last few years since the events took place. Since the researcher was new to this level of a research, study, a university supervisor and doctoral committee were established to guide the process. Additionally, the researcher participated in multiple interviews prior to conducting participant interviews. The final limitation, the potential bias of the researcher because the researcher was a novice, rural principal, was addressed by ensuring no personal motives, nor was the researcher's current district included with the study. Interview questions were created to be open ended and not leading.

The study was delimited by the small population sample set by the researcher's criteria. Invitations were sent to all novice principals that were in their first three years who participated in the Emerging Leadership professional development program through MLDS. The Emerging Leadership Program is designed for principals in their first 2 years of principalship. The MLDS is a program presented through the RPDC. Since the RPDC is located across all districts in the state of Missouri and any school leader may participate, this provided quick access and detailed specifics of the participants across the state and a focus on common language.

Due to the researcher being novice, attempts were made to mitigate effects from presented limitations and delimitations. However, the selection of using Bandura's SET as the guiding blueprint remained as the design of the study. The researcher worked with university supervisors to ensure reliability and validity as much as possible. A variety of open-ended questions and time for further reflection of participants was encouraged with the goal of removing personal bias from the conversation. It was assumed that participants understood the definition of self-efficacy and leadership skills since they were provided to them in their initial documentation. In addition, it was assumed that

participants experienced the events that unfolded during COVID-19 and participated in the MLDS Emerging Leadership program and were assigned a mentor throughout the process. It is also assumed that there were other support systems and resources available to them during this time. It was assumed that all participants answered truthfully and honestly to their fullest ability since confidentiality was assured at the beginning of the research process in the research explanation documentation.

Summary

During the pandemic known as COVID-19, teachers, principals, and educational leaders were saddled with increased job-related stress levels that were one of the highest for working adults (Steiner & Woo, 2021). Increased demands and elevated stress levels are a factor causing one fifth of principals to report they planned to leave their jobs after the 2020-2021 school year (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2021). If they did, this rate would be higher than pre-COVID turnover rates (Goldring, Taie, & O’Rear, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2021). Early research reports suggest that only about 6% of principals left the workforce nationally during this time (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2021). However, according to a study completed by Diliberti and Schwartz (2021) rural principals had the largest increase in turnover rates following the 2020-2021 school year at 8%, an increase over pre-COVID rates by about 5%.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify the lived experiences of novice principals during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural districts across the State of Missouri and using Bandura’s SET, gather an understanding of how their leadership evolved and decisions were made during a time of crisis. Bandura’s SET guided this study by helping categorize the lived experiences, resources, and tools rural,

novice principals needed to build their self-efficacy and grow their leadership competencies through a pandemic. By understanding how the participants' leadership journey evolved and the experiences of novice leaders during this global pandemic, future researchers may be able to help prepare novice leaders to adjust their leadership style during challenging situations. The aim of this study was to update and contribute to the research that exists on novice rural principals' leadership and fill the gap of how leadership evolves during a national pandemic or crisis. By capturing the lived experiences of these leaders, identifying the contributing factors used to build their leadership competencies, and using Bandura's SET, the researcher sought to obtain a better idea of the development needs novice leaders may have when faced with the challenges of a global pandemic, especially in smaller rural districts, where resources and experiences may be limited (Spillane & Lee, 2014), and gain a more detailed account of the experiences of rural, novice leaders during the events of COVID-19.

To allow the reader to gain further understanding, this study presents five chapters. Chapter Two will provide a comprehensive literature review of the topics introduced in Chapter One organized by thematically in the following order: self-efficacy and the role of principal, self-efficacy and challenging times, principal burnout, turnover, and retention, self-efficacy and the role of rural principals, self-efficacy and the role of novice principals, and finally self-efficacy and leading during challenging times. Additionally, further explanation of the theoretical framework of Bandura's SET will be provided. In Chapter Three the researcher described the methodology of the phenomenological study and steps taken to conduct this research. Results of the semi-

structured interviews were analyzed and shared in detail in Chapter Four. Conclusions of findings and recommendations for further research were presented in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The pandemic known as COVID-19 disrupted almost every aspect of normal life starting in the early months of 2020, including the world of education (Coetrain, 2020; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Educational leaders were forced to close schools (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). These school closures were immediately felt by parents, students, and teachers and it began an unprecedented chapter in U.S. K-12 schooling (Money & Pacifici, 2020). Schools struggled to address opportunities such as virtual learning, meeting families' needs, and the social emotional toll the pandemic took on individuals and their employees (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). One characteristic educational leaders needed to support their decision making when facing multiple concerns was that of self-efficacy (Abernathy, 2018; Money & Pacifici, 2020). Self-efficacy has a positive impact on an individual's leadership abilities and school leadership within an organization (Morgan, 2018).

Leading during a crisis is challenging and almost impossible for principals to prepare for in their educational preparation programs (Money & Pacifici, 2020). To be successful, principals need to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy in order to address the challenges that come their way and make decisions during a crisis (Money & Pacifici, 2020). Having confidence in your decision-making process during times of crisis greatly affects the outcomes of those decisions (Bandura, 1994). Individuals can be proactive, self-organizing, self-reflective, and responsible for their own personal development (Bandura, 1986; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012). They have the needed skills to think for

themselves and regulate their emotions, and can use what they think and feel to guide their behaviors (Bandura, 1986; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012).

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory

Bandura's (1986, 1997) SET emphasizes an individual's belief in their ability or capability to succeed in a specific role, task, or situation. Bandura (1994) further explained, "Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave" (p. 71). In education, principal self-efficacy may include beliefs in one's ability to raise student achievement scores, balance a building budget, and provide quality professional development to staff, especially if these are areas in which the principal feels confident (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Self-efficacy is not believing that you are a likable leader, wonderful with children, an excellent facilitator, or talented in the task of budgeting. These overall judgements align with self-concepts and self-esteem and can indirectly influence a leader's motivation (Seifert & Sutton, 2009). One's self-efficacy is determined by the individual and at times may contrast with their ability level (Bandura, 1997). Significant inconsistencies in these two areas may cause a motivational problem for the educational leader (Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Seifert & Sutton, 2009).

Self-efficacy theory is one fundamental part of Bandura's SCT, which suggests all human beings are competent and capable of being successful, if they hold self-efficacy and are provided with the right experiences to obtain their desired goals (Bandura, 1977). One's sense of motivation, prosperity, and success can be influenced by their personal self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Seifert & Sutton, 2009). Self-efficacy alone does not determine success, but one's behavior. It is an individual's behavior that indirectly affects their performance (Bandura, 1977). Individuals cannot

just believe in their ability to achieve their desired target; their self-efficacy grows over time using two different methods of learning that are relevant when learning a new task (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1997) called these two ways of learning “declarative knowledge” and “procedural knowledge” (p. 25).

Declarative knowledge is fact-based knowledge obtained mostly through education prior to being applied through action (Bandura, 1997). Obtaining background knowledge is important, since it provides a foundation for further learning and can be called upon when the individual needs to apply this knowledge in a real-life situation (Bandura, 1997). Declarative knowledge may be applied in a specific situation which will help the individual gain procedural knowledge. Procedural knowledge is acquired from experiences and over time may become automatic and can be completed with little effort (Bandura, 1997). With effort, individuals who use both their declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge routinely, even while struggling, will continue to build their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Not every person perceives their level of self-efficacy the same way, nor do they obtain their level of efficacy in the same manner. Individuals use outside resources to build on their self-efficacy in different areas over time (Bandura, 1997). To break it down even further, Bandura (1977) and Pajares and Schunk (2001) identified four main sources of influence an individual can use to build their self-efficacy.

Mastery Experience

The most effective and influential way to build self-efficacy is through the process of mastery experience (Bandura, 1986, 1994; Pajares, 2002). Mastery experiences are obtained through taking action to complete tasks or activities and self-

reflecting on personal performance and how it affected the bigger picture (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2002). Outcomes interpreted as successful build one's self-efficacy and those that are failures may lower it (Bandura, 1986; Seifert & Sutton, 2009). If success is experienced at first and quickly, then an individual will most likely not be influenced by a few failures. On the contrary, if failure in a specific area is achieved before an individual achieves some level of success, it can cause them to establish a low self-efficacy and in turn the individual will shy away from this type of activity in the future (Bandura, 1986; Seifert & Sutton, 2009). More simply stated, the events and actions of an individual are evaluated by that individual for their level of effectiveness and the perceived results help to either improve the self-efficacy of the individual or decrease their perception of ability level (Pajares, 2002).

Vicarious Experience

Educational leaders who may have the opportunity to see other leaders like them in action, achieving success, may boost their own personal self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Hernandez, 2019). This way of strengthening and building self-efficacy is known as vicarious experiences. Vicarious experiences are provided observing other individuals be successful (Bandura, 1977; Hernandez, 2019). If individuals have limited knowledge of how to do something, are uncertain about their personal ability to complete it, and have the opportunity to view others' success, then they can build their self-efficacy through vicarious experience (Pajares, 2002). Observing another person's success leads an individual to believe that they too can experience success in the same areas (Bandura, 1994). At times, leaders may look for individuals who pose the traits they feel they need to be successful and will compare themselves to them (Bandura, 1986; Seifert & Sutton,

2009). These are often role models and/or mentors that provide the individual with an example or a significant influence in how they wish to see themselves lead (Pajares, 2002). Role models and/or mentors may play an important role in the direction an individual decides to take based on their level of success and the similarities between the mentor and the mentee (Bandura, 1986).

Another aspect of vicarious experience comes in the form of peers or peer review. What dominant peers in one's educational circle value tend to become the values of others, especially individuals working to build their self-efficacy (Pajares, 2002). Social comparisons in and outside of their network become important to individuals and often become the basis for their personal leadership platform (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2002). When it comes to failure, individuals who closely relate to others and believe they have the same ability level will question their ability even more when they see someone like them fail (Pajares, 2002). If the individual believes they are superior in ability, then the failure of others will not affect them (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2002).

Social Persuasion

The third source of influence an individual may use to build their self-efficacy is social persuasion. Social persuasion may be easily compared to receiving feedback highlighting personal capabilities from a reputable source (Bandura, 1986). Not as strong an influencer as mastery or vicarious experiences, social persuasion, most likely verbal, may persuade people to believe that they possess the capability and tools necessary to be successful in a desired role or activity (Seifert & Sutton, 2009). With the goal of personal improvement and not success over others, individuals receive praise and apply more effort to an activity, gaining additional knowledge and experience to improve their self-

efficacy (Bandura, 1997). If there are multiple people whom the individual respects who provide positive social persuasion and encouragement, the level of one's self-efficacy will increase significantly (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004).

The experiences of social persuasion start early in lives of individuals; most often adults may remember a time when something was said to them as a child that had a profound effect on them in their future (Pajares, 2002). The praise given must not be empty or superficial or the individual will know, and it will have no bearing on their personal self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). A successful vicarious experience cultivates not only one's belief in their ability but also allows the individual to envision success within the task (Pajares, 2002). However, most often negative persuasions have a greater effect on the individual's personal perception of self-efficacy than positive persuasions (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2002). It is far easier to believe the negative than the positive if individuals do not have the resilience or ability to withstand the negative judgments (Pajares, 2002).

Emotional and Physiological States

The fourth and final way of developing and improving one's self-efficacy is through identifying a thorough understanding of their personal emotional and physiological states (Pajares, 2002; Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Mood state, stress levels, anxiety, fatigue, and arousal are all indicators of an individual's efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1986). A strong emotional reaction to a task or experience may alter one's perception of their ability to succeed in a task (Seifert & Sutton, 2009). If individuals feel stress or anxiety at the thought of completing a certain task, then this can affect their personal self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) stated,

It is not the sheer intensity of emotional and physical reactions that is important, rather how they are perceived and interpreted. People who have a high sense of efficacy are likely to view their state of affective arousal as an energizing facilitator of performance, whereas those who are beset by self-doubts regard their arousal as a debilitator. (p. 71)

An individual's self-efficacy is the perception of the amount of difficulty they think they can surpass. If the activity or task is easily completed by the individual, then their level of self-efficacy tends to increase with each opportunity to complete or with each opportunity to observe another's success (Bandura, 1977). Measuring one's perceived self-efficacy should be done across multiple activities with a gradual increase in facing adversities along the way (Bandura, 1997).

Individuals cannot rely on self-efficacy alone. Having a high sense of self-efficacy does not guarantee success or a positive outcome to a task or experience (Pajares, 1997). Pajares (1997) supported elements of Bandura's SET, however, since people have a varied belief of what self-efficacy is, he saw a challenge in researchers' ability to assess levels of self-efficacy. Seifert and Sutton (2009) and Fisher (2020) cautioned researchers that Bandura's SET emphasized that one's beliefs affect motivation and performance but did not specifically address which beliefs or tasks are most successful or gain the biggest return. Bandura (1986) noted that even though individuals have a high sense of self-efficacy and the ability to achieve success, they may lack the needed supplies, resources, and/or equipment to achieve the desired results. When approaching a new task, an individual's performance from a similar task may come into play, and their self-efficacy beliefs about the success of that task may be misleading (Seifert & Sutton, 2009). Similar to confidence, individuals may have too much confidence or too much self-efficacy and not succeed in the task before them (Seifert &

Sutton, 2009). Individuals may think just because they were successful in one area it will transfer to another, and that is not always the case. If they do not achieve the same desired result, it may cause a level of stress and depression, deterring the individual from attempting the same type of experience again (Bandura, 1986).

High self-efficacy sounds as if it is a necessary trait that all leaders must have to be successful with limited opportunity for challenges (Seifert & Sutton, 2009). However, the effects of self-efficacy may be more complex than individuals think. Leaders may choose tasks that are more familiar to them or those in which they feel most confident of succeeding and avoid others (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). As stated, leaders may perceive their skill and ability level to be higher than the actual task or on the contrary, they may not be confident in their ability, resulting in low self-efficacy so they may avoid spending time on a particular task. For example, Bolman and Deal (2008) encouraged leaders to use multiframe thinking when leading an organization. However, if a leader has low self-efficacy when it comes to being politically savvy, such as speaking with key stakeholders, advocating for resources, and addressing conflict, they may not focus their time in this area as they do not believe they can be successful (Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Seifert & Sutton, 2009). The next effect of high self-efficacy may be spending too much time on or being tenacious about a specific task (Seifert & Sutton, 2009). When an individual believes they have the ability and skill to complete a task, they will be persistent in their efforts to complete it, even if they face several challenges along the way. Finally high self-efficacy may also improve an individual's ability to manage difficult situations or regain motivation after surviving failure (Seifert & Sutton, 2009).

Self-Efficacy and Role of the Principal

Educational leaders, such as school principals, perceived self-efficacy determines where they spend their time and influences the decisions made daily (Bandura, 1997). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2005) researched the components school principals use to acquire or grow their self-efficacy. Relationships were not determined regarding demographic variables such as race, school setting (urban, suburban, rural), school level (elementary, middle, high), or socioeconomic status of the students (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2005). The role of the principal may be defined in many ways, but researchers agree it is the most vital role in determining overall school effectiveness and leading change for school improvement (Day et al., 2011; Fullan, 2016; Heck & Halliger, 2009; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Sebastian et al., 2018). Principals experience a variety of tasks and responsibilities that are ever-changing, competing for their limited time and attention (Harris & Jones, 2020; Spillane & Lee, 2014) and contributing to the growth of their self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2005).

In 1996 the first set of national administrator standards was presented to 45 states and the District of Columbia by The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, (Bertrand & Copeland, 2019). These standards identified a framework for principal expectations, focusing on theories of leadership and competing managerial priorities (Catano & Stronge, 2007; National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015) with limited focus on instructional leadership and student achievement (Donaldson, Mavrogordato, Dougherty, Ghanem, & Youngs, 2021). Over the years education has continued to evolve and with that so has the need for updated principal

standards. Revisions were made in 2008 and most recently in 2015, The NPBEA provided updated professional standards for educational leaders. These standards broadened the scope of responsibility by including items identified in current research that would provide a more well-rounded leader, meeting not only the managerial and instructional needs of buildings but encouraging principals to spend time establishing significant relationships with families and school communities, and encouraging focus on hot topics like school equity, visions, and innovation (Superville, 2017).

Currently each state determines its leadership standards, credentialing process, and training expectations for school leaders (Crawford, 2019; Donaldson et al., 2021). Some states moved more quickly than others in adopting the national standards, most notably Delaware and Nebraska (Superville, 2017). In the state of Missouri, educational leaders and state officials moved quickly, making it one of the first states to adopt the new principal leadership standards in 2010 (Donaldson et al., 2021), adopting modifications in 2015, and working with universities to rethink principal preparation programs (Superville, 2017). The standards set in 2015 are more student centered with a greater focus on student success and educational growth (Superville, 2017). In 2014, leaders at the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) compiled key state stakeholders to address the criteria for principal evaluation, development, and mentoring programs to better support leaders and improve student achievement and principal retention (Bertrand & Copeland, 2019; Liang & Slotnik, 2020). Since the program development of principal preparation and evaluation were left up to the states (Crawford, 2019; Donaldson et al., 2021), the state of Missouri stakeholders developed the MLDS to assist educational leaders in their leadership journey starting at preservice

leadership up to many years of leadership experience (Bertrand & Copeland, 2019). Missouri Leadership Development Systems currently has four levels of leadership development, starting with aspiring (preservice), emerging (first few years in role), developing (three or more years in position), and transformational (full developed to lead schools) leadership (Bertrand & Copeland, 2019; Liang & Slotnik, 2020).

Transformational leadership is developed over time and focuses on the educational leader's ethical and moral ability to motivate others to accomplish skills and tasks higher than their perceived self-efficacy level (Bandura, 1997; Burns, 1979).

Educational organizations need leaders to guide their organization and provide a vision for the future; without individuals with strong leadership skills in place, many organizations fail or lose their way (Owusu-Agyeman, 2019; Ruben & Melan, 2019).

Educational leaders strive to develop effective leadership skills; many training programs across the United States encourage the development of transformational leadership, encouraging leadership candidates to increase their ability to empower subordinates to lead and complete duties (Owusu-Agyeman, 2019). In traditional leadership, clear goals and expectations of work are defined by the leader; the transformational leader creates an environment where the subordinates strive for autonomy, personal growth, and a focus on obtaining achievements that exceed the expectations of others (Mert & Ozgenel, 2020).

Transformational leadership is the goal for educational leaders set by educational institutions across the nation. In the state of Missouri, the MLDS model supports principals over multiple years as they grow into a transformational leader, with the goal to further improve student achievement within their buildings (Bertrand & Copeland, 2019; Liang & Slotnik, 2020; Slotnik & Liang, 2019). The 10 national standards

(Mission, Vision, and Core Values; Ethics and Professional Norms; Equity and Cultural Responsiveness; Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Community of Care and Support for Students; Professional Capacity of School Personnel; Professional Community for Teachers and Staff; Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community; Operations and Management; and School Improvement) have been combined into five targeted domains and each of these domains is addressed at each level of the MLDS program including the Transformational Leader (Bertrand & Copeland, 2019; Liang & Slotnik, 2020). The five domains are designed to help educational leaders improve teaching and learning within their organization and have been identified as the Missouri Principal Leadership Competencies and are the recommendation for principal evaluations (Bertrand & Copeland, 2019). The five domains are Visionary Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Managerial Leadership, Relational Leadership, and Innovative Leadership.

Visionary Leadership

Leadership competencies aligned to visionary leadership focus on inspiring others to have a shared vision and effective communication of the mission, vision, and core values, establishing systems for continuous improvement through data collection, and ensuring policies and procedures are equitable and cultural fits for the community (Liang & Slotnik, 2020; Slotnik & Liang, 2019). A shared vision is essential to the success of a learning organization since it is the guiding force behind what the organization wishes to accomplish (Senge, 2006). Senge (2006) explained the importance of everyone having the same vision and when it aligns to an individual's personal vision, it can uplift and inspire an organization, leading to great change. Kotter (2007) also emphasized the

importance of creating a shared vision in his eight-step process for leading change. By establishing a guiding coalition and communicating the shared vision through all available means, multiple times over and over, it will move an organization forward (Kotter, 2007). Becoming a transformational leader takes time and practice (Burns, 1979). Research from Cobanoglu and Yurek (2018) revealed that administrators' self-efficacy beliefs and their transformational leadership styles are reflective of each other. If a leader has a high sense of self-efficacy, they tend to see themselves as a transformational leader more so than a transactional leader. In summary, transformational leadership is the shift in leadership from the principal directly focusing on initiatives related to school-wide goals, instruction, curriculum, and student achievement, to working more with staff to decide on shared goals and initiatives, while working diligently to build the capacity of his or her staff (Salazar, 2020).

Instructional Leadership

Transformational leaders exhibit their instructional leadership abilities by spending time within classrooms and working collaboratively with others to monitor curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher performance (Salazar, 2020; White, 2021). The principal has been identified as the most important instructional leader within the building (Salazar, 2020). The practice of these skills will build a principal's sense of self-efficacy through declarative knowledge (Bandura, 1997). Kythreotis, Pashiardis, and Kyriakides (2010) found that principals' instructional leadership had a direct effect on students' academic achievement and provided evidence of a correlation between principals' sense of collective efficacy and school improvement and effectiveness. With this data, we may assume that higher levels of self-efficacy among principals will have a

positive influence on students' academic achievements (Goddard, Goddard, Sook Kim, & Miller, 2015; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Building principals enter the profession to influence student performance through providing instructional leadership, however, when stepping into the role, the wide range of managerial tasks and unpredictable events make it challenging to find time to devote to instructional leadership (LeFevre & Robinson, 2015; Salazar, 2020). While aspiring principals are working to increase their declarative knowledge in principal preparation programs, the importance of the role of instructional leader has been presented, encouraged, and emphasized (Spillane & Lee, 2014; Salazar, 2020).

The foundation of instructional leadership is built on the establishment of trust between the principal and their staff (Huang, Hochbein, & Simons, 2020; White, 2021). As an instructional leader, the principal is responsible for hiring, evaluating, and mentoring teachers, selecting, and implementing curriculum, and managing student discipline (M. Miller, 2009; White, 2021). Continuing the successful accomplishments of the past while implementing changes to impact the future is a necessity for instructional leaders who are no longer the expert in all content and instructional methods (Boies & Fiset, 2019; Sanford et al., 2019; White, 2021). Well-developed trust and the facilitation of growth for teachers is established through observations and evaluations, professional learning communities, and professional development opportunities (White, 2021). Teachers and staff benefit from clear expectations presented by their educational leaders and appreciate the focus on setting goals for improvement (Paufler, King, & Zhu, 2020), especially during their evaluations (White, 2021). For professional development or instructional changes to not disrupt trust within an organization, principals are

encouraged to use professional learning communities as a guiding format (Berg, 2020). Maintaining a strong positive culture while implementing change or introducing new concepts can decrease the resistance some teachers may feel when presented with new educational expectations or concepts (Antinluoma, Ilomaki, Lahti-Nuuttila & Toom, 2018).

Instructional leaders focus on building a foundation of trust with their staff and teachers, establishing a culture of growth and opportunity, and influence achievement through an equitable mindset (White, 2021). Tasks they are expected to complete are endless, but centered on driving instruction, finding, developing, maintaining, and evaluating staff (Huang et al., 2020; White, 2021). These tasks are vital to the success of the school environment but may take significant time to establish and align closely with the expectations presented within the Managerial Leadership domain, which encompasses all elements of the daily operations, systems, and procedures a school needs to be successful. Balancing these two leadership roles can be challenging for many principals (Hohner & Riveros, 2017; Jordan, 2020).

Managerial Leadership

Aspiring principals perceive managerial tasks during their training program as composed of tasks related to pedagogy, general managerial tasks, and tasks pertaining to emotion and interpersonal relationships (Fisher, 2020). These tasks are often a focus of professional principal preparation programs and allow aspiring principals to build self-efficacy in this domain (Fisher, 2011). School principals are also administrative leaders who have a variety of managerial tasks which may need to be accomplished daily (Hoyer & Sparks, 2018; Jordan, 2020). Tasks may include school budget projection and

management, student discipline, and managing and maintaining school facilities for safety and longevity (Jordan, 2020; A. Maxwell & Riley, 2017; M. Miller, 2009). For educational buildings to be successful and learning to occur, managerial tasks must be completed correctly and in a timely manner (Jefferies, 2019; McCormick, 2019). In many rural school settings, principals are expected to do more with less resources; these resources may include personnel such as maintenance, custodians, counselors, special education partners, and noncertified staff that can help to ease the workload of managerial tasks (Mette et al., 2017). Having working relationships and partnerships with key stakeholders to accomplish tasks is vital (Martin, 2020). Missouri Leadership Development System stressed the importance of identifying and implementing operating systems, overseeing personnel, and ensuring the equitable and strategic use of resources while identifying time as the most needed resource. Missouri Leadership Development System (2018) aimed to not only teach effective systems, practices, and procedures for principals but also expand principals' knowledge and skills, allowing them the ability to delegate tasks and meet demands through shared leadership, giving back time for focused instructional leadership, and building relationships with staff and key stakeholders.

Relational Leadership

The success of an organization is no longer measured simply by its financial status, but with its commitment to and its treatment of its employees, customers, and communities, and the organization's overall impact on the society (Branson & Marra, 2019). Highly effective leaders are not only visionary but are also able to work with a diverse population of individuals collaboratively rather than exerting their power in a top-down approach (Smit, 2017). Relational leaders focus on a shared power structure and

lead in a caring manner (Shapiro & Gross, 2013), looking at the world from a more global perspective considering individuals' personal feelings and perceptions (Mert & Ozgenel, 2020; Smit, 2017). Establishing more than a surface-level relationship with key stakeholders, including students, teachers, superintendents, parents, school boards, and the community, is essential for the success of the organization (Mert & Ozgenel, 2020; M. Miller, 2009). As leaders, principals are expected to educate and encourage others to meet or exceed the goals of the organization. If organizations can establish positive relationships with their employees, invest in their skills, and employees feel valued they are more likely to increase the effort given in their role and in turn improve student achievement (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Branson & Marra, 2019; Mert & Ozgenel, 2020). Creating an environment that is rich in teamwork and mutually beneficial to all students, staff, parents, and community is considered the essence of good leadership (Branson & Marra, 2019).

Innovative Leadership

Educational leaders today who demonstrate the ability to balance multiple, competing demands and adjust their leadership to meet new challenges are known as creative and innovative leaders (Ariyani, Suyatno, & Zuhaery, 2021). Innovative leaders are change agents, applying new knowledge gained through professional growth and by being reflective practitioners to drive appropriate change within their organization (MLDS, 2018). For change to be successful, leadership decisions, ideas, and actions are driven by the principal and supported by all stakeholders (Ariyani et al., 2021). Kotter (2007) identified this as forming a guiding coalition. Educational leaders build a sense of community among this guiding coalition to share the change message and establish a safe

environment where employees can take risks (Sagnak, Kuruoz, Polat, & Soylu, 2015). For the environment to be innovative, employees must feel their work is meaningful, believe in their abilities, feel they have the power to act on their ideas, and believe they can impact the organization (Sagnak et al., 2015).

Self-Efficacy During Challenging Times

Actions and decisions made during challenging times are reflective of the school leader's personal self-efficacy beliefs (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). As principals face the challenging demands of their job, their sense of efficacy plays a vital role in how principals meet the expectations set for them (Money & Pacifici, 2020; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2005). Principals that exhibit a high level of self-efficacy display flexibility, persistence, and willingness to try new strategies and remain calm and confident showing resilience when experiencing setbacks (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2005). The role of the principal is multifaceted, and leaders routinely experience conflicts between providing instructional leadership and completing administrative and managerial tasks. The role of a principal is becoming more diverse (Levin et al., 2020; Spillane & Lee, 2014). The multitude of responsibilities, especially under MLDS's model of 32 competencies across five domains, requires the principal to prioritize tasks, work long hours, and accommodate multiple stakeholders (Grissom, Loeb, & Mitani, 2015; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Principals with high levels of self-efficacy are more prepared when these challenges arise and more likely to develop a positive attitude toward concerns because they believe they have more control over decisions and their ability to lead their organization to be successful (Dimmock & Hattie, 1996), especially during a crisis (Money & Pacifici, 2020).

Principal Burnout, Turnover, and Retention

Principals who struggle with self-efficacy beliefs face challenges using critical skills such as problem-solving, setting high expectations, and holding organizational members accountable, leading to lower performance with the organization (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Principal turnover is frequently experienced by school districts across the United States, which has been the case for multiple years (M. Miller, 2009; Shkurina, 2018). Increased workloads and higher demands are factors in increased stress of building principals, affecting them both physically and mentally (Mahfouz, 2018). Building principals carry the stress of establishing and maintaining a positive school culture along with the success of students (Levin & Bradley, 2019). They even carry the stress of meeting the growing needs of their staff and faculty (Levin, Bradley, & Scott, 2019). At times the demands of the job along with the tasks can seem unbearable for school leaders (Muir, 2018). Low levels of self-efficacy are one major reason principals choose to leave the education profession in addition to being a contributing factor to the performance and success of a school (Dimmock & Hattie, 1996). The more turnover a district faces, the more challenging it is to maintain or improve student achievement (Levin et al., 2020). On average student achievement starts declining approximately two years prior to the departure of the current principal and for the next two years during a transition to a new a principal, there is high teacher turnover and continuing decline of student performance (M. Miller, 2009). The average longevity of a principal in position is only about four years across the nation, and 1 in every 5 principals is leaving the profession annually (Levin et al., 2020). From heavy workload, barriers to quality professional development, low compensation, high-

stakes accountability, to limited resources and support there are many reasons principals are experiencing burnout (Levin et al., 2020; Mahfouz, 2018; Maness, 2021). Levin and Bradley (2019) and M. Miller (2009) suggested that principal turnover lowers teacher retention. The new principal is then responsible for selecting new teachers that most likely align to the new principal's goals and vision for the school.

In a study conducted prior to the pandemic, Meyer et al. (2020) identified retention, mobility, and attrition rates among school leaders in the states of Colorado, Missouri, and South Dakota. These researchers found on average 79% of administrators stayed in position after their first year, but that number dropped to an average of 53% after 3 years. In the state of Missouri first-year and third-year principal retention rates were higher than the three state averages, coming in at 82% and 56%, respectively (Meyer et al., 2020). In the state of Missouri for principals who stayed in the profession, 56% moved to a new district after their first year of principalship, and 64% moved after their third year in a position. Their findings also identified that on average about 4 out of 5 principals who left their school leadership position left the state's educational system altogether, with only a small percentage finding a role remaining in education (Meyer et al., 2020). Principals in districts with teacher salaries lower than the average \$39,139 were 138% more likely, more than twice as likely, to leave their role after the first 3 years in position than counterparts who were principals in districts with higher teacher pay. Additionally, principals in buildings with less than 220 students most often classified as rural districts were 122% more likely to leave after the first 3 years (Meyer et al., 2020). Retention data collected from 2019 to 2020 by Liang and Slotnik (2020) identified that principals involved in the MLDS were more likely to remain within their role in the state

of Missouri than those not enrolled in the program. Identifying the needs of educational leaders and preventing principal turnover is essential to the success of education and steps must be taken to address this concern (Levin & Bradley, 2019; Mahfouz, Greenberg, & Rodriguez, 2019).

Self-Efficacy and the Role of Rural Principals

In America, over 20% of school-aged students are being taught in rural schools, however little is known about their educational environment (Lavalley, 2018). Rural schools are usually a reflection of their community, small and located in remote area with a dense population, strong community ties, and isolated from larger urban areas (Bauch, 2001; Hansen, 2018; Hayes et al., 2021; Rye & Scott, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Compared to their urban counterparts, rural leaders have more of a variety of responsibilities (Preston et al., 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Rural school principals find they can make a stronger connection with their community, families, and students since they are smaller in numbers (Hayes et al., 2021; Manard, 2017; Renihan & Noonan, 2016; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). This is vital considering many small towns and rural communities are rich in tradition and expect to have close contact with school administrators (Manard, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Close relationships with students and families allow rural principals to pay greater attention to students' learning and assess more specific student needs (Renihan & Noonan, 2016), unlike those in suburban and urban school districts (Hayes et al., 2021). Students feel a sense of belonging (Bauch, 2001) that contributes to a positive school culture with high levels of engagement between students, faculty, and community (Hayes et al., 2021). While a strong sense of community can be a positive thing for school culture and

student/teacher relationships, it can be challenging for new leaders that are not native to the community (Preston et al., 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Harmon and Schafft (2009) criticized traditional leadership preparation programs for not meeting the needs of rural principals due to the tightness of the community.

Rural principals also face challenges when it comes to networking with other educational leaders and accessing high-quality professional development (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer & Silver, 2018; Hayes et al., 2021; Preston et al., 2014). Larger urban districts tend to have multiple administrators to share the workload and accountability standards (Preston et al., 2014), while rural principals tend to be isolated with a greater workload (Hansen, 2018; Hayes et al., 2021; Ramon, Peniche, & Cisneros-Cohernour, 2019), less help, and limited opportunities to build their self-efficacy through vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1997). Principals in rural communities may be quite a distance from resources such as leadership development programs and mentors that could aid in their development (Hayes et al., 2021; Ramon et al., 2019). Rural districts tend to have older populations that diminish the amount of tax dollars the school district receives (Rye & Scott, 2018). With less funding districts may not have the needed resources for principals to travel to larger areas to gain this knowledge. Since driving student success through instructional leadership is one of the main goals for all educational leaders, professional development is critical to the growth of principals and on-the-job professional development should be included (Frees, 2021). Rural principals must get creative with their limited budget and tend to use their funding for improving student achievement, placing their own development on the backburner (Preston et al., 2014). In addition, the lack of funding makes it challenging to attract and hire quality high-level

talent (Montgomery, 2010), therefore leaders are concerned about leaving their buildings unattended (Preston et al., 2014).

In rural communities, job opportunities are limited. At times the school may be the epicenter of the community and one of the largest employers (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). The median income is lower than urban and suburban areas and many jobs are low wage with modest benefits (Bauch, 2001). Families may be moving for greater opportunities, thus many rural districts face declining enrollment (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Rural principals need to be able to do more with fewer resources, since their responsibilities may have them completing not only instructional leadership tasks, but building management as well (Grissom, Loeb, & Mitani, 2015). The principal becomes the glue holding the building, community, and staff together (Preston et al., 2014) and often determines if the district can retain high-quality teacher talent within the school building (Hayes et al., 2021).

Rural principals face a variety of different leadership challenges in contrast to their suburban or urban counterparts. Challenges include being the epicenter of a small community where stakeholders expect leaders to reflect their town values, limited resources requiring leaders to wear multiple hats, and the responsibility to be the ultimate decision maker and source of information. Additionally rural principals experience limited funding that may isolate a rural leader from participating in mentoring and professional development opportunities (Preston & Barnes, 2017; Preston et al., 2014). Rural leaders must be prepared to work within a politically charged environment and navigate challenging waters on a daily basis (Preston et al., 2014). Their leadership is critical to the success of the small community (Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra, &

Angelidous, 2011) with the strongest skill needed being that of building strong and positive relationships (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Self-Efficacy and the Role of Novice Principals

Fisher (2014) identified a statistically significant relationship between the level of self-efficacy beliefs of principals and their years of experience in the role. Principals within their first year of experience identified higher levels of self-efficacy beliefs than principals with 2 through 6 years of experience and those with 6 through 10 years of experience (Fisher, 2014). First-year principals had the highest levels of self-efficacy beliefs as compared to all other years of experience (Fisher, 2014). This is in stark contrast to the results of Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2005), who identified no significant relation between principal self-efficacy beliefs and years of service. Either way, stepping into a new leadership role as a new principal is a sizable shift from the role of classroom teacher or even an assistant principal because expectations have been raised (Salazar, 2020; Swen, 2020) and there are many aspects of the job which novice principals learn by doing (Spillane & Lee, 2014), especially since there is a variety of support levels based upon the district in which they work (Salazar, 2020). Bandura (1997) would identify this on-the-job training as procedural knowledge. In a study conducted by Clarke and Wildy (2004) novice principals confirmed that leadership skills they developed while working in the role had a more significant impact on their development than those they acquired in class and the ability to practice these tasks was invaluable.

Entering the role as a novice leader, many principals are faced with feelings of isolation and loneliness as they are saddled with the task of being the ultimate decision maker within the building (Spillane & Lee, 2014; Swen, 2020), especially if they have been promoted from within (Nichols & McBride, 2017). The large number of competing administrative tasks and unscheduled events make it challenging to find the time to address them all (Salazar, 2020; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Swen, 2020). There is also a greater emphasis on novice principals' expectations to build their professional learning community (PLC), most often done through the use of social media. This can either increase their perception of their abilities or it may make them feel more isolated if they are challenged to keep up (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer & Silver, 2018). These competing tasks coupled with an increased expectation of participation in PLCs exacerbate the novice principal's perception of their ability to serve as an instructional leader and can further isolate them, decreasing their job satisfaction (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer & Silver, 2018).

Many novice principals enter the profession to become instructional leaders; they have developed their declarative knowledge during their university studies (Bandura, 1997) and are ready to become change agents within their new organization (Hayes et al., 2021). Novice principals enter their role usually after spending time as an assistant principal, but

many come from the role of a teacher leader, far removed from their university studies (Davis et al., 2017; Hernandez, 2019; Salazar, 2020). Spillane and Lee (2014) noted that novice principals quickly become overwhelmed by the overabundance of administrative tasks that need to be completed. Balancing their time effectively as a novice principal with little experience and addressing needed tasks such as paperwork, budget management, curriculum expectations, and following district policies are among the many issues facing these novice leaders (Bayar, 2016; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). At times, they will find it difficult to determine which tasks are most important and need to be completed first, which may hinder their ability to get into the classroom to drive instruction (Spillane & Lee, 2014; Swen, 2020). Many novice leaders find themselves working extended hours every day or taking work home with them to complete in the evening (Bayar, 2016; Hernandez, 2019; Salazar, 2020). Facing tough decisions frequently and feeling like work cannot get completed may make it challenging to build a novice leader's self-efficacy in instructional leadership as they may not have the opportunity to develop mastery experience (Bandura, 1997).

All educational leaders such as administrators find value in being coached or supported by a mentor to build their self-efficacy (Brinkmann, Cash, & Price, 2021). Coaching could be global or specific depending on the needs of the novice principal or

the skill level of the mentor or coach; either way the goal is to build the capacity or self-efficacy of the novice leader (Bauer & Brazer, 2013). Bauer and Brazer (2013) advised that externally generated, structured principal mentor programs like those designed by the MLDS may not contribute to increased job satisfaction because they require specific learning goals (Brown, 2019; Gates, Baird, Master, & Chavez-Herrerias, 2019), whereas novice leaders appreciated mentors or coaches that helped them address challenges that were specific to their building needs. However, mentoring, a tool many districts use to help grow and support their principals, often falls short of its desired outcomes (Ferguson, 2019).

Rural, novice principals find themselves challenged balancing personal and professional life, often blurring the lines between the two (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). They face challenges carving out time for relaxation and self-reflection (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Taking time to self-reflect will increase leadership skills and improve one's self-efficacy (Brinkmann et al., 2021).

Self-Efficacy and Leading During Challenging Times

Phenomenological researchers are encouraged to obtain scope of the phenomenon outside of the context of the study (Creswell, 2007). As such, the researcher reviewed literature addressing leadership growth and development outside the field of public K-12 education. This included areas such as political leadership growth across different countries (Rondeaux, 2020; Windsor et al., 2020), leadership development in business (H. E. Jones, Chesley, & Egan, 2020), within the medical field (Jackson & Preston, 2022; Kurosaka & Payton, 2020), within higher education (Fussell, 2020; Marshall, Roache, &

Moody-Marshall, 2020), and parochial schools (A. Miller, Wyttenbach, & Nuzzi, 2020). Leaders in all aspects of the world and in all different areas were faced with challenges during COVID-19.

Leading during a crisis is difficult for educational leaders at any stage of their career (Petriglieri, 2020). Generally, crisis leaders make errors in decision making due to a need to take immediate action, an overabundance of pertinent information being funneled down, and addressing multiple priorities at once (Brinkmann et al., 2021), priorities they may have never encountered considering crisis situations are commonly unpredictable (Eliadis, 2019). Being an effective leader is crucial during a time of high crisis, such as COVID-19, where resources are limited and demands are increased (Bajaba et al., 2021). Educational leaders such as principals must dig deep to identify strengths within themselves and find the courage to move forward even when times are most challenging (Eliadis, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many aspects of daily life around the world, including the day-to-day operations of education (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Pollack, 2020). Many students, teachers, parents, and school administration faced challenges that were unique and difficult to control or overcome (Chakraborty, Mittal, Gupta, Yadav, & Arora, 2020). These challenges were centered around instructional strategies and student achievement, technology access for all, special services, and support for students, teachers, and families (Harris & Jones, 2020; Huck & Zang, 2021; Superville, 2020). In March of 2020, most of the nation went into lockdown mode and school building leaders not only had to work with teachers to provide alternative methods of instruction, but they also had to develop

new ways of communicating, collaborating, and supporting their stakeholders, all while maintaining a positive school culture (Borup et al., 2020; Chennamsetti, 2020; Ellis et al., 2020; Huber & Helm, 2020; Kavrayici & Kesim, 2021).

Fair and equitable access to educational technology became a significant point of contention when Missouri public schools were forced to transition to online or paper learning (Riley, 2020) after Missouri Governor Mike Parsons, along with the Missouri DESE Commissioner Margie Vandeven, ordered schools to be closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Moxley & Delaney, 2020; Office of Governor Michael L. Parson, 2020). This was true for many states, as schools across the country were closed with uncertainty as to what the 2020-2021 school year would bring (Moxley & Delaney, 2020; Flaxman et al., 2020; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Although there have been multiple advancements in educational technology that became useful during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dhawan, 2020), online learning posed challenges for many districts due to teacher resistance and limited infrastructure, especially within rural communities (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021; Poon, 2020). Gross and Opalka (2020) reported research from the RAND corporation stating that 90% of school principals and 30% of schoolteachers reported that access to technology and reliable internet was a barrier to providing student learning. Educational advocates identified more developed learning management systems, improved home internet access, and lack of teacher and family training as barriers educational leaders needed to overcome in order to be successful moving forward (Diliberti, Schwartz, Hamilton, & Kaufman, 2020).

Educational leaders and classroom teachers had to redesign instruction and provide live virtual or paper instructional packets (Diliberti et al., 2020; Huck & Zhang,

2021; Weiner et al., 2021) since face-to-face instruction was halted for nearly every K-12 student in the spring of 2020 (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Little time was given for teachers to prepare for this transition and their personal self-efficacy levels of teaching with technology varied, using tools with which they may not have had much experience or time to master (Huck & Zhang, 2021) even though there had been a rise in expectations for teachers to start using them (Rice & Deschaine, 2020). Many districts provided students with review materials instead of new learning based on decisions made within their community (Huck & Zhang, 2021). New virtual guidelines for teaching were established and varied across districts and decisions were made based on state guidance and expectations, but ultimately final decisions were made by the educational leaders within the district (Weiner et al., 2021).

Not only was it a challenge to create and deliver materials, but educational leaders also found challenges in engaging students in their learning. Seventy-four percent of teachers reported engagement was much lower and struggling students were more likely not to participate at all (Mountford, 2020). Working parents were burdened with the demands of not only parenting but filling in as a teacher. This became a struggle for many, causing inconsistent learning for students (Harris & Jones, 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Educational organizations facing challenges with low socioeconomic status or struggling academic student populations only faced more challenges once the pandemic hit (Weiner et al., 2021). School closures posed a disadvantage to all students who may have needed live instruction or additional support, but for English language learners and special education students, the most vulnerable populations, school closures and online learning became ever more challenging, widening an already established achievement

gap (Huck & Zhang, 2021; Sider, 2020). Principals worked hard during school closures with their teachers to provide special education students with short-term solutions to meet their academic needs including meeting via phone, using online communication platforms such as Google Meet, and distributing tools such as games, puzzles, and manipulatives (Sider, 2020).

Leading during a time of crisis can be stressful and weigh heavily on the social and emotional states of the leader (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Connecting with those you lead and establishing trust within the community is crucial during a time of crisis (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Weiner et al., 2021) but putting the needs of others over one's self through servant leadership is a way to combat the heaviness and stress of the situation (Iyer, 2013). Principals focused their attention on meeting the psychological needs of their students, staff, families, and communities (Weiner et al., 2021). School principals became first responders focusing on the needs of their families even before education, such as packing and providing meals for their constituents. This is what efficacious leaders do during a crisis, meet the needs of their constituents (Superville, 2020).

Summary

Schools have been in crisis mode since the beginning of 2020 (Brinkmann et al., 2021). The role of a rural principal is more time demanding with a wider variety of responsibility, less funding, and limited personnel compared to larger districts (Hayes et al., 2021; Manard, 2017; Preston et al., 2014). Novice educational leaders who take a role as new principal in a rural district not only start with these higher demands, but they must also take significant time to develop strong relationships with their staff to achieve

desired results or make changes (Hayes et al., 2021; Manard, 2018). Novice, rural principals who entered their role in the fall of 2019 experienced a global pandemic unlike anything anyone had experienced before (Harris & Jones, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Pollack, 2020; Superville, 2021). Bandura (1997) suggested that to build self-efficacy individuals must have the opportunity to develop mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and emotional and physiological awareness. Self-efficacy theory is one part one part of Bandura's (1977) SET, which examined the relationships between one's environment, behavior, and personal beliefs in ability (Brinkmann et al., 2021). Therefore, rural, novice principals needed time to practice their role, the ability to observe other rural leaders who were successful in their role, be provided with positive feedback, and have time to learn to be aware of their emotional and physiological triggers when working in unknown conditions. Establishing a culture of trust, collaboration, and shared leadership is necessary when withstanding the effects of a crisis and novice leaders had little time to do this (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2005) identified the importance of support from central office and the superintendent as being correlated with principal self-efficacy beliefs, as well as close relationships with mentors and colleagues, both of which were challenging during this time. The events of COVID-19 impacted the environment of the entire world and this research aimed to delve into the leadership behaviors and evolution of rural novice principals by using Bandura's SET to identify the lived experiences of these individuals.

In Chapter Three the researcher will present the methodology used and steps taken to conduct this research. Results will be analyzed and shared in detail in Chapter

Four. Conclusions of findings and recommendations for further research will be presented in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Principals' perceived leadership ability or leadership self-efficacy beliefs have been identified to align with school culture and expectations, thus indirectly influencing student achievement and growth (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). The preparation and level of efficaciousness of the nation's principals in the ability to lead are essential to creating a school culture focused on strong instructional practices and high student achievement (Neuss, 2016). The principal is the most vital role when it comes to school effectiveness, overall wellness, and leading change for school improvement (Day et al., 2011; Fullan, 2016; Heck & Halliger, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; Sebastian et al., 2019)? For rural principals to achieve increased effectiveness they must have an increased level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) when it comes to achieving their principal competencies, especially those centered around instructional leadership (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Building strong relationships with students, staff, parents, and community and enacting local district, state, and national policies centered around student growth are at the forefront for most rural principals when aiming for school improvement (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

During a time of uncertainty, rural novice principals were expected to lead their school building with little to no training in crisis leadership and many leaders struggled to adapt (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021), adding to the stress of competing demands experienced by novice principals (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Inconsistent and ever-changing policies and procedures from government and health organizations, staffing shortages, and doing more

with fewer resources became the norm (Harris & Jones, 2020). By exploring the lived experiences, personal decisions, and leadership evolution of novice rural principals during the crisis of COVID-19, researchers can identify elements that may have contributed to each individual's personal and self-efficacy growth, allowing researchers to better understand the experience of COVID-19 as a whole and how educational institutions may better prepare principals for crisis in the future (Bandura, 1994; Peoples, 2021). Additional research on school leadership and the role of the principal during the pandemic may assist in providing multiple insights and potential changes for leaders of the future and possibly contribute to improved retention (Harris & Jones, 2020).

Included in this chapter is an explanation of the research methodology used to identify the lived experiences of rural, novice principals during the pandemic known as COVID-19 and how their self-efficacy and experiences shaped the evolution of their leadership journey. The remaining elements included in Chapter Three of this research study include the purpose of the study, research questions, participants, selection and sampling, research setting, research design, instrumentation, and data analysis.

Purpose of the Study

The pandemic known as COVID-19 disrupted almost every aspect of normal life starting in the early months of 2020, including the world of education (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020). Teaching had to be paused and transitioned to an online format (Zhao, Zhao, Liu, & Liu, 2020), redefining how teachers taught and how students learned (Harris & Jones, 2020). In a time that should have allowed novice rural leaders the ability to put their declarative knowledge into practice to improve their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), novice rural principals found themselves faced with multiple

unknowns, increased responsibilities, and developing new knowledge and skills as they related to leading through a pandemic (Pollack & Wang, 2020; Pollack, 2020). Prior to the pandemic principals faced increased accountability and a surge in stress affecting their mental health (Pollack & Wang, 2020; Riley, 2020). The pandemic not only intensified the accountability of principals, many not only faced physical issues from COVID-19, but also concerns about personal well-being contributing to stress and burnout (Harris & Jones, 2020; Pollack, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify the lived experiences of novice principals during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural districts across the State of Missouri and using Bandura's SET, gather an understanding of how their leadership evolved and decisions were made during a time of crisis.

Research Questions

How did the leadership of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri evolve during the crisis of COVID-19?

- a. What leadership behaviors and skills did rural, novice principals identify as crucial for leading and learning during COVID-19?
- b. What support systems did rural, novice principals identify as most impactful for leading and learning during COVID-19?
- c. What unexpected obstacles did rural, novice principals encounter during COVID-19 that impeded their building's vision?
- d. What leadership strengths did rural, novice principals identify within themselves following COVID-19?

- e. What were the perceptions of rural, novice principals regarding their ability to lead and learn during COVID-19?

Participants

According to Creswell (2007), phenomenological studies require similar participants. Individuals in this type of study must have relevant and notable experiences from the same event. The participants selected for this event were based on the following criteria for principals in the state of Missouri. Nine novice rural principals were selected for this study, one from each of the nine RPDCs across the state. According to Peoples (2021), phenomenological studies should have between eight and 15 participants, so this study would meet those guidelines. Principals were new in their role during the selected time period of fall of 2019 through the fall of 2021 and were the educational leader in either a public elementary, middle, or high school or combination of one of these. These determinations were based on school district classifications from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the DESE with a minimum of two participants from each. By purposively selecting one from each RPDC the researcher was able to randomly select individuals at different schools across the state that were in their first 3 years of principalship, at a variety of school levels, and appointed as principal in a district that was identified as rural per NCES and DESE during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants selected were also members of the RPDC's MLDS's Emerging Leadership Program. This allowed participants to use common language to evaluate the evolution of their leadership during the pandemic known as COVID-19. Selecting one participant from each of the RPDC's public, rural, novice principals only, and requesting they participate in the Emerging Leadership program were all delineating factors to

identify how leadership of rural novice principals evolved during the events of COVID-19. However, demographic features such as gender, age, and race were not delineating factors for participation in this study.

Selection and Sampling

Qualitative research requires purposeful sampling, more specifically, phenomenological qualitative research requires participants who have experienced and can explain a particular lived event (Creswell, 2007). The researcher selected fixed criterion for this research study. Participants for this study were novice principals within their first 3 years of principalship, working in a rural public school district as identified by the NCES and participants in the MLDS Emerging Leadership program.

Principals selected for this study either entered their role or were in their first 3 years of their position during the selected time of COVID-19, fall of 2019 through the fall of 2022. Demographic information of the nine participants from rural Missouri public schools is found in Table 1. Each of the participants met criteria for inclusion in the study. The researcher worked with the DESE supervisor for the Missouri Leadership Development System to identify candidates who fit the criteria. Based upon the NCES and DESE classification system, there were three elementary, two middle, three high, and one other principals involved in the study. The other category was that of an alternative school for junior high and high school students. There were five in their first year in position in fall of 2019, four in their second year of position in the fall of 2019, and one in their third year in position in the fall of 2019. Participants were also identified as being promoted from within their community, returning to the community, or hired from outside of the community.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Study Participants

Participant data	Graduate year	Entry year	Years in MLDS	Gender	Ethnicity	Home, returning, or new	Building	RPDC
A	2015	2018	4	Male	White	Home	6 th -12 th Other	Southeast
B	2016	2019	3	Female	White	Returning	6 th - 8 th MS	Heart of Missouri
C	2013	2018	4	Male	White	New	6 th -8 th MS	Kansas City
D	2015	2017	3	Female	White	New	9 th -12 th HS	Northeast
E	2017	2019	3	Female	White	New	PK-3 rd ELEM	Northwest
F	2018	2019	2	Female	White	Home	9 th -12 th HS	South Central
G	2016	2019	3	Female	White	Home	PK-5 th ELEM	Southwest
H	2016	2018	3	Male	White	Home	9 th -12 th HS	St Louis
I	2016	2019	3	Female	White	Returning	PK-1 st ELEM	Central

Following approval by the Research Review Board at Southwest Baptist University, the researcher emailed novice, rural principals within the state of Missouri, who were identified as eligible for this research study (Appendix C) to obtain preliminary consent to participate. Email addresses were listed on the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education open access website. Participants' demographic information was coded to reduce the risk of exposing identifying information. Interviews were held in person or over Google Meet and recorded for ease of translation after approval was gained from participants. If participants denied approval, then notes were recorded by hand and kept in a journal and locked up in a secure drawer for data analysis.

Upon completion of this research study all recordings, translation notes, and videos will be held in a secure cloud-based storage for 5 years and then destroyed.

Research Setting

A request to participate in either an in person or virtual interview for this research study was sent via email along with a letter including the purpose of the study, details on how participants were selected, and a general overview of the topics to be discussed. After reviewing the materials, the participant accepted participation by selecting yes on the informed consent presented in a Google Form. Rural, novice principals who accepted the invitation were in their first 3 years of principalship, were willing participants, and were interviewed individually. Participants were from rural districts working in elementary, middle school, high school, or a combination of one or more of these settings. Participants were from varied rural communities across the state and experienced COVID-19 during the onset of their leadership journey as a principal. In person interviews were conducted in the participant's environment of choice, while virtual interviews were held using the online program, Google Meet. Approval was obtained by the researcher prior to recording interviews. Interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai software and coded to ensure confidentiality and to obtain common themes regarding the lived experiences of participants. If participants did not consent to recording of the interview, detailed notes were taken by the researcher and approved by the participant at the conclusion of the interview. Consent for analysis of these written notes was still obtained. Follow-up was completed via email to clarify any questions or information gathered.

Rural, novice principals meeting the criteria for this research study had shared experiences as a new building leader during school closures and the crisis known as COVID-19. Participants had been hired by their local school boards and district superintendent. School board members were elected by the community and these members hired the superintendent. Participants were working in either their first, second, or third year as a principal. COVID-19 was a nationwide pandemic that impacted schools and school leaders starting in the spring of 2020 with limited guidance and support from governmental and health agencies (Argyropoulou, Syka, & Papaioannau, 2021; Canese & Amarilla, 2020; Ellis et al., 2020). When schools across the country began closing, rural school leaders faced additional challenges in supporting their students. Limited access to technology and reliable internet access was a dominant factor in students' success, not to mention inconsistent access to food (Hamilton et al., 2020). How school leaders, specifically principals, successfully lead schools in rural communities continues to be understudied (Preston & Barnes, 2017) but most recent reports identify rural principals tend to be people-centered leaders and change agents (Hayes et al., 2021). By selecting a qualitative phenomenological study to understand how leadership evolved for rural novice principals during COVID-19, the researcher followed Peoples' (2021) suggestion of interviewing eight to 15 participants who had experienced the same phenomenon to allow for a broader investigation of the topic.

Research Design

With the goal to identify how the leadership of novice, rural principals in the state of Missouri evolved during the crisis known as COVID-19, the researcher selected a qualitative phenomenological study to capture the lived experiences during the selected

time of spring 2020 through fall 2021, to better understand rural, novice principals' experiences as a whole (Creswell, 2007; Peoples, 2021). A phenomenological study was selected as the best way to answer this research question since the goal of a phenomenological study is to collect data from the participants who experienced the phenomenon directly and then compile the information and synthesize the results into a consensus of the event (Creswell, 2007). In an earnest attempt to explore novice rural principals' experiences during COVID-19, a close resemblance of Moustakas's (1994) approach was applied in this research. This approach was suggested due to how the research problem best aligned with a phenomenological study and that rural, novice principals and their leadership evolution were of significant interest to this researcher because of the researcher's passion for leadership development and personal experiences during this time period. Phenomenological studies also require anywhere from eight to 15 participants who have experienced similar phenomenon, allowing the researcher to gather their experiences and identify common thoughts and themes that could be explored by further researchers (Peoples, 2021). While quantitative data may have been able to be collected through a survey that would have expanded the number of participants, the researcher determined it would have limited the depth of content collected and chose a qualitative format instead. Other qualitative studies such as narrative studies capture the life of an individual, ethnography focuses on the shared culture of groups, and case studies focus on the event more than the individual (Creswell, 2007). The researcher determined the vast dynamics of the leadership journey of rural, novice principals during COVID-19 would best be collected using a qualitative phenomenological research study

because several experiences should be recorded to ensure multiple experiences were recorded.

The data for this qualitative phenomenological study were collected using initial and follow-up interviews. Participants were asked open-ended questions that allowed them to recall events and feelings they experienced as leaders during the events of COVID-19. While questions were predetermined to address the research questions and capture novice principals' specific leadership journey, the researcher encouraged participants to share all aspects of their journey, allowing each interview and follow-up questions to be dictated by the participant's answers. Following the interviews, data were analyzed by coding common themes and feelings of participants. Generalizations were able to be made through common themes as to the lived experiences of novice, rural principals during the COVID-19 experience.

Instrumentation

A combination of journals, focus groups, interviews, follow-up interviews, field notes, and recordings are most often found in phenomenological research studies (Peoples, 2021). The researcher selected interviews and follow-up interviews as the main source of data collection to obtain the lived experiences of the participants. Semi-structured interview questions were developed by the researcher, but participants were not held to these questions. Opportunities were given for participants to expand and share their lived experiences during the fall of 2019 through the fall of 2022. If this research study were to be replicated, results may differ due to the elapsed time since the events. The researcher assumed participants provided honest responses which accurately described their leadership journey as best they could recall, with the goal to answer how

rural, novice principals' leadership evolved during the pandemic known as COVID-19. To improve the reliability of the study, the researcher aimed to triangulate the data through interviews, participant leadership competency self-reflection created by the MLDS Emerging Leadership program (Appendix E), and through examining district and building archival data including items such as faculty meeting agendas, handbooks, and entry plans. To further improve reliability and validity, the researcher completed member checks. According to Creswell (2007), member checking may be used as a way to determine the accuracy of data in a qualitative study by providing the participant with descriptions and themes from the interview and ensuring they feel they reflect the participant's viewpoint. It was assumed that participants were honest in their answers and shared their experiences freely as they remembered them. Recorded sessions were reviewed, and participants were able to check their transcriptions and provide clarification prior to final data results being reported. Participants were expected to participate in the full duration of the study but could remove themselves at any time.

Interview process.

Novice, rural principals who willingly accepted the invitation participated in semi-structured interviews individually with predetermined, open-ended questions (Appendix A). Participants had the choice to be interviewed in person at a location of their choice or using the online format Google Meet. The researcher reviewed the purpose of this research study and encouraged participants to share all aspects of their lived experiences. Each interview was expected to last less than an hour but was contingent on the participant's willingness to be transparent. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using online software, Google Meet and Otter.ai. A follow-up

email was conducted to clarify any missing or unclear information, which was addressed and gaps filled to gather a complete picture of their lived experience (Peoples, 2021). Upon completion of the interview, the researcher thanked the participant for their willingness to share and provided an overview of the next steps in the research study.

Procedures

This phenomenological research study aimed to identify the lived experiences of novice rural principals during the pandemic known as COVID-19 to better understand the event as a whole (Peoples, 2021). By obtaining detailed lived descriptions through the process of interviews, direct data were collected to help answer the research question, How did the leadership of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri evolve during the crisis of COVID-19? After conducting a literature review on self-efficacy and the role of principal, permission was sought from the Institutional Review Board at Southwest Baptist University to complete this study. Upon their approval, the researcher identified qualifying participants based on selected criteria. With the help of instructors at the Southwest Regional Professional Development Center (SWRPDC), a list was compiled of all principals enrolled in the Emerging Leadership Program across the state at the start of the 2019-2020 school year. Participants were then narrowed down to those working in rural districts. All qualifying participants were then emailed a request to participate in either an in person or virtual interview for this research study along with a letter including the purpose of the study, details on how participants were selected, and a general overview of the topics to be discussed (Appendices A, B, and C). Follow-up questions were emailed, and a request was made for participants to share their emerging leader self-reflection via email. Following data analysis, member checks were completed

thoroughly until participant and researcher agreed that the transcription of interview and the themes and descriptions analyzed were aligned with their perceptions. All items were then reviewed by the researcher, coded, and analyzed based on steps listed below.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in phenomenological study emerges from the common themes identified within the data collected from the interviews (Peoples, 2021). This research study used Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, which embeds the researcher's bias and assumptions through the process using the hermeneutic circle (Laverty, 2003; Peoples, 2021). Using the hermeneutic circle allows the researcher to consistently reflect and modify their understanding of the phenomenon by moving between the parts and the whole experience in a circular format to make sense of the phenomenon (Laverty, 2003). Since the researcher was a novice principal during this crisis known as COVID-19 bracketing may have been impossible, so the hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen.

Using Peoples' (2021) data analysis flow chart the following steps were taken to analyze the data collected from participants. First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim using the transcription service Otter.ai. This software provided a word-for-word account of the conversation. The researcher then read through all interviews to develop a preliminary understanding of the participants' overall experience. Information irrelevant to the overall theme, such as filler statements "um," "uh," and "well" were removed from the transcript (Peoples, 2021, p. 59).

The second step was to develop preliminary meaning units. Developing preliminary meaning units or identifying a trait or feature of the research topic allows preliminary themes to emerge (Peoples, 2021). The researcher's experiences were

recorded by journaling to begin the hermeneutic circle process. By identifying the researcher's bias up front and continuing to evaluate their perspective through processing the participant's experiences, the goal was to create new projections of meaning (Peoples, 2021). Steps 1 and 2 were completed for each interview conducted.

Once all interviews were completed the researcher moved on to Step 3. In Step 3 the researcher collected all preliminary themes compiled and categorized them into final themes. Creswell (2007) suggested tracking the number of times common themes or units are discussed within an interview. A spreadsheet was developed to track this information along with participant details including years of service, mentor satisfaction, and other key demographics. The researcher continued to journal participants' personal experiences, bias, and reflection of data collection.

In Step 4 the themes from Steps 2 and 3 were identified from each interviewee's specific story. Peoples (2021) called this their situated narrative results. Direct quotes describing each specific theme were highlighted within the transcript. Follow-up interviews were conducted if necessary to clarify specific answers provided during the interview to ensure results are categorized correctly. If requested, participants were provided a copy of both original interview transcripts and follow-up interview documentation so they could use their compilations to reflect on their experiences.

Finally in Step 5, the researcher used the situated narrative results and created general narratives using the terms "most," "many," and "some" (Peoples, 2021). "Most" was identified as themes or ideas that had been uncovered substantially within the transcripts at over 70% or more. If the themes were only expressed between 40-60%, then the transcript was identified as "many." Finally, "some" was used to identify items

within the transcript that rarely emerged but were still relevant to the study, providing some unique perspectives of participants.

Summary

The crisis identified as of COVID-19 disrupted the education system and altered the role of educational leaders significantly (Buschelman, 2020; Flaxman et al., 2020; Hargreaves & Fullen, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Pollock, 2020; Superville, 2020). Principals during school closures in the spring of 2020 began packing meals, setting up remote learning, and trying to meet the needs of their students, staff, and families in a way no one has had to before (Superville, 2020). As the crisis continued, principals found their duties increased and the scope of their job expanded to include additional safety and wellness tasks (Buschelman, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Superville, 2020). This increase in workload and responsibilities was stressful for all educational leaders but was added to the novice principals' existing fears, challenges and unknowns (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Data were collected from each participant, capturing their personal lived experiences and leadership journey during the spring of 2020 through the fall of 2021. Specifically, this research study filled a gap in the literature as to the leadership evolution of novice, rural principals during the phenomenon known as COVID-19.

Chapter Three outlined the process and methodology for this study. In Chapter Four, the researcher will provide the demographics, data, and results from participant interviews per the methodology presented in Chapter Three. In Chapter Five a summary of the research study will be explained with an emphasis on interpreting the key findings to this research study and how it aligned to current research. Implications for future research and recommendations for future studies will also be shared.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

In the spring of 2020 school districts and building leaders across the nation were forced into an unprecedented experience known as COVID-19, testing their determination and leadership abilities. As this crisis continued through the fall of 2021, building leaders questioned not only their leadership abilities but also their desire to continue in their role (Heubeck, 2021). Educational leaders including rural, novice principals faced many types of challenges while working to provide a stable educational environment for students (Kavrayici & Kesin, 2021; Zhao et al., 2020). The added responsibilities and pressure of a national pandemic only exacerbated an already high-stress situation (Superville, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify the lived experiences of novice principals during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural districts across the State of Missouri and using Bandura's (1977) SET gather an understanding of how their leadership evolved and decisions were made during a time of crisis. By capturing the lived experiences of this specific population of leaders, the researcher hoped to expand the research on how rural, novice principals' leadership evolved and decisions were made during this time of crisis known as COVID-19. Chapter Four includes the data collected from semi-structured interviews using Bandura's SET.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with nine rural, novice principals across the State of Missouri. One participant from each of the nine Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDCs) was selected. Each participant was in their first 3 years of principalship during the onset of COVID-19. Upon completion of the

interviews, transcripts and researcher notes were reviewed to identify common themes aligned with the five domains of leadership competencies found in the research literature review presented in Chapter two known as instructional leadership, managerial leadership, visionary leadership, innovative leadership, and relational leadership. Using Bandura's (1977) SET, participant responses were categorized into four different areas of building personal self-efficacy including mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states. Combined with the previous mentioned leadership competencies the researcher worked to examine how the participants' leadership evolved and decisions were made during a time of crisis.

In Chapter Four, the researcher will present data collected describing the participants and setting of the research study; information collected will be shared in an effort to address the main research question and subquestions:

How did the leadership of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri evolve during the crisis of COVID-19?

- a. What leadership behaviors and skills did rural, novice principals identify as crucial for leading and learning during COVID-19?
- b. What support systems did rural, novice principals identify as most impactful for leading and learning during COVID-19?
- c. What unexpected obstacles did rural, novice principals encounter during COVID-19 that impeded their building's vision?
- d. What leadership strengths did rural, novice principals identify within themselves following COVID-19?

- e. What were the perceptions of rural, novice principals regarding their ability to lead and learn during COVID-19?

Participants

Qualitative research requires purposeful sampling, more specifically, phenomenological qualitative research requires participants who have experienced and can explain a particular lived event (Creswell, 2007). The researcher selected fixed criteria for this research study. The participants included nine rural, novice, public school principals; one from each of the nine RPDCs and participants in the MLDS Emerging Leadership program provided by the corresponding RPDC. By selecting participants from each of the RPDCs, the researcher was able to meet the recommended guidelines for phenomenological research (Peoples, 2021) and gather research from principals across the entire state of Missouri to identify how their leadership evolved during the crisis known as COVID-19. Requiring participants to have participated in the MLDS Emerging Leadership Program helped to provide a consistent foundation and made the use of vocabulary and terminology easier to understand. All participants completed the MLDS Emerging Leadership Program, and some had progressed to the next step of Sustaining Leadership offered by each RPDC. Additionally, the researcher aimed to include participants from all grade levels including elementary, middle school, high school, or other. The participants selected were building leaders in some combination of PK-12 public education system. Buildings were classified by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as well as the home districts as elementary, middle, high school, or alternative (other). In this study three were elementary principals, two were middle school, three were high school, and one identified as an alternative school

for middle school and high school students. These results met the researcher's goal of having a minimum of two per category in elementary, middle, and high school, but did not meet the goal of having two in the other category due to the lack of interest from those qualified to participate in this research study.

School leaders who participated in this study were required to be within their first 3 years of principalship at the start of the 2019-2020 school year. In 2019, five participants were in their first year, three were in their second year, and one was the third-year principal. An added feature to this research study was to identify if the participants had been longtime members of the rural community and promoted from within, returning to a former district in their new role as building leader, or most recently hired from outside to be new principals in a rural district. Principals within this study were varied, with four reporting they were homegrown or promoted from within, two were returning to a district in which they had previously worked, and three were new to the community they were beginning to serve. Demographic information of building leaders such as gender and ethnicity were collected but had little to no direct bearing on the study. To protect the identity of the participants, participants were only identified by their RPDC and the classification of their building, but not their building size. Participants were given an alphabetic letter (A-I) to identify for the researcher who they were within the study. Each principal was interviewed in February or March of 2022 via Google Meet; no participants selected an in-person interview. The average length of interview was approximately 40-45 minutes. Participants were provided with interview protocols and questions prior to the start of the interview upon acceptance of the informed consent, and permission to record interviews was obtained prior to the start of the interview. All

participants agreed to be recorded. Participants had the opportunity to stop the process at any time, but all chose to continue through the duration of the study.

Table 2

Demographic Information of Study Participants

Participant data	Graduate year	Entry year	Years in MLDS	Ethnicity	Home, returning, or new	Building	RPDC
A	2015	2018	4	White	Home	6 th -12 th Other	Southeast
B	2016	2019	3	White	Returning	6 th - 8 th MS	Heart of Missouri
C	2013	2018	4	White	New	6 th -8 th MS	Kansas City
D	2015	2017	3	White	New	PK-6 th	Northeast
E	2017	2019	3	White	New	PK-3 rd ELEM	Northwest
F	2018	2019	2	White	Home	9 th -12 th HS	South Central
G	2016	2019	3	White	Home	PK-5 th ELEM	Southwest
H	2016	2018	3	White	Home	9 th -12 th HS	St Louis
I	2016	2019	3	White	Returning	9 th - 12 th HS	Central

Data Analysis

Data analysis in phenomenological studies emerges from common themes identified within the data collected from interviews (Peoples, 2021). This research study used the Heideggerian Hermeneutic Phenomenology process to analyze data, and a data analysis flow chart as the process addressing the potential researcher bias along the way (Peoples, 2021). These steps include the following: reading the entire transcript and removing unnecessary language, generating preliminary meanings, generating final

meanings to each unit for each survey question, synthesizing final meaning units, synthesizing narrative into general narrative for all participants, and finally generating narrative description. At the completion of all interviews the researcher used the online software Otter.ai to transcribe the Google Meet recorded interviews into a detailed transcript of the conversation between the researcher and the participants. At the recommendation of Peoples (2021) all unnecessary words were removed that were redundant, words such as “um” and “hmm” from the transcript during the initial reading. Following the initial reading, the researcher commenced the Hermeneutic circle by journaling her own thoughts, experiences, and biases. Since the researcher was a rural, novice principal during this time, it was important to complete this process, allowing the researcher to reflect and modify understanding (Laverty, 2003). In subsequent readings, the researcher worked to identify and highlight key words and phrases that would align with the leadership competencies identified from the literature review and Bandura’s (1977) forms of developing self-efficacy that would align to specific research questions and answer how leadership evolved and decisions were made during the crisis known as COVID-19. This process was completed for each interview.

Next, the researcher took the preliminary meaning units and developed groupings or themes by coding each of the transcripts. Creswell (2007) suggested tracking the number of times themes or units are discussed during each interview. While reviewing each separate interview individually again to better understand each participant’s specific story, direct quotes from each participant were identified. Following the individual coding of themes of each participant, common results were identified by using the following criteria: themes that were identified by each of the nine participants were

classified as “all,” themes that occurred in seven to eight participants transcripts were classified as “most,” themes that emerged with three to six participants were classified as “many,” and themes that were identified with two or less participants but still important to the research study were classified as “some.” In the final step, the researcher was able to use the classification data to develop a general description of rural, novice principals’ leadership evolution and lived experiences during this time of crisis, focusing on how their self-efficacy grew and decisions were made. The development of a general description using the “most” and “many” classifications allowed the researcher to make general statements about the lived experiences to better understand the phenomenon as a whole. Classifications of some showed that there may have been specific experiences that were only relevant to certain populations but not the population as a whole.

In attempt to triangulate the data, the researcher requested the MLDS Emerging Leadership Self-Reflection Tool from each participant. The reflection tools were given to participants pre and post participation in the MLDS Emerging Leader Program by the staff at MLDS. Questions were posed to participants as to when they completed their self-reflection tool and clarification was obtained as to how the participants felt their leadership had changed throughout the process. Individual participant interviews were conducted in February and March of 2022. In addition, the researcher reviewed archival data from each district: 2020-2021 reentry plans, student and faculty handbooks, and district Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Services Plan (SRCSP). Individual transcripts of each participant interview and specifics of archival data were shared with the participants. Any discrepancies were clarified by the participants individually.

Table 3

Common Coded Preliminary Meanings Usage Per Participant Interview Transcriptions

Code Terms	PA	PB	PC	PD	PE	PF	PG	PH	PI
Mentor (External Peers)	0	9	0	9	33	6	26	11	21
Administration (Internal Peers)	26	22	18	14	31	28	12	33	14
Teachers (Staff)	45	56	65	59	87	49	75	65	66
Students (Kids, Learners)	63	55	71	75	91	72	98	89	75
Collaboration/Support/Meetings/(PLC)	22	35	34	44	52	23	39	26	44
Flexibility/Patience (Resilience)	33	44	38	39	65	31	49	36	51
Culture/Relationships	23	32	36	31	43	25	56	31	39
Virtual Instruction (Technology)	34	22	41	44	21	31	11	29	18
Learning Loss (Behind)	19	14	7	28	18	24	31	19	8
Instruction (Teaching, Learning)	14	28	33	21	37	27	39	22	22
Observation (Performance, Evaluation)	7	13	15	14	5	22	16	28	14
Feedback (Coaching)	3	22	25	11	31	18	26	27	16
Curriculum (Standards, Credits)	16	6	11	24	13	25	9	31	4
Student Achievement	21	10	17	26	22	33	21	28	16
Professional Development	15	22	17	12	21	19	31	24	12
Classroom (Visits)	23	32	28	31	29	19	27	16	31
Quarantine/Closure	9	7	21	18	13	35	18	29	26
Resources (Food, Internet, Needs)	31	33	21	37	39	22	35	27	42
Problem Solving (Brainstorm)	17	28	22	24	41	35	16	27	31
Mental Health (SEL)	5	15	25	15	26	44	16	29	32
Vision (Goals)	16	22	18	12	14	11	9	17	12
Expectations	18	29	21	16	11	32	15	24	16
Communication	29	35	31	33	42	33	38	41	26
Policies & Procedures	7	17	6	14	21	16	16	18	14
Initiatives	6	11	15	9	23	21	8	17	9
Discipline	14	18	17	16	9	16	6	21	3
Paperwork (Checklists)	11	21	22	9	23	42	8	31	9
Cleaning (Sanitize, Custodial)	6	11	9	22	20	29	16	33	14
Safety (Health Department, CDC)	21	17	22	26	28	35	29	34	16
Masks	19	9	14	25	5	28	33	31	11

Note. Participants were identified as a P + an alphabetic symbol based on their RPDC location and the researcher's identification system; please see Table 2 for details.

Additionally, the numbers in each column represent how many times the Code Term was used within the interview transcript; for example PA used the word mentor or similar term for external peer 0 times.

Common Coded Preliminary Meanings

Creswell (2007) and Peoples (2021) stressed the importance of identifying common terms or themes from all participant interviews by recording the frequency of the terms used. The online translation program Otter.ai used by the researcher created the top 20 terms generated by each respondent. There were variations of multiple terms such as students, kids, learners, and kiddos along with items like collaboration, together, and teamwork. The researcher combined these terms and placed them in similar categories, combining their frequency totals. The next step the researcher took was to identify the common terms appearing most often and align them with the foundation of the research study on leadership of principals, then separate into leadership competency categories established in the literature review. Results of the frequency of each term per participant are presented in Table 4. The Otter.ai software used to transcribe the recorded interviews only identified the top 20 terms per interview, but the researcher expanded the terms to the top 30 due to the scope of the research study and the importance of those additional 10 terms to the overall research results. Frequency totals ranged from zero terms mentioned to the highest term being used 91 times by one participant and 689 times by the nine participants in total.

Table 4*Code Terms: Average Usage of High and low Terms Within Interview Transcripts*

Code Terms	Average	Most number of times used	Least number of times used
Mentor (External Peers)	12.7	33	0
Administration (Internal Peers)	22	33	12
Teachers (Staff)	63	87	45
Students (Kids, Learners)	76.5	98	55
Collaboration/Support/Meetings/(PLC)	35.4	52	22
Flexibility/Patience (Resilience)	42.8	63	31
Culture/Relationships	35.1	56	23
Virtual Instruction (Technology)	27.8	44	11
Learning Loss (Behind)	18.6	31	7
Instruction (Teaching, Learning)	27	39	14
Observation (Performance, Evaluation)	14.8	28	5
Feedback (Coaching)	17.7	31	3
Curriculum (Standards, Credits)	15.4	25	4
Student Achievement	21.5	33	10
Professional Development	19.2	31	12
Classroom (Visits)	26.2	31	16
Quarantine/Closure	19.5	35	7
Resources (Food, Internet, Needs)	28.5	42	21
Problem Solving (Brainstorm)	26.7	41	17
Mental Health (SEL)	20.7	44	5
Vision (Goals)	13.4	22	9
Expectations	20.2	32	11
Communication	34.2	42	26
Policies & Procedures	14.3	21	6
Initiatives	13.2	23	6
Discipline	13.3	21	3
Paperwork (Checklists)	19.5	42	8
Cleaning (Sanitize, Custodial)	17.7	33	6
Safety (Health Department, CDC)	25.3	35	16
Masks	19.4	33	5

Note. The most and least number of times was identified in Table 4, based on participants' interview transcripts.

Once common preliminary meanings were established and recorded, response terms from the interview transcripts were then categorized by frequency. Average highs and lows are presented in Table 4. The highest average occurrences of terms in the nine

interviews were the following: Students (76.5%), Teachers/Staff (63%), Flexibility/Patience (42.8%), Collaboration/Support/PLC (35.4%), Culture/Relationships (35.1%), and close behind, Communication (34.2%). The five least common terms presented within the interview transcripts by averages were as follows: Mentor/External Peers (12.7%), Policies and Procedures (14.3 %), Discipline (13.3%), and Initiatives (13.2%). All terms were located within the literature review but needed further classification to establish themes, especially since the participants' building classifications seemed to have similar patterns and present different data. For example, the term Mentor appeared on an average of 12.7% across all nine participants, however, the average usage in elementary classification buildings was 26.6% (PE, PG, PI), middle school was 1% (PB, PC), high school was 2.8% (PD, PF, PH), and the alternative school was 0% (PA). In the case of Virtual Learning/Technology, the average frequency for all nine participants was 27.8% with high school participants averaging 34.6% (PD, PF, PH), the alternative school 34% (PA), middle school 33% (PB, PC), and the elementary building participants only averaging 13% (PE, PG, PI). One area not mentioned heavily within the literature review was that of masks, or masking. Masks or masking became a key issue for some communities (PD, PF, PG, and PH) while others experienced few issues with masking (PB, PE, and PI).

Themes

After thoroughly reviewing and identifying the common preliminary meanings, the next step in the data analysis process was to develop themes. Themes emerged from common terms by research participants. The researcher placed terms into four categories developed independently by the researcher and then compared them to leadership

competencies described in the literature review. Terms were sorted by the researcher into predetermined leadership skills aligned with the categories of the 32 leadership competencies identified in the literature review. The 32 leadership competencies were represented within the five themes of innovative, instructional, managerial, relational, and visionary leadership. The key terms were then separated into categories and compared to Bandura’s (1977) and Pajares and Schunk’s (2001) four main sources of influence an individual can use to build their self-efficacy, mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states. By placing these leadership competences into themes of influence regarding building self-efficacy, the researcher hoped to be able to further examine the data to answer the central research question, How did the leadership of rural, novice principals evolve during the crisis of COVID-19?

Table 5

Coding Terms Into Themes Developed by the Researcher

People Centered	Student Achievement	Competing Priorities	Task Oriented Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor • Administrators • Teachers/Staff • Students/Kids • Collaboration • PLC • Support • Flexibility • Patience • Culture • Relationships • Mental Health • Communication • Professional Development • Feedback (Coaching) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual instruction • Technology • Teacher/Staff • Student/Kids • Learning Loss • Instruction • Teaching • Observations (Evaluations) • Feedback (Coaching) • Curriculum (Standards/Credits) • Achievement • Classroom Visits • Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers/Staff • Students/Kids • Closures (Quarantine) • Resources • Food • Internet • Routines • Problem Solving (Brainstorm) • Mental Health • Communication • Initiatives • Safety • Masks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers/Staff • Students/Staff • Closures (Quarantine) • Communication • Policies • Procedures • Initiatives • Discipline • Paperwork • Checklists • Cleaning (Sanitize, Custodial) • Safety • Masks

Note. Coding terms from interview transcripts, identified in Table 3, placed in the four categories developed by the researcher.

Table 6
Coding Themes by Leadership Competencies Presented in the Literature Review

Relational Leader	Instructional Leader	Innovative Leader	Managerial Leader	Visionary Leader
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor • Administrators • Teachers/Staff • Students/Kids • Collaboration • PLC • Support • Flexibility • Patience • Culture • Relationships • Mental Health • Communication • Masks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual instruction • Technology • Teacher/Staff • Student/Kids • Learning Loss • Instruction • Teaching • Observations (Evaluations) • Feedback (Coaching) • Curriculum (Standards/Credits) • Achievement • Professional Development • Classroom Visits • Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers/Staff • Students/Kids • Closures (Quarantine) • Resources • Food • Internet • Routines • Problem Solving (brainstorm) • Mental Health • Communication • Initiatives • Safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers/Staff • Students/Staff • Closures (Quarantine) • Communication • Policies • Procedures • Initiatives • Discipline • Paperwork • Checklists • Cleaning (Sanitize, Custodial) • Safety • Masks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision • Goals • Teachers/Staff • Students/Kids • Expectations • Communication

Note. Coding terms from interview transcripts, identified in Table 3, placed in the five categories of 32 leadership competencies discovered in the literature review.

Relational Leadership

All participants within this study noted that building strong relational leadership skills was a valued part of their leadership experience during this time. When asked the research subquestion b, What support systems did rural, novice principals identify as most impactful for leading and learning during COVID-19? all respondents discussed experiences with other people and the importance of a strong professional learning network. When reviewing each participant’s MLDS Emerging Leadership Self-Reflection Tool, all the participants ranked their performance in relational leadership after this time as somewhat to fully accomplished. Many participants selected fully accomplished (PA, PB, PC, PE, PG, PI) and described specific events that helped them to improve their ability to be a relational leader. Two key areas of improvement highlighted

by multiple participants were determining resources and strategies in the school community to help address the overall well-being of the students and the intentionality of interaction with staff by being visible, accessible, and approachable.

First, determining resources and strategies in the school community to help address the overall wellbeing of each student was a task that all participants discussed in their interviews. Most participants (PA, PB, PC, PE, PG, PH, PI) discussed identifying key members in the school community either internally or externally that were able to help and support their student population during this time of crisis. Participant A recalled the experience of building relationships with key individuals to meet the everchanging needs of the students.

When school shut down in the spring of 2020, we were blindsided, we knew we had to help our students, they needed to learn, they needed to eat, some just needed to talk. We just did not know how we were going to do it all. We had to work together to make this happen. I started reaching out to school members and key people in the community to see if they could help. As always, they answered our prayers; within days we were packing meals and starting virtual instruction. We could not have done it without teamwork.

Participant B experienced a similar result during this time, stating,

When I think of resources, I think of people, my administrative team especially, we met regularly, virtually, any way we could...we knew we had to do what was best for students, we were able to bring multiple resources together to accomplish tasks.

Finally, Participant H shared a little about their relational leadership journey;

When I started as an educational leader, I was a little of an introvert, I kept to myself, probably more than I should, if I needed something done, I just did it myself... When COVID hit, that had to stop, the workload was too big, and I had to work more with my peers and my staff to ask for help. I also became one of the people responsible to coordinate food delivery. Asking people to come in during this time of so much unknown was rough, but I did it and our kids didn't go hungry. Everyone was receptive, well most people were. I just know during this time we really banded together to do what was best for kids.

Next, improving the intentionality of interaction with staff by being visible, accessible, and approachable had a whole new meaning when COVID-19 started. With building closures in the spring of 2022, participants had to find unique and innovative ways to connect and develop relationships with their staff. Some of the participants even found ways to connect with their staff during COVID closures (PA, PE, PI). Participant E talked about building relationships with her staff in unique ways. As a first-year principal that was new to the district, she was still establishing trust when school closed in March 2020: Teachers were nervous and scared. We spent time on Google Meet sessions, just talking and sharing our feelings. We had hot cocoa and P.J. parties, my teachers just wanted to be together.”

Participant C and Participant H experienced similar experiences when it came to being relational leaders. Both located in rural districts outside of larger urban areas, they shared how COVID protocols were inconsistent between rural, suburban, and urban areas across their regional areas. Faculty and staff had mixed opinions and principals felt it necessary to be a dedicated support for their teams. Participant C shared, “I always had

my phone on me, I told them, day, or night, don't be afraid to call. I just needed to be there to listen. They needed that more than ever." Participant H recalled,

Every day was a different news story, the health department was changing the rules, one minute we were in school, the next minute we were out. Our teachers were scared, confused, and needed us. I was honest, I told them I did not have the answers, but together we would figure them out.

The importance of supporting staff and being authentic in how you communicate was a common theme by many participants (PA, PC, PE, PF, PH). In the central region, Participant F was transparent on a regular basis: "I told them this was a learning experience for us all. We are all doing our best. We are all trying." PF discussed how weekly check-ins were completed with teachers just to check in and see how things were going, asking how to help them. This behavior continued and eventually transitioned to parents.

Looking back on the experiences, Participant G shared a key learning for the administration team in their district. Not being available to meet and get together was a misstep for their district. Their district decided to reduce their professional development sessions, nonessential faculty meetings, observation meetings, and anything else that helped to take things off teacher's plates. Participant G's reflection focused on culture:

I knew culture was important, I just didn't realize how important it was, especially in elementary, ...we thought we were helping by removing extra responsibilities; however, feedback was centered around how much they missed being together and doing activities, even ice breakers...we failed them when they needed us most.

The lack of focusing on relationships has adjusted how PG reads today.

Additionally, when reviewing staff and student handbooks and the districts re-entry plans, all districts aimed for face-to-face learning. All participants expressed their desire to return to in person instruction in the fall of 2020. While the coordination and safety protocols of COVID-19 exposures made it challenging, the ultimate goal was to return 100% in person instruction. Many participants (PA, PB, PC, PD, PF, PH) recalled they tried their best with virtual instruction but felt the lack of in person instruction not only affected their relationships with teachers but their relationships with students and their teachers' relationships with students. One participant (PC) expressed,

It was hard enough helping to support our teachers, but it was even more challenging to keep up with our students during COVID-19. With the shutdown in March all the way through the following year, teachers were busy trying to connect with all their students, it was even harder for us to reach out.

Finally, when reviewing data regarding relational leadership and working with others, some participants (PE, PG, PI) stressed the importance of working directly with their mentor as a key resource that aided their ability to lead and learn during COVID-19. Participant E expressed,

MLDS partnered me with a principal who was not too far away from me. She was also in a rural district, but bigger than mine. I can't tell you how much I relied on her partnership and leadership. She is one of the reasons I am still standing here today. It is hard when you are the only person doing your job in the district, we must find other people who are in the same boat to help us.

Participant G raved about working with her mentor as well: “I was paired up with a veteran principal who had been doing this job for years, it was nice to know she was experiencing some of the same things I was. It let me know, I wasn’t alone.” Some participants made no mention of their mentor (PA, PC). However, all participants discussed the importance of building a strong relationship within their administration team. Participant G discussed how their administration team met at least weekly, sometimes more, and Participant A reflected on how important the communication was between each administrative leader and how COVID-19 “forced us to become a stronger team” expressing the final thought, “We needed each other.”

Instructional Leadership

When novice principals step into their leadership role, their goal is to be an instructional leader, however the wide range of managerial tasks and the unpredictable nature of the job make this challenging (LeFevre & Robinson, 2015; Salazar, 2020). During the events of COVID-19, rural, novice principals who participated in this study had mixed results when it came to driving instructional leadership. All participants shared they knew instructional leadership was important and had a direct effect on student achievement but for some (PG, PI), other challenges and priorities became more relevant and a larger focus during the time of COVID-19. Attending to the emotional needs, safety, and mental health of students and staff was a priority shared by all participants. However, participants PG and PI addressed these needs over instructional leadership. In their reflections, they discussed the challenges they faced in instructional leadership during the shutdown in March of 2020. Participant I stated,

As an elementary building in a rural district, we could not send home Chrome books like they did in the high school, we tried to continue instruction with paper packets, it just wasn't successful. When our kids returned the next fall, they were already behind. We have been working hard to get caught up, but then all the quarantines and kids in and out... instruction is difficult, we are seeing the learning loss.

Similarly, Participant G echoed the challenges with paper packets but added additional concerns: "We all know our elementary aged students really need that teacher interaction and hands-on activities, they didn't get it. They are still behind. I feel we fight the battle every day to get them caught up."

Many participants (PA, PB, PC, PD, PE, PF, PH) held fast to their already established high student achievement expectations and put student learning at the forefront, focusing on professional development for teachers, to limit student learning loss. "Technology became vastly important for our school and district" stated Participant A. "We had to quickly train teachers to implement quality teaching strategies using our online program. We didn't want our students to fall behind, we established a cohort monitoring structure, so all kids were getting a quality education." Similarly, Participant C recalled, "Student achievement had to continue to be a priority; we felt continuing to focus on instruction would help our students not worry about all the trouble around them. Our job is to educate and that is what we did." Many participants (PA, PC, PD, PE, PF) continued with structured teacher observations to examine performance while some others (PG, PH, PI) modified their teacher observations to be more of a check-in than a scored teacher observation. Participant H explained:

We switched our teacher observations from an instructional evaluation to an informal general walk through. Our goal was to just make sure learning was happening, but more importantly to check in with our people to make sure they were okay, mentally.

Visionary Leadership

Visionary leadership competencies at the Emerging Level through MLDS focus on inspiring others with a shared vision and on effective communication of the vision, mission, and core values. All participants' self-reflection stayed consistent in this area at somewhat accomplished. Many participants (PA, PB, PC, PD, PE) responded that visionary leadership was one of their least focused upon areas during COVID-19. Some participants (PB, PE, PG) reported that the events of COVID-19 shifted their focus, and the vision that came naturally was "take care of your teachers and do what is best for students." Participant I reported, "Honestly, I feel like for my first year it was support each other and love kids." One participant (PA) said they were lucky, the pandemic played right into their hands. The district's vision has always been to focus on relationships first. He shared, "COVID couldn't stop us, our vision and mission were just basically being student first all the time that didn't change." On the contrary Participant G shared her experience as a first-year principal was challenging. She did not feel she focused enough on their mission and vision, her team was in survival mode, and she was in survival mode. "Things were not horrible, but I know they could have been better." When reviewing reentry plans and handbooks, all districts listed their mission and vision in the front of their materials.

Managerial Leadership

For educational buildings to be successful and learning to occur, managerial tasks must be completed correctly and in a timely manner (Jefferies, 2019; Maxwell & Riley, 2017; Miller 2009). When reviewing the MLDS Emerging Leader Self-Reflection Tool all participants recorded the following managerial competencies as fully accomplished: *The leader analyzes the immediate and long-term needs for building and sustaining a safe and functional school, as well as analyzes routines, instruction, procedures, and schedules for building and sustaining a safe, healthy, orderly, and compliant learning environment.* All participants rated themselves as somewhat or fully accomplished in the *area of understands and complies with district, state, and federal requirements for records and reporting.* Some participants (PA, PE, PG) shared if you took off the last part of records and reporting, their rating may be fully accomplished. Participant A stated, “We had to follow all kinds of COVID-19 policies from the federal and state. It just didn’t apply to records.”

In the area of *sustaining a safe and functional school*, all districts created and publicized a school reentry plan for the 2020-2021 school year and a SCSR for the 2021-2022 school year. All participants said their input was solicited by upper administration for completing these plans. All plans discussed changes in policies and procedures and specifically discussed masking guidelines, cleanliness, and safety protocols.

In the area of *analyzing routines, instruction, procedures, and schedules for building and sustaining a safe, healthy, orderly, and compliant learning environment*, all participants recalled the need for making managerial changes for the last 2 years. Participant F recalled,

Every day we were responsible for executing our safety plan; trying to keep kids 6 feet apart was hard. We had to redesign schedules, travel periods, how they ate lunch. It took us a while, but we did it and we had to uphold it every day. Safety was our Number 1 concern.

Some participants (PE, PG, PI) talked about their cohort models and trying to keep classes together. Participant E shared:

When we returned to school in the fall of 2020 we were unmasked, so it was important for contact tracing to keep kids in the smallest groups possible...we tried really hard to limit travel, kids had to sit at lunch 3-6 feet apart, special classes went on a cart. Our day-to-day operations changed, significantly. Some changes were good, and we still use them today.

Innovative Leadership

The final leadership competency theme is Innovative Leadership. The MLDS organization encourages educational leaders in their emerging leadership program to review existing realities and become change agents within their organization, adjusting their leadership to meet new challenges (Ariyani et al., 2021). The unprecedented times of COVID-19 created opportunities for all educators to become innovative thinkers. All participants reported they needed patience and flexibility within their daily job because everything was always changing. Innovational leadership lends itself as a great partner to these leadership competencies, similarly to relational leadership. In the area of managerial, Participant F talked about the need for organization; PF developed detailed spreadsheets to stay focused on and follow up all the tasks that needed to get done. Participant D talked about the importance of dealing with students differently from a

relational perspective, providing opportunities to assist them with their mental health and get their required credits to graduate:

We were closed in the fall of 2020 for a few weeks. We had students failing, virtual instruction wasn't working for them. I knew they had to be in the building. I went to my admin team and asked them if we could have some of our kids come in, those who were failing, or create a rotation schedule...that is what we did. We had to think outside the box.

When answering the Research Subquestions c and d, most interviewees paired their answers together. The challenges of deciding what to do aligned with the strengths they did not know they had. For example, Participants A and D discussed their biggest challenge was having so much on their plate and not being able to get it all done. Things were constantly changing, and they were feeling overwhelmed. They later realized how important it was to delegate. Participant D shared:

I was buried in work, I didn't get time at home with my family, it was tough, but through this process I have learned to let go and delegate. I developed teams with areas of expertise within my building; I don't think I would have done that without COVID. Working hard to build strong relationships and trust has not only allowed me to grow, but my team to grow as well.

Many participants (PB, PC, PE, PG, PI) were surprised at some of the wonderful things they were able to accomplish in such a challenging time. When COVID-19 shut down the school, Participant C was still working to build strong relationships with parents and students, stating,

When we shut school down, I still was working to build relationships with everyone. I tried to reach out on social media and make calls, but it was tough. I struggled not knowing if my kids were okay and did they have enough to eat. We had a food pickup program, but our line kept getting smaller. I got with the director in the bus barn, and we put together a schedule to deliver food via the buses. It worked great.

Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify the lived experiences of rural novice principals during the crisis known as COVID-19 and by using Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory, expand the current research on the leadership growth of rural, novice principals during a crisis. My goal was to answer the question, How did the leadership of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri evolve during the crisis of COVID-19? The researcher asked open-ended questions about the participants' experiences aligned with key leadership competencies to identify the perceptions of each participant's experience, leadership growth, and personal self-efficacy. The interview protocol and questions were designed around the main research question and subquestions designed by the researcher. Participant answers were organized within these leadership categories to provide a clearer picture of the lived experiences of novice, rural principals during the onset of the crisis known as COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 through the fall of 2021.

Table 7

Classify of Experiences by Resources of Support and Decision Making Determined by the Researcher

	Independent	Partnership	Directives	Feeling
Experiences by participants classification	51	73	24	11

Note. Classification of experiences mentioned in the interview transcripts.

Participant experiences were then categorized by sources of support, influence, or inspiration. Across the nine interviews there were over 80 explanations of events or leadership experiences that participants shared. In Table 7, these results reflect the number of times the participants mentioned completing activities individually through trial and error, with others, because of others, or because they were told. Since the participants were not asked directly which source aided them, but asked in a general open-ended format, the researcher placed mention of experiences into four categories: Independent, Partnership, Directive, and Feelings and recorded how often they were discussed. Many had more than one category or combination of more than one mentioned during a single event. These were then compared to the terms separated into the four main sources of influence to try to determine how rural, novice principals improved their skills or self-efficacy during the 2019 school shutdown through the fall of 2021.

Table 8

Coding Terms based on four main sources of influences to build their self-efficacy

Mastery Experience	Vicarious Experiences	Social Persuasion	Physiological and Emotional States
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Virtual Instruction •Technology •Observations •Feedback (Coaching) •Curriculum •Standards (Credits) •Safety •Student Achievement •Quarantine/Closures •Resources (Food, Internet, Needs) •Mental Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mentor •Administration •Collaboration •Support/PLC •Safety •Curriculum •Standards/Credits •Quarantine/Closures •Resources (Food, Internet, Needs) •Mental Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Mentor •Administration •Teachers/Staff •Quarantine/Closures •Resources (Food, Internet, Needs) •Mental Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Patience •Masks •Safety •Quarantine/Closures •Resources (Food, Internet, Needs) •Mental Health

Note. Coded terms were the key terms from the interview transcripts presented in Table 3.

In Table 8 the researcher separated the key terms into Bandura’s (1977) and Pajares & Schunk’s (2001) four main sources of influences to build their self-efficacy. While many of the key words from the participants’ interviews were placed in multiple categories, by sorting them into these four sources of influence the research could examine the data more accurately. Participants in this survey attended their graduate programs to obtain principal certification starting 2013 and going through 2018, so when entering their role in 2019, they could have been anywhere from 1 to 6 years removed from their educational programs. Education programs have changed in the last few years and the declarative knowledge they obtained may not be exactly what they needed. Participant F talked about how much she would have “loved to have more training in mental health.” Participant G said, “My principal program did not teach me how to deal with a global pandemic; hindsight is 20/20. However, even a class on dealing with more real-life issues may have helped.”

All participants recalled their experiences during COVID-19 and shared resources that were beneficial to them as they navigated changes. Participant G recalled the importance of working with the administrative team to review other school districts' building reentry plans. "We were not the experts; most districts close to us put their plans out early, we just pulled them up and aligned ours with theirs." Participant F shared the perspective of looking at other building or district initiatives and decisions and either aligning or modifying them to fit PF's building's needs. PF shared:

I know our superintendent would collaborate with other superintendents. If the district down the road was removing their mask mandate, we felt more comfortable doing it. That's when we heard about people delivering food on their school bus, we thought, what a great idea! We could do that too.

Principals who had the opportunity to view others in their role as being successful also then took risks by building their self-efficacy through vicarious experiences. Many participants (PA, PB, PE, PG, PH, PI) discussed things they saw within other districts during the interview process. All participants during their interview recalled experiences of uncertainty, but when looking back at these specific experiences, they talked about what a learning opportunity they became.

Summary

Chapter Four provided the lived experiences, strengths, and opportunities of nine rural, novice principals in the State of Missouri during the crisis known as COVID-19 from the spring of 2020 through the fall of 2021. This research study examined what leadership skills, behaviors, and competencies were crucial to the participants' leadership journeys during this challenging time. Documenting the lived experiences of rural, novice

principals during this crisis helped the researcher understand the specific population's unique experiences as a whole. Leadership competencies presented within the literature review provided an opportunity to examine all aspects of leadership during a time of crisis. Bandura's (1997) SET helped the researcher to understand how the participants gained their confidence in their ability to lead and learn during this period. The data from this research study will help begin to fill the gap on how rural, novice principals' leadership evolved during a time of crisis, specifically, the crisis known as COVID-19.

In the closing chapter, Chapter five, the researcher will examine the data collected from semi-structured interviews, the participants' self-reflection tool, and archival data to summarize the key findings of this research study. Using the five domains of leadership and Bandura's (1997) SET, key facts will be presented to answer the overarching research question, How did the leadership of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri evolve during the crisis of COVID-19? and the five subquestions. A summary will be presented in a discussion section that focuses on the general findings narrowing to specific details. Next, recommendations for further studies will be proposed based on what was discovered in the literature review and data analysis. Finally, a conclusion to this research study is shared, helping to fill the gap in current literature regarding the evolution of leadership of rural, novice principals during a crisis.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Introdcution

Novice, rural principals who entered their role for the first time in the fall of 2019 experienced a global pandemic unlike anything anyone had experienced before (Harris & Jones, 2020; Kavrayici & Kesin, 2021; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Pollack, 2020; Superville, 2021). Two years into a national pandemic, rural novice principals and other educational leaders across the nation are still facing physical and emotional strains that have elevated the stress of their role to extreme levels (C. Jones, 2022; Molffit 2022; Superville, 2022). However, the role of the principal is more important than ever. Many principals and school leaders are resilient and those that are remaining in the field are finding growth and success during this ever-changing and challenging time (C. Jones, 2022).

The day-to-day expectations of building principals continues to evolve (Moffitt, 2022). When this research study was in its final stage of completion in February of 2022, Missouri Senator Eric Burlison had just announced that COVID-19 cases were on the decline and the final school in Missouri, Greenwood Laboratory School in Springfield, was lifting its mask mandate. While COVID-19 concerns seemed to be diminishing, what was left behind were new challenges for educational leaders. Building leaders were experiencing staffing shortages with limited availability of subs and the glooming reality of a nationwide teacher shortage, a rise in student mental health concerns, and a heightened political environment where resources were becoming even more limited. Job satisfaction was at an all-time low (Cabeen, 2022). However, for building principals who

have been able to grow their leadership during these challenging times and find a way to cope with the stress of their daily tasks, some are suddenly remembering and focusing on their “why”... the students and their staff (Cabeen, 2022).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify the lived experiences of rural novice principals during the pandemic known as COVID-19 and identify how their leadership evolved and decisions were made during this time of crisis. Participants for this study were rural, novice principals in their first 3 years of principalship within a public school during the onset of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020. One participant from each of the RPDCs was selected to gather a sampling of the lived experiences of principals across the state of Missouri. These principals also participated in the Missouri Leadership Development System Emerging Leader Program. Participants represented elementary, middle, high and alternative school buildings as presented in Table 2. This study was guided by the central research question: How did the leadership of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri evolve during the crisis of COVID-19? The following subquestions were also addressed:

- a. What leadership behaviors and skills did rural, novice principals identify as crucial for leading and learning during COVID-19?
- b. What support systems did rural, novice principals identify as most impactful for leading and learning during COVID-19?
- c. What unexpected obstacles did rural, novice principals encounter during COVID-19 that impeded their building’s vision?
- d. What leadership strengths did rural, novice principals identify within themselves following COVID-19?

- e. What were the perceptions of rural, novice principals regarding their ability to lead and learn during COVID-19?

The framework used for this qualitative phenomenological study was Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory (SET), one part of his (1977) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). This framework was selected since it deals directly with an individual's perceived capabilities to be successful in their experiences based on the opportunities given to develop their procedural and declarative knowledge (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Novice, rural principals who entered their role in the fall of 2019 experienced a global pandemic unlike anything anyone had experienced before (Harris & Jones, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Pollack, 2020; Superville, 2021). Bandura (1997) suggested that to build self-efficacy individuals must have the opportunity to develop mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and emotional and physiological awareness. The following is a discussion and conclusions of the lived experiences of the rural, novice principals who participated in this research study, recommendations for further studies, the significance of this study, and the contribution of additional educational research in the areas of leadership of the rural, novice principal.

Summary of Findings

The researcher selected a qualitative phenomenological study to understand the lived experiences of rural, novice principals in the State of Missouri during the crisis known as COVID-19 and identify how their leadership evolved and decisions were made using Bandura's (1997) SET. Phenomenological research seeks to explore the lived experiences and capture the feelings of individuals during a phenomenon occurrence to better understand the event as a whole (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth,

2018; Peoples, 2021; Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015). Additionally, phenomenological researchers provide a foundation for understanding how individuals experience a specific situation (Moustakas, 1994). This study allowed the researcher to answer the central question, How did the leadership of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri evolve during the crisis of COVID-19? The researcher used semi-structured interviews to capture nine participants' lived experiences based on key leadership competencies and ways to develop self-efficacy presented in the literature review.

Upon completion of the interview transcripts and the identification of themes, each individual participant was given the opportunity to review their personal data for clarification and accuracy. In an attempt to triangulate the data, the researcher then collected and reviewed each individual's MLDS Emerging Leader Self- Reflection Tool (Appendix E). Questions were asked regarding when the pre and post reflections were completed and discussion between researcher and participant identified any changes made. In addition, the researcher reviewed documents from each individual school district. Documents included the school district's reentry plan, the student handbook, the faculty handbook, and the districts SRCSP. If the researcher identified a discrepancy between these documents and the interview transcripts, the participants were able to provide clarification if necessary.

To answer the central research question, common themes were first developed by the researcher. Participant responses were categorized into four leadership areas: people centered, student achievement, competing priorities, and task-oriented responsibilities. These four areas were consistent with the research around leadership competencies, however, there was an increase in the need for first-year principals to manage competing

priorities during this crisis time. Next, the researcher sorted common terms that aligned with the current literature around the leadership growth of rural, novice principals during a crisis, leadership competencies, and the four ways to build self-efficacy presented by Bandura (1997) and Pajeras and Schunk (2001). The themes presented were reviewed and compared to archival documents and SRCSP plans to determine the answer to the research question, How did rural, novice principals' leadership evolve during the crisis known as COVID-19? Data analysis in Chapter Four (Table 4) identified the most common used terms in the audio transcriptions as Teachers (Staff), Students (Kids), Culture (Relationships), Flexibility (Patience), Collaboration (Support), and Communication. While these terms came as no surprise to the researcher based on the literature, their relevance needed a closer look. These common themes were then further dissected into four main themes developed by the researcher (Table 5) and leadership competency categories (Table 6) to establish areas of focus for principals during this period. There were some differences in frequency between building classifications. Little differences were determined between homegrown leaders, newly hired, and returning principals. However, common themes emerged from elementary principals which were different than middle school and high school principals. In addition, experiences were recorded by areas of support, influence, or inspiration (Table 7). Finally, themes were then sorted by influences on individuals' self-efficacy (Table 8), in hopes to determine how decisions were made and leadership competencies were developed. According to research, novice principals tend to feel isolated and alone (Spillane & Lee, 2014). However, participants within this study referenced the support of others as the Number 1 thing they needed during this time period. Relationships became the priority.

Discussion

This research study was guided by the central question, How did the leadership of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri evolve during the crisis known as COVID-19? To examine this question, the researcher used the 32 leadership competencies represented in the five domains of leadership established by the RPDC's Missouri Leadership Development System (MLDS) program along with Bandura's (1977) SET. By researching the leadership competencies and examining how the participants gained self-efficacy in these areas, the researcher aimed to explain the lived experiences of rural, novice principals during this unprecedented time. Additionally, the researcher sought to fill a gap in educational research when it comes to the evolution of leadership growth of rural, novice principals during a crisis. Findings from this research study, answers to the research question and subquestions, and a discussion of their significance will be discussed in the following subsections: Leadership Growth During COVID-19 and Decision Making During a Crisis.

All research faces limitations. Limitations that affected this study that were not controlled by the researcher were the willingness of participants to discuss the components and circumstances of the events around COVID-19, the amount of participants who agreed to participate in the survey who met the predetermined delimitations, the ability to contact participants that met the preset delimitations due to confidentiality concerns, and the varied ability levels and experiences of participants prior to the onset of COVID-19. All participants shared portions or aspects of their leadership journey during this time period, and most participants (PA, PB, PC, PD, PF, PH, PI) met the researcher for the first time during the interview. Even though questions

and interview protocols were shared prior, and confidentiality was explained, some participants seemed hesitant to expand their answers (PC,PD, PH). Participants' levels of comfort varied when sharing their personal leadership journey. The researcher set delimitations regarding the years of service in a principal role, rural location, and requirement of principal's involvement in the MLDS Emerging Leader Program. By setting these delimitations, the sampling was small. The researcher planned to work with each RPDC individually to determine candidates but due to confidentiality concerns, the researcher worked with the state MLDS coordinator to communicate the need for research participants. Communication was sent to the state coordinator, forwarded to the regional leaders and then finally shared with participants. While the researcher was lucky enough to have the necessary number of individuals agree to participate by signing the informed consent and participating in the interview process, there was a limited number to choose from, causing a concern for diversity if the research study was to be replicated. Finally, participants within his study completed different principal preparation programs and had diverse leadership experiences prior to this research study. The researcher had no knowledge of previous crisis experiences or declarative knowledge gained by participants.

Leadership Growth During COVID-19

One of the goals of this research study was to identify the lived experiences of rural, novice principals during COVID-19 to better understand the evolution of leadership during a crisis. To accomplish this goal, it was important to understand the leadership competencies and expectations of all principals prior to the spring of 2020 and to explore principal leadership during a previous crisis. Prior research conducted around these topics

was presented in the literature review. A brief review reminds the reader, the role of the principal is the most vital role in determining overall school effectiveness and leading change in the school environment (Day et al., 2011; Fullan, 2016; Marzano et al., 2005; Sebastain et al., 2019). Actions and decisions made during challenging times are reflective of the principal's personal self-efficacy beliefs (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Money & Pacifici, 2020). Principals that exhibit a high level of self-efficacy display flexibility, persistence, willingness to try new strategies, and remain calm and confident in tough situations (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2005).

Transformational leadership develops over time and focuses on the educational leader's ethical and moral ability to motivate others to accomplish skills and tasks higher than their perceived self-efficacy level (Bandura, 1977; Burns, 1979). Rural, novice principals entered their role with a foundation of declarative knowledge from their educational institution expecting to have the time to develop their transformational leadership skills by gaining procedural knowledge through practicing leadership skills and building competencies. However, this became more challenging when rural, novice principals faced a global emergency that shifted their job responsibilities quickly during the crisis of COVID-19 (Pollack, 2020; Superville, 2020).

Rural district principals have more variety in job responsibilities than their suburban and urban counterparts (Preston et al., 2014; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). During the crisis of COVID-19 these additional responsibilities did not disappear but were exacerbated by the needs of their stakeholders. For example, Participant G in the interview talked about the magnitude of the role:

I never knew what fire to put out first, I was pulled in multiple directions, I was a nurse, a contact tracer, a counselor, a cook putting together meals, every day it was something different...on top of my normal role.

Participant A agreed, “I thought I knew what the role of the principal was. Then COVID hit, I became many other things, too many to count.” Competing priorities forced rural, novice principals to prioritize their leadership focus. In this research study, participants reported their leadership experiences and the researcher was able to categorize them into four different areas: -people centered, student achievement, competing priorities, and task oriented responsibilities- and then compare them to the five different leadership domains: -relational, innovative, instructional, managerial, and visionary-, to identify where each individual focused their time and found growth during the events of COVID-19. When reviewing how leadership evolved during COVID-19, the researcher looked at behaviors and skills, support systems, obstacles faced, and finally perceptions and abilities of the leaders.

When looking at leadership behaviors and skills, the two leadership domains most frequently discussed by the participants of this study were relational leadership and innovative leadership. Leaders with strong relationship skills have become a priority for businesses, communities, and school organizations (Branson & Marra, 2019). Rural administrators tend to have strong community ties and find success when it comes to relational leadership (Hansen, 2018; Hayes et al., 2021; Wiczorek & Manard, 2018). Innovative leadership comes over time and allows the leader to use their skills developed as reflective practitioners to implement change (MLDS, 2018). These two leadership domains pair well together especially in a crisis since organizations must have a strong

sense of community or a solid foundation of trust among employees, so they feel safe to take risks or make changes (Sagnak et al., 2015). These connections were evident during the crisis known as COVID-19. The participants' source of growth came primarily from their interactions with others and their willingness to try different things on their own. These two areas align closely with mastery and vicarious experiences. This appears to follow right in line with Bandura's (1997) most influential ways to build self-efficacy. Following closely behind, high school and middle school principals noted instructional leadership, however this was not the case for some elementary buildings (PG, PI). Instead, elementary buildings displayed a stronger connection with their mentors and achieved growth through social persuasion more than their middle school and high school peers.

Relational leaders take time to build strong relationships with their staff, students, and community. They focus on shared power structure and lead in a caring manner (Shapiro & Gross, 2013). Rural principals find they can make stronger connections with their communities due to their limited numbers (Hayes et al., 2021; Manard, 2017). This was evident in the feedback from the study participants; even new principals to their districts were building strong relationships. Participant E recalled:

We were all going through the same thing; it brought us together, I was new in the district, but no one ever made me feel new, we were a family, and we would do anything to help one another. Teachers, students, parents, community members, it didn't matter, everyone wanted to help.

Principal participants who entered their first or second year as a building principal during COVID-19 in the fall of 2019 were working to build strong relationships. It was

necessary for the process to accelerate for these individuals because of the amount of trust rural, novice principals needed to have when school closed in the spring of 2020. According to all participants, building recommunication with stakeholders was “more important than ever” (Participant D). The way this was accomplished “came natural” according to Participants E, F and G. Participant F stated,

It was trial and error, some days I would make people mad, others they felt I was the best support. I had to learn to read people. None of us had the answers, we just tried our best, I think being transparent with my staff helped that.

In the last 3 years, principals have used obstacles and challenges they faced to become more innovative leaders (Ruggirello, 2021). While rural, novice principals during COVID-19 may have not initiated the change, they were left in charge as to how to implement the needed changes to ensure the safety and success of their students, teachers, and community. The term “initiative” ranked in the lowest five categories during the interview process; a more in-depth review of the results revealed for the researcher the ability to categorize participant feedback showing the greatest growth for these nine participants was in the area of becoming innovative leaders. Research suggests leaders who balance multiple, competing demands and adjust their leadership to meet these challenges are innovative leaders (Ariyani et al., 2021). The events of COVID-19 allowed every leader to accept this challenge.

During their initial MLDS Emerging Leader Self-Reflection Evaluation, participants scored themselves lower on innovation as “not accomplished or somewhat accomplished,” but after gaining additional experience and reflecting on their journey, all participants believed they had accomplished great gains in the area of innovative

leadership. Everyday tasks like hallway transitions, lunchroom schedules, cleaning schedules, and student seating charts needed to be modified to keep students and staff safe. While these are managerial tasks, principals and district leaders needed to think outside the box to figure them out. Participant I in an elementary setting talked about strategic placement of students in the classroom, at lunch, and especially for special classes and Title reading instruction:

Due to our health department guidelines, students had to be so far apart and around each other less than 15 minutes so we didn't have to do so many quarantines. Try that with the littles, we did our best. We got creative...we changed our Title time to be only 10 minutes, and the teacher went to them on a cart. That way it never ran over the time, but students would still get the intervention they needed. Lunch was interesting, we tried to give teachers a break, so they didn't have to eat in the classroom, so we had to place students facing certain directions and so many spaces apart...again we had to get creative.

Participant F also needed to be creative:

Our decisions were all based on what is best for students, I had a few students that really struggled when we were shut down in the spring (2020). When we started the 2020-2021 school year and sickness started to come up and it looked like we were going to shut down again, I was very worried about them. I went to the rest of the administrators and proposed we allow certain high-risk kids to come in on different days, so they could be IN school. They loved it. So, we made the changes, best thing we could've done.

Participant A focused on the innovation behind the instructional changes that needed to be made:

We had to think differently. Teachers had to teach differently. We had virtual and live instruction going at the same time. Teachers needed help, resources, training. We met as an administrative team regularly to set and change expectations. It couldn't be done like it had always been done.

In this study, principals worked to gain self-efficacy mostly through mastery and vicarious experiences based upon their interview responses. These methods of obtainment were consistent with Bandura (1986), who identified mastery experience as the most frequent, effective, and influential way to build self-efficacy and vicarious experience as a close second. Regarding mastery experiences, all participants recalled times where they tried something to see if it would work. When asked what they learned as a leader during this time, most responded with a story that recalled something they either tried, causing them to succeed or fail, and how they learned from it. "I don't know what type of leader I would be today if I hadn't gone through all of this," shared Participant D. "Everyday was something new and I learned every day, I am stronger because of it." This perspective was also shared by Participant B: "I know I am a better leader because of COVID; it hasn't been easy, but I have grown. I can do things now I wasn't sure I could do before."

While all participants discussed experiences they achieved through mastery experiences, they also shared opportunities to learn and grow from others. These were defined as vicarious experiences. Learning through vicarious experiences means observing someone similar in role and abilities, finding the success in what they do, and

then believing you can do the same (Bandura, 1977; Hernandez, 2019; Pajares, 2002). Many districts, superintendents, and principals were forced to do things differently. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were filled with the success stories of other districts. The MLDS organization would hold webinars and leadership meetings so participants could learn from each other. Participant B said, “I was jumping on Zoom calls and forums all the time with my MLDS group. That is where I got most of my ideas to try.” Similarly, Participant C shared, “There were a few people in my cohort that were feeling really good about what they were doing, I often called them to get ideas.” Working together and learning from others is not a new concept in education; building a professional learning network is vital.

Finally, all participants discussed the importance of strong relationships with external and internal peers. In addition to learning vicariously from others, Participants E and G and I also reflected on how they learned by the feedback from their mentors and superintendent. This type of feedback can be classified by Bandura (1977) as social persuasion. Participant E shared, “When times were tough and I wasn’t sure, my mentor or my superintendent would remind me I wasn’t alone, and I was doing a good job. Their belief in me helped me to believe in myself.” Similarly, Participant I reflected, “My mentor was my biggest supporter and my toughest critic. We were all struggling and she helped me to understand that and find the positives in every decision I made.”

Decision Making During a Crisis

At the onset of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, rural, novice principals faced challenges and obstacles they had never faced before. Educational institutions were disrupted, leading to needed changes in

instructional strategies, technology, student achievement, special services, and mental health support for students, parents, and teachers to name a few (Harris & Jones, 2020; Huck & Zhang, 2021). Principals needed to develop new ways to communicate and collaborate, all while maintaining a positive school culture (Borup et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2020, Huber & Helm, 2020), not to mention the operational changes that needed to be put in place to ensure the safety of everyone involved. During the interviews all principals shared changes they needed to make within their buildings to make it safe for learning when they returned in the fall of 2020. School reentry plans also reflected these changes as well as student handbooks. All included a disclaimer letting parents and students know that changes may be made due to feedback from the local health department, or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). When discussing resources that aided participants during this time they centered around people, the local health department, and the CDC.

When it came to making decisions, principals within this study relied on their support systems. Traditionally, novice principals face strong feelings of isolation and loneliness (Spillane & Lee, 2014; Swen, 2020). Building a strong professional learning community (PLC) can help to either improve or decrease their levels of self-efficacy (Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Bauer & Silver, 2018). Many participants reported they would meet or talk

with other principals to see what was happening within in their buildings and discuss how successful their changes were. For example, Participant G shared, “I always called (_____), they are about the same size as me and the principal always had great ideas. If it was working for them, I knew it would work for me.” Participant B recalled how people on social media impacted her leadership: “I got some great ideas from Facebook groups I belong to, everyone was trying new things and it was working for them, I thought why not, It may work for us.” For Participants E and G and I, their assigned mentor was a main source of support for them. While the others, Participants A, B, C, D, F, and H all raved on their relationships with their additional administrative team. Participant A shared:

We met often as an administrative team; as a first-year principal, I couldn’ t ask

for more. We made a lot of decisions together and their leadership made my journey easier. I don’ t know if I would’ ve gotten that without all our struggles.

With the completion of 2020-2021 school year, participants all agreed they were hoping that things would get better. Throughout the summer of 2021, COVID-19 positivity and hospitalization rates began to rise rapidly again throughout Missouri (West & Ansari, 2021; Yong, 2021). It was obvious that the intent to return to normalcy was not going to happen. The

impact of the events of COVID-19 would not only impact the 2019-2020 year, but others to come. When generalizing the overall lived experiences of the participants within this study, you can only reflect on their experiences thus far. Responses reflect leaders who were forced into a change process that no one had ever experienced before. This is consistent with current research that suggests the role of a principal has changed and it is harder than ever (Harris & Jones, 2020; McLeod & Dulsky, 2021; Pollack, 2020; Superville, 2021). While the stress of these additional challenges weighing heavily on their personal social and emotional states (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020), leaders prevailed and found support in other ways. Resources such as people, both internal and external, local health departments, and everyone's intuition and ability to take initiative to try and see what would happen led principals through this journey. This built not only professional learning community, but their personal self-efficacy along the way through mastery and vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1997). When times were tough and decisions needed to be made, the people around them aided in this process.

During this study, one aspect that was surprising was that of the rural, novice principals' ability to quickly establish trust with their students, staff, and parents to make needed changes. During this time, they were able to balance competing tasks and act quickly to address competing priorities,

the true indicators of an innovative leader (Ariyani et al., 2021). Research suggests that leaders need time to develop trust and build a guiding coalition to achieve change (Kotter, 2007; Sagnak et al., 2015). Rural, novice principals leading during the pandemic were given limited time to achieve this. However, since leading through a crisis is difficult during any point in one's career (Petriglieri, 2020), the participants within this study were able to rise to the occasion. All participants reported the sense of community and the importance of finding a stronger leader within themselves. While all participants reported this crisis was challenging, none of them reported they would be looking for roles outside of their current job.

Professional Implications

Every year approximately 20% of schools in the state of Missouri welcome a new principal to their school buildings with varied levels of preparation and self-efficacy to fulfill the needs of this vital role. This was no different as the pandemic known as COVID-19 occurred during the 2019-2020 school year and changed the face of education. The continuously changing challenges and emotional toll the coronavirus pandemic is forcing upon principals is pushing them out the door (Maxwell & Superville, 2020). Increased workload and constant scrutiny have made the role of the principal one of the most challenging in the school system. For over 3 years now, educators especially principals, have become the first line of defense for angry parents upset about mask mandates, student learning loss, quarantines, and policy and procedure changes (Ujifusa,

2021). Federal statistics report on average 20% of principals are new in their role each year (Bartanen, Grissom, & Rogers, 2019; Henry & Harbatkin, 2019). Placing principals with little to no training, professional development, or experience in dealing with these challenges sets them up for failure.

Actions and decisions made during challenging times are reflective of the principal's personal self-efficacy beliefs (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Money & Pacifici, 2020). Principals that exhibit a high level of self-efficacy display flexibility, persistence, willingness to try new strategies, and an ability to remain calm and confident in tough situations (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2005). The success of leading with these skills is built over time. In this research study all participants discussed the importance of flexibility, patience, and resilience. These terms were shared by participants 42.8% of the time during their interviews, the highest score behind Students (76.5%) and Teachers (63%). Participant A shared, "It was the biggest thing I learned for sure, and I am not sure if I would have truly understood how flexible I needed to be without the pandemic."

Providing opportunities for principal candidates to learn additional skills needed to handle stressful situations would only help them when transitioning into a new role. Novice principals and aspiring principals need access to professional learning that is current and meets their needs (Ruggirello, 2021). Program access would include principal preparation programs and aspiring principal training. The role of the principal has changed, and preparation programs need to change with it. The events of COVID-19 and the impact it made on educational demands of principals require changes in how they are prepared to lead. Principals within this study are asking for it. Participant F talked about how much she would have "loved to have more training in mental health."

Participant G said, “My principal program did not teach me how to deal with a global pandemic; hindsight is 20/20. However, even a class on dealing with more real-life issues may have helped.” Participant E shared, “The most helpful class I had was a scenarios-based class: this is the information you have, now what do you do? These are the types of classes that we need in principal programs.” Participant A shared his struggles,

I had just graduated with my certification in 2018 and was lucky enough to become a principal in 2019. It was rough, I could have used more field experience. Every day I was making decisions, hoping they were the right ones.

Another aspect uncovered during this research study was the challenges schools faced during this period regarding parent frustration due to political forces, state mandates, and health department regulations. Schools have long been a sense of controversy in American History. The challenges faced by educational leaders have a lasting effect on students and especially on new principals (Ujifusa, 2021). Principals are concerned about the mental and physical health of their students, their staff, their families, and finally, themselves (Maxwell & Superville, 2020). All participants discussed the toll this pandemic has taken on their health physically and emotionally. Comments like, “I’m exhausted every single day” (PI) and, “I’ve never been more tired than I am right now” (PH) are just a few shared. Physically principals were skipping meals, rarely going to the bathroom, and just running on autopilot. Participant A shared,

We were making things up as we went, there were so many things coming at me, it was hard to manage. I remember physically aching when I got home and my head hurt so bad, I just needed to go to bed.

While research reported the job of a principal is physically demanding, the participants in this study not only confirmed that but also shared it was escalated during this time of crisis.

Mentally, the events of COVID-19 were exhausting. Local health departments and state mandates were put in place for student safety, however according to Maxwell and Superville (2020), they were “confusing, often contradictory guidance that was constantly shifting” (p. 6). All participants within in this study discussed the biggest obstacle that impeded their ability to carry out their mission and vision to their leadership centered around the importance of meeting their students and staff’s mental needs. Participant I shared, “We just had to love our teachers and our kids, everything else could wait, our school counselor was busy all the time.” Participant E shared a similar perspective:

While I know there were some tasks that I had to complete as part of my job and I would try and prioritize them, I knew my most important job was talking to people and making sure they were okay. When we returned in 2020-2021 you could feel the heaviness of the unknown still in the air. The fact that we had small children masked all the time didn’t feel good, and everyone had a difference of opinion on it. It takes a toll carrying the weight of the building on your shoulders.

A recurring theme among participants included meeting the educational needs as well as the basic needs of the student population and ensuring equity among them. Key issues like internet access, food insecurity, and potential student learning loss uncovered in the literature review were also reflected in this research study. Participant C recalled, “We had to turn to virtual learning overnight, problem is all our students don’t have

reliable internet. Many cannot afford to just get it, what about them?” Participant D echoed the same thoughts:

I worried about students who had to be home in difficult environments with no support, no internet, no way of continuing their learning...we worked hard to provide reliable internet. However, in our district, there are some places where it just wasn't possible; now those students are struggling, I have a fear they will never catch up.

Food preparation and delivery became the norm with all participants, and many were excited to be able to meet student food insecurities within the 2020-2021 school year. Additionally due to changes in federal regulations, “being able to make sure the students have at least two hot meals a day at no charge to them makes me sleep at night,” shared Participant G. “I am so glad the government took note; families are struggling and when we were out on shutdown, I know some of my kids didn't eat regularly.” In addition, each participant also discussed the fear of learning loss during the school shutdown in spring of 2020 and the fear of an increase in their current achievement gaps. Fear of broadening an already existing gap in those areas most vulnerable, such as Special Education, English Language Learners, and students on Free and Reduced Lunch status was a real concern of all participants. For years, federal and state regulations have placed an emphasis on state testing scores; the COVID-19 phenomenon has paused this focus and shifted it to that of meeting student needs. Based on prior regulations and professional experience, it is the researcher's opinion that those regulations will need to return and districts and principals must be prepared to shift to them.

Finally, principals are already exiting at high rates. The mass exodus of experienced principals could pose challenges for the development of new principals and the overall education of students (C. Jones, 2022; Maxwell & Superville, 2020). Adding the stress of a national pandemic and ever-changing policies will continue to burden school leaders. This study examined the experiences, challenges, and leadership growth of nine principals, understanding what they went through, what support they needed, and how they made their decisions. By pausing to reflect on the experience of building principals who lived through this experience and understanding their needs, school superintendents, preparation programs, and even politicians could gain a perspective of how to better support this vital population. There is still hope for permanent positive changes to come from this crisis.

Recommendations for Future Research

Overall, this research study aimed to fill the gap in how novice rural principals' leadership evolved during a crisis. It also provided an opportunity to review the motivation, prosperity, and success of nine rural, novice principals by exploring their lived experiences and identifying their development of self-efficacy through procedural and declarative knowledge as defined by Bandura (1977). While a general overview of experiences was shared by participants of this study, the perspectives of other individuals should be further researched to gather additional experiences within the COVID-19 phenomenon. These participants may include principals from all district sizes, including urban and suburban and administrators. By expanding the scope of participants, it would allow researchers to gain additional perspectives of the lived experiences of principals during COVID-19, strengthening the data and better understanding how this global

pandemic affected the leadership of multiple individuals. Furthermore, additional participants could be interviewed, and further data analysis conducted regarding the evolution of leadership growth and the differences between principals in elementary, middle, and high schools. In this study it was evident there was a clear difference between the leadership focus, experiences, and resources the participants relied on. By expanding the participants and narrowing the questions to identify the strengths, opportunities, and decisions based on the building level, additional research data may be found to either reinforce or expand this research or potentially provide a different narrative.

Also, a delimitation of this study was all participants were required to be in their first 3 years as principal and they needed to have attended the Missouri Leadership Development's Emerging Leadership Program. The researcher chose these delimitations to narrow the research study, which in turn, limited the number of participants available to participate. Further research could include principals at all stages of their career, since all principals experienced the phenomenon, potentially affecting their leadership growth in the spring of 2020 through the fall of 2021. The participant pool could be expanded further by removing the requirement of having the participants engaged in the Emerging Leader Program. Another aspect could be examining the similarities and differences between the participants who attended the Emerging Leader Program versus those that did not or those who may have continued to the next leadership program, Sustaining Leadership. Any expansion of the participant pool could provide a more global perspective as to the evolution of leadership of principals during a time of crisis, which would fill a current gap in research.

Finally, an additional opportunity for researchers for future examination could be to expand the research regarding principal preparation programs and the development rural, novice principals need to feel successful in their first few years of leadership, especially during a crisis. This suggestion is relevant due to feedback provided by the participants. Participant E shared:

All new principals are overwhelmed when they start their role, you just don't know what you don't know. However, there are some things that I would have loved to learn prior to starting in my position. You can't plan for a pandemic, but we should have more training on emergency situations; the educational environment is changing.

Participant D expressed a need for additional development, but more in the area of mental health. They recalled,

We had many classes in college that talked about leadership structures and how to lead, how to develop a leadership vision, but what I needed during COVID, was how to better support the stress my people were facing, teachers and students. We might've had one class that touched on culture and feelings, but in a high school, I think we are finding we are all counselors and so I would have loved some more training on mental health.

By expanding this research study to identify the developmental needs of rural, novice principals during a crisis, findings could be used to influence the course offerings of principal preparation programs, better expanding the declarative knowledge of principals as they enter their new role as leaders. This would potentially provide them with greater

self-efficacy leading to a greater success in student achievement and minimizing teacher burnout and turnover.

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study was based on Bandura's (1977) SET. Bandura's theory provided a framework for how rural, novice principals perceived their evolution of leadership and how decisions were made during the crisis known as the COVID-19 pandemic. In Missouri, rural school principals experienced at times some of the highest COVID rates, impacting the school environment, providing challenging learning opportunities for students and teachers, and even more challenges for principals (Keller, 2020). Rural, novice principals entered a role for which no textbook or previous experiences could prepare them. Rural, novice principals were responsible for improving their leadership competencies through mastery experiences at a higher rate than ever before, learning as they went. In the past, principals had the opportunity to learn from individuals that came before them or learn from those around them who may have achieved success. During the events of COVID-19, no one had been through this type of experience, no one had done this before. Novice principals were on the same level playing field with their seasoned peers.

Phenomenological research is designed to capture the lived experiences of a selected group of participants during a phenomenon to better understand the phenomenon as a whole (Peoples, 2021). This qualitative study aimed to do that regarding the leadership evolution of rural, novice principals. The experiences of each participant were captured through interviews after providing them with interview protocols (Appendix A) developed by the researcher, based on the literature review conducted for this study. The

following overarching research question was the basis for this study: How did the leadership of rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri evolve during the crisis of COVID-19?

When analyzing data for this research question and subquestions, key terms discovered in the interviews matched the key terms in the review of literature and fit within the themes presented throughout this study and included: Visionary Leadership, Relational Leadership, Innovative Leadership, Managerial Leadership, and Instructional Leadership. Additionally, the researcher was able to take the key terms and themes and place them into Bandura's (1977) and Pajares & Schunk's (2001) four ways to develop self-efficacy to identify the source of development and how decisions were made through either mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, or physiological or emotional states.

Overall, the growth of rural, novice leaders is not a new concept, and building self-efficacy takes time and practice. However, the experiences of the participants during a time of crisis have accelerated their learning and leadership, especially in the areas of relational and innovative leadership. Rural, novice principals were saddled with multiple tasks, competing priorities, and responsibility for finding creative ways to lead during the events of COVID-19. This was done through building mastery experience by trial and error, building strong relationships with peers to gain insights as to how others were leading through this challenging time (vicarious experiences), and finally by gaining feedback from those with whom they worked closest, their peers and mentors, either internal or external within their organizations (social persuasion).

Furthermore, research demonstrated the significance of building relationships with internal and external partners to not only develop self-efficacy skills within the leader, but also to collaborate and communicate ways to make more informed decisions for students, staff, and community to meet the academic and basic needs of students. The powerful impact the COVID-19 phenomenon had on the leadership evolution of all principals has forced the evaluation of preparation programs, resources, and mental health support for leaders everywhere. As future principals are being prepared for their role, it is important for stakeholders to review the events of COVID-19 and when the next crisis or another pandemic hits, our most vital tool to impact student achievement, the principal, is ready for the challenge.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Introduction

I'd like to thank you for being willing to participate in the interview process on your experiences as a novice, rural principal during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our interview today will last approximately 45 minutes during which I will be asking you a variety of questions in hopes to gain additional insight.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to identify the lived experiences of novice principals during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural districts across the State of Missouri and using Bandura's self-efficacy theory, gather an understanding of how their leadership evolved and decisions were made during a time of crisis.

I would like your permission to record this interview. Please note, no names or titles will be used in our report and all individuals will be referred to as participants. May I have your permission to record this interview? ___Yes ___No

If yes: Thank you! Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record.

If no: Thank you for letting me know. I will send you the notes after they are transcribed so you can clarify anything I may have misheard or misunderstood,

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? [Discuss questions] If any questions (or other questions) arise at any point in this interview, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

Interview Questions

(RQ=Research Question)

Demographic Questions:

- a. What population of students does your building serve?
 - b. When did you begin your journey as a principal?
 - c. Prior to your role as a principal had you served in leadership before?
1. What were some of the most important lessons you learned as an administrator during the crisis known as COVID-19? (RQ1a, RQ1e)

2. What resources were particularly beneficial to you as you navigated the daily tasks of a rural novice principal during the crisis known as COVID-19? (RQ1b)
3. As a new school leader how did you lead and support your teachers during the onset of the crisis of COVID-19 through the fall of 2021 to evaluate instructional practices and drive student learning? (Follow-up to include Observations, Equity, and Assessments) (RQ1)
4. As a novice rural principal how did you manage the day-to-day tasks and building responsibilities that come with the role as principal? (Follow-up to include, systems, routines, procedures, time management) (RQ1)
5. As a novice rural principal how did you build relationships with your staff in the fall of 2019, through the onset of the crisis of COVID-19, and finally through the fall of 2021? (Follow up: with students, parents, community, do you feel you had their trust? How did this stay the same or change?) (RQ1)
6. How are you addressing the uncertainties of your teachers, staff, and community during this time of crisis? (RQ1a)
7. Were there any new programs, initiatives, or changes you made or started to make during the crisis of COVID-19? How did they go? (RQ1c)
8. As a school leader how did you develop, implement, and/or maintain your mission, vision, and core values with your teachers during the onset of the crisis of COVID-19 through the fall of 2021? (RQ1c)
9. As a school leader, what do you wish you would have known to prepare you for this time period? (RQ1a, RQ1b)

10. What aspects of your role did you find most challenging during the crisis known as COVID-19? (RQ1c)

11. As you reflect on your first few years as a principal, how do you believe you have grown in your role? (RQ1d, RQ1e)

12. Did you identify any strengths within you that you didn't know you had or would think you would need? (RQ1d)

13. Is there anything else that I didn't ask about that stands out in your mind as to your leadership experiences during COVID-19?

Thank you so much for your time.

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Will be in a Google Form that will be linked to the email.

The advisor for this dissertation project is Dr. Mick Arnold, Professor Emeritus of Graduate Education at Southwest Baptist University. My study has been approved by the Research Review Board of Southwest Baptist University.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to identify the lived experiences of novice principals during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural districts across the State of Missouri and using Bandura's self-efficacy theory, gather an understanding of how their leadership evolved and decisions were made during a time of crisis.

Potential Benefits and Foreseeable Risks: Findings of this project will be integrated into reports, presentations, and publications that can advance the professional learning for leaders in order to foster high levels of collective teacher efficacy and job satisfaction. Findings may also be used in articles, presentations, and other publications to inform a national and international audience. Potential risk associated with participation in the study are loss of privacy should confidentiality of responses be compromised. The researcher has taken steps listed below to protect participants' identities in order to protect individuals from embarrassment that may be associated with the identities of respondents with their responses.

Confidentiality: All information associated with project participants will be kept in a locked office accessible only to the researcher. In accordance with the federal regulations, the research materials will be kept for a period of 5 years after the completion of the research project. No comments will be attributed to you by name in any reports or publications related to this study. You may be identified by category (e.g., Principal A), but a pseudonym will be used in place of your name in all reports. Neither the school nor the school district will be identified in any reports or publications related to this study.

Participation is Voluntary: Your voluntary participation in the interview is appreciated, and your responses will be kept anonymous. You may decline to answer any questions or discontinue participation in the study at any time without any negative consequences. If you choose to withdraw from the project, all interview data pertaining to you will be destroyed. Refusal to participate or discontinue participation at any time will not result in penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Interview Method: To provide flexibility you will be able to choose an in person or virtual interview. To honor your time, virtual interviews will be completed via a video call system, such as Google Meets or Zoom. If you do not have a preference for a specific product, the interview will be completed by a Google Meet that will be scheduled with you.

Request for the interview to be recorded will take place on the day of the meeting, which can help the researcher provide accurate transcripts of the participant's answers. You have the right to request the interview not be recorded, and the recording and/or interview be stopped at any time. Recordings and transcripts will be destroyed 7 years following the completion of this study.

Informed Consent and Choice of Interview Method: Your input is very valuable, and your participation will be greatly appreciated. Please indicate your willingness and consent to participate in the survey by digitally submitting approval at the bottom of this Informed Consent form. By providing your digital signature, you are consenting to allow use of your interview responses in this study. You will also share your initial consent for the interview to be recorded for the researcher's accurate transcription process.

Questions: If you have any questions regarding the research project, please do not hesitate to contact me or my research advisor. I can be reached at khartman@agpirates.com or (417) 631-3145. Dr. Mick Arnold can be reached at marnold@sbuniv.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Southwest Baptist University Research Review Board.

Sincerely,

Kelli L. Hartman
Ed.D. Student, Southwest Baptist University

APPENDIX C

Email Communication

Good Evening, _____ (participant),

I am a doctoral student completing my final requirements for the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership at Southwest Baptist University. I am currently working on my dissertation entitled "*Leading through a Pandemic, the Leadership Journey of Rural, Novice Principals during COVID-19.*"

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to identify the lived experiences of novice principals during the COVID-19 pandemic in rural districts across the State of Missouri and using Bandura's self-efficacy theory, gather an understanding of how their leadership evolved and decisions were made during a time of crisis.

At this time, my research proposal is complete, and I have received RRB approval from Southwest Baptist. I have been an educator for 13 years and have taken precautions to avoid any potential biases. I am seeking to interview you for approximately 45 minutes about your experiences as a rural, novice leader from the fall of 2019 through the conclusion of the 2020-2021 school year. Your interview will be used, along with eight other principals from Missouri public schools' individual interviews, to determine how leadership has evolved for rural, novice principals. The nine principals that will participate will represent the nine DESE RPDCs, to represent all regions of Missouri.

If you are willing to be part of this study, will you please fill out the following [Informed Consent Link](#) and confirm with a return email.

Attached to this email are the interview questions that will seek to help you share your lived experience.

If you have any questions or concerns and would like to further discuss this study, I would be happy to do so. Thank you in advance for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Kelli L Hartman
Ed.D. Student, Southwest Baptist University
Cell Phone: (417) 631-3145
Email: khartman@agpirates.com

APPENDIX D

Reminder Email

This email script will be sent to interview participants who chose the interview method of digital call two days before the scheduled interview.

Greetings! I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to remind you about our scheduled interview we have scheduled for _____ (date) at _____ (time). Your responses to the interview questions will be used as data to support my doctoral research study regarding the evolution of leadership during COVID-19 for rural, novice principals in the state of Missouri. The questions we will discuss are:

Demographic Questions:

- a. What population of students does your building serve?
 - b. When did you begin your journey as a principal?
 - c. Prior to your role as a principal had you served in leadership before?
1. What were some of the most important lessons you learned as an administrator during the crisis known as COVID-19? (RQ1a, RQ1e)
 2. What resources were particularly beneficial to you as you navigated the daily tasks of a rural novice principal during the crisis known as COVID-19? (RQ1b)
 3. As a new school leader how did you lead and support your teachers during the onset of the crisis of COVID-19 through the fall of 2021 to evaluate instructional practices and drive student learning? (Follow-up to include Observations, Equity, and Assessments) (RQ1)
 4. As a novice rural principal how did you manage the day-to-day tasks and building responsibilities that come with the role as principal? (Follow-up to include, systems, routines, procedures, time management) (RQ1)
 5. As a novice rural principal how did you build relationships with your staff in the fall of 2019, through the onset of the crisis of COVID-19, and finally through the fall of 2021?

(Follow up: with students, parents, community, do you feel you had their trust? How did this stay the same or change?) (RQ1)

6. How are you addressing the uncertainties of your teachers, staff, and community during this time of crisis? (RQ1a)

7. Were there any new programs, initiatives, or changes you made or started to make during the crisis of COVID-19? How did they go? (RQ1c)

8. As a school leader how did you develop, implement, and/or maintain your mission, vision, and core values with your teachers during the onset of the crisis of COVID-19 through the fall of 2021? (RQ1c)

9. As a school leader, what do you wish you would have known to prepare you for this time period? (RQ1a, RQ1b)

10. What aspects of your role did you find most challenging during the crisis known as COVID-19? (RQ1c)

11. As you reflect on your first few years as a principal, how do you believe you have grown in your role? (RQ1d, RQ1e)

12. Did you identify any strengths within you that you didn't know you had or would think you would need? (RQ1d)

13. Is there anything else that I didn't ask about that stands out in your mind as to your leadership experiences during COVID-19?

Please let me know if you have any questions that I can answer before we meet.

Please use [this link](#) [link provided] to access our meeting at the designated time.

Thank you for participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Kelli L. Hartman
Ed. D. Student, Southwest Baptist University

APPENDIX E

**Missouri Leadership Development Self-Reflection Tool
Emerging Level Leader Competency Assessment**

Description of Visionary Leader Competencies	Not Accomplished	Somewhat Accomplished	Fully Accomplished
Examines and begins to understand the existing core values and culture of the school and how it connects to the mission and vision			
Examines how the mission, vision, and core values are communicated to, and supported by, stakeholders			
Examines the sources of data used to evaluate the existing mission, vision, and core values			

Description of Instructional Leader Competencies	Not Accomplished	Somewhat Accomplished	Fully Accomplished
Examines and becomes familiar with the existing curriculum and learning standards			
Identifies existing instructional practices and reinforces those that are appropriate to the learning content			
Observes classroom instruction and provides meaningful and timely feedback to build teacher practice and student response			
Assesses teachers' understanding and use of formative and summative assessments and their relationship to student learning			
Assesses current teacher analysis of student level data for improving the instructional process			
Uses data from multiple sources to identify strengths and needs for professional learning			

Description of Managerial Leader Competencies	Not Accomplished	Somewhat Accomplished	Fully Accomplished
Analyzes the immediate and long-term needs for building and sustaining a safe and functional school			
Analyzes routines, instruction, procedures, and schedules for building and sustaining a safe, healthy, orderly, and compliant learning environment			
Analyzes personnel to determine areas of strength and need			
Determines the effectiveness of existing expectations, guidelines, and procedures			
Assesses and reviews data to determine appropriate interventions and support for personnel			
Understands and complies with district, state, and federal requirements for records and reporting			
Assesses how current fiscal resources support school goals and priorities and determines compliance with district, state, and federal requirements			
Assesses how current non-fiscal resources support school goals and priorities and determines compliance with district, state, and federal requirements			

Description of Relational Leader Competencies	Not Accomplished	Somewhat Accomplished	Fully Accomplished
Determines how to analyze the extent of diversity in the school based on ethnicity, gender, economic background, etc.			
Determines how resources and strategies in the school community are used for addressing the overall well-being of each student			
Builds relationships with students and establishes high expectations for behavior and learning to promote a positive culture			
Intentionally interacts with staff by being visible, accessible, and approachable			
Analyzes the culture of support and respect among staff and determines strengths and opportunities for improvement			
Identifies potential teacher leaders			
Creates formal and informal opportunities to interact with families			
Identifies key stakeholders in the community and begins to build relationships			

Description of Innovative Leader Competencies	Not Accomplished	Somewhat Accomplished	Fully Accomplished
Observes and gathers knowledge, skills, and best practices relevant to teaching and learning in the school			
Engages in professional networks to expand relationships and generate avenues for new knowledge and understanding			
Begins reflecting on experiences of being a new principal, personal strengths, and weaknesses and takes some action to grow and develop			
Demonstrates receptivity and generates a plan for receiving constructive feedback from others			
Begins applying time management practices to allow focus on the school's highest priorities			
Acts in accordance with the belief that a principal's primary role is to promote student learning			
Explores existing circumstances related to student learning and considers possible areas for change			

APPENDIX F

Human Research Training Certificate

CITI Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Human Research Curriculum Completion Report

Printed on 2/17/2013

Learner: Kelli Hartman (username: Kibhart)

Institution: Missouri State University

Contact Department: Educational Technology

Information Email: Kibhart@msu.com

Social & Behavioral Research:

Stage 1. Basic Course Passed on 02/17/13 (Ref # 9756059)

Required Modules	Date Completed	
Belmont Report and CITI Course Introduction	02/13/13	3/3 (100%)
History and Ethical Principles - SBR	02/13/13	5/5 (100%)
The Regulations and The Social and Behavioral Sciences - SBR	02/13/13	4/5 (80%)
Assessing Risk in Social and Behavioral Sciences - SBR	02/13/13	5/5 (100%)
Informed Consent - SBR	02/15/13	3/5 (60%)
Privacy and Confidentiality - SBR	02/15/13	3/5 (60%)
Research with Prisoners - SBR	02/16/13	4/4 (100%)
Research with Children - SBR	02/17/13	4/4 (100%)
Research in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools - SBR	02/17/13	3/4 (75%)
International Research - SBR	02/17/13	3/3 (100%)
Internet Research - SBR	02/17/13	4/5 (80%)
Avoiding Group Harms: U.S. Research Perspectives	02/17/13	3/3 (100%)
Research and HIPAA Privacy Protections	02/17/13	5/5 (100%)
Vulnerable Subjects - Research Involving Workers/Employees	02/17/13	4/4 (100%)