

## **Lessons Learned: The Stories of Three School Leaders**

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### **Abstract**

This case study aimed to look at the stories of building administrators during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic. The administrators' stories were examined through the lens of Getzels and Guba's (1957) Administrative Theory Framework and intended to reexamine principal preparation programs and professional development. The researchers conducted two interviews for each Midwest school administrator over three months. The first interview focused on the role of school administrators when schools closed due to COVID-19. The second interview focused on the role of the school administrators in the fall of 2020. The researchers discovered three dominant themes: school structure, new leadership roles, and relationships.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 Pandemic, narrative inquiry, Administrative Theory, school leadership, and school structure

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic significantly impacted our educational system during the Spring of 2020. The school system confronted many obstacles in its function, and administrators were forced to become flexible and adaptive to a changing leadership model. On March 12, 2020, Ohio governor Mike Dewine announced that all school systems must immediately close due to the COVID-19 Pandemic (Office of Governor Media, 2020). Governors from other Midwest states such as Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan elected to cancel school until further notice as the COVID-19 Pandemic presented unprecedented safety and health concerns to the general

population. As school districts scrambled to adhere to state authorities by closing schools, school leaders at the district and building levels were panicked, confused, and unprepared for a school system and structure that could no longer revolve around brick-and-mortar buildings and classrooms. The role of school administrators, specifically building principals and assistant principals, became undefined, uncertain, and unconventional.

This case study aimed to provide higher education, educational administration programs, and school superintendents a glimpse into the lived experiences of K-12 building principals and assistant principals as they attempted to lead their stakeholders in a virtual system and structure while incorporating traditional values during the COVID-19 pandemic. Inside perspective into the lived experiences yielded insight which allowed the researchers to ponder and examine future school administration preparation coursework and professional development for our school districts. The personal stories of these building administrators illuminated the researchers' understanding of the changes made to school leadership structures that have traditionally thrived and depended on educational stakeholders physically attending school. Ayers (2020) claimed that educators' lives are expressed through a series of stories and experiences where their professional and personal experiences are connected and coupled together. Just as "teachers' stories of their personal and professional experiences along with stories of young children have become critical devices in understanding the complex nature of a classroom" (Kim, 2016, p. 18), the complexities of a school system, especially during a time of crisis, can be examined through the lens of school administrators' experiences.

These parameters established multiple bounded systems where three different schools can

be explored through the lens of school building administrators' experiences. In this way, the study examined administrators' micro-level experiences as a way to understand the macro-level complexities of school systems as a whole over three months through a data collection process that involved interviews alongside artifacts gathered online (Creswell, 2005). Also, this study considered administrators' leadership through these case studies when schools pivoted to a virtual learning environment.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The COVID-19 pandemic forced administrators to abandon conventional leadership roles to foster in-person learning. With their leadership being relegated to online means, administrators needed to incorporate unfamiliar leadership conventions in their supervision, organizational management, and communication with teachers, staff, and students.

To examine administrators' experiences during COVID-19, the authors reviewed their experiences using Getzels and Guba's (1957) model for Administrative Theory with a Constructivist/Interpretivist Worldview. The researchers analyzed the professional and personal experiences of the three school leaders as they navigated the abrupt closing and uncertain opening of their schools using a Constructivist/Interpretivist Worldview lens (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers examined the school principals' experiences and the impact COVID-19 had on their leadership roles that typically rely upon positional power granted through a hierarchal leadership structure. Administrative Theory promoted a systematic, orderly division of labor among school

stakeholders and followed a top-to-bottom pyramid model, allowing administrators to relish their very clearly defined job description.

The authors posited that the "administrative process" was based on the satisfaction found when an individual was able to meet the expectations of the "nomothetic role" and "idiographic need-dispositions" as the "social system" goals are met (Getzels & Guba, 1957). "Nomothetic" was defined as the "normative dimension of activity in a social system," and "idiographic" referred to the "individual, personality, and need-disposition" within a social system (Getzels & Guba, 1957). In a school system structure, building principals are required to carry out specific "nomothetic" duties such as supervision of staff and students, execution of teacher evaluations, coordination and facilitation of faculty meetings, delivery of morning announcements, coordination of school safety drills, supervision of curriculum delivery, and the implementation of standardized testing (Burgett, 2014). Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) found that role functions were relatively normal. Most university principal preparation programs trained principals in school leadership courses such as law, finance, supervision, and internships. Principal preparation programs need to consider training principals with "new ways" (Superville, 2020) to reconcile traditional "nomothetic" (Getzels & Guba, 1957) job roles that remain relevant and paramount in a virtual learning environment. Regardless of in-person or virtual learning, future principals need a foundational level of understanding in school law, finance, supervision, and instruction. Even though the "nomothetic" (Getzels & Guba, 1957) duties of a school principal shifted to a virtual environment, the need to prepare school leaders for a virtual learning environment

was paramount. A recent study by the Wallace Foundation discovered that effective school principals helped increase academic performance among students in reading and math by approximately three months (Grissom et al., 2021). As schools attempted to operate an unplanned, virtual learning environment, principals were left to navigate this new environment without the education and training to handle these changes.

Administrators understood their leadership role to be based on "goals and purposes," which were divided into "tasks to achieve the goals" (Getzels & Guba, 1957). The impact of COVID-19 dismantled the normal duties of building administrators such as teacher evaluations, supervision, conferences, school improvement plans, etc. Building principals and assistant principals were confused about what their role had become while teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders were at home with prohibited access to physical interaction with their teachers and classmates. Therefore, the institution of school, role(s) served within a school, role expectations within a school, and the leadership of principals and assistant principals and the entire ecosystem experienced challenges that had never been seen before. Getzels and Guba (1957) did not anticipate public schools closing their doors due to a pandemic, nor did the scholars forecast the dependency schools might have on innovation and technology as the option of physically attending a classroom ceased to exist. Administrative Theory was applicable to this study to examine how the institutional roles of building administrators responded to the challenges created by the COVID-19 Pandemic. This study incorporated Getzels and Guba's (1957) Administrative Theory to examine how school leadership roles may need

to adapt to changing and challenging circumstances experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Method**

Through a qualitative case study methodology, the researchers examined the stories of three school building administrators in their leadership roles in three different educational levels—elementary, middle, and high school—in Midwest public schools. With the emphasis on school administrators' institutional roles, the researchers asked the following question: *What do administrators' narratives about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 reveal about their leadership practices and positional responsibilities?*

### **Research Design**

Through this case study analysis, the three researchers conducted an "in-depth analysis" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) on how the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the roles of three school building administrators at the start of the pandemic when schools were closed and during the midst of the pandemic when schools would traditionally open in August 2020. Also, the researchers considered the element of "time" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) as relevant to the design because school administrators led schools when they were directed to close in March and reopen in August 2020 under different circumstances due to the "event" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) of an existing pandemic. The researchers conducted two semi-structured interviews. The first interview focused on school building administrators' experiences when schools closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic and had six questions and two follow-up questions (Appendix

A). The second interview focused on school building administrators' experiences when schools opened or were supposed to open in August 2020 as the country was still in the pandemic. Because this is a case study descriptive research that involves two intensive, extended interviews, only three participants were selected, which is aligned with Salkind's (2009) discussion about selecting a sample for a case study.

This qualitative case study relied on non-random sampling techniques because this technique provided deep information about the subject (Salkind, 2009). The participants were selected from the target population based on purposeful sampling. The researchers selected a segment of the school administrators selected three districts in the Midwest region due to limited time and financial resources.

Although purposeful sampling led to a lack of generalization, it allowed the researchers to gather valuable informants and rich information (Salkind, 2009).

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

### ***Research Description***

The researchers in this case study are three current educational assistant professors at a Midwest university located in an urban setting. In addition, the three researchers experienced educational facilities that were abruptly closed due to the COVID-19 Pandemic in March 2020. Two assistant professors, one male, and the other

female, racially identified as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). The third assistant professor racially identified as a White female. The assistant professors were required to finish instructing their students in a virtual learning environment and lived with the uncertainty about the campus opening in the Fall of 2020. Also, the three researchers have prior K-12 classroom teaching experience, and two of the researchers are former building principals. The White female assistant professor is faculty in Educational Foundations and Secondary Education. The second BIPOC female assistant professor is faculty in Elementary Education. The third BIPOC male assistant professor is faculty in the Educational Administration Department.

### ***Participants and Recruitment Process***

This research study took place in two Midwest U.S. states, and purposive sampling was used for the study. The rationale behind using purposive sampling was twofold. First, school building administrators, principals, and assistant principals were the "specific predefined group" (Trochim & Donnelley, 2008). Other school employees' groups were not considered for this research, as the focus was on school leaders. Second, the researchers desired to conduct school building administrator interviews in a timely fashion so that the leaders could provide current and in-depth narratives of the events and experiences that stemmed from closing and opening a school year due to a pandemic. Trochim & Donnelly (2008) claimed that "purposive sampling can be useful in situations where you need to reach a targeted sample quickly" (p. 49). Also, Creswell (2005) defined purposeful sampling as the internal selection of participants for a study that allows the researcher to learn and understand their particular life experiences.



Because the researchers sought a specific sample group, school building administrators, and considered the importance of securing a sample in a timely fashion, they attempted to secure a sample from their professional K-12 contacts serving in two different states. The first researcher (BIPOC male) contacted five school building administrators by email from one school district. The five school building administrators served in a school district located in an urban setting outside a large Midwest City. Two of the five contacted school building administrators agreed to participate in the study. One of the participants served as an elementary principal, and the other building principal served at a middle school. The second researcher (BIPOC female) contacted three school administrators serving in one urban school district in a Midwest City. All three building administrators declined participation due to the sensitivity of the topic and time commitments to work. The third researcher (White female) contacted four school building administrators serving in two different school districts outside a large Midwest City. Only one of the building administrators agreed to participate in the study. He served as an assistant principal of a large urban high school.

This purposeful sampling pulled administrators from three levels – elementary, middle, and high school. The final sample consists of three male administrators in their mid-30s who served in the public sector with a student population of more than 50% non-White. Superville (2022) discovered that almost 80 percent of all school principals in the United States are White, with approximately 6.8 years of administrative experience.

Therefore, all participants needed to have at least four years of experience in administration, school building administrator licensure, and a Master's in Education. The

three administrators were issued the following pseudonyms: Mr. Johnson, Mr. Lindahl, and Mr. Clarke. Table 1 illustrates the school demographics, where the three-building administrators served students from three different grade level bands. In addition, it was delineated that the schools in the Fall of 2020 were still providing instruction online during that data collection, and students were not in the building. Finally, a list of three school administrators was furnished through prior school administration relationships in the field, and letters were sent out inviting them to participate in the study with an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved application.

**Table 1**

*Participants' School District Demographics*

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	<u>School 1</u>	<u>School 2</u>	<u>School 3</u>
Pseudonym	Mr. Johnson	Mr. Lindahl	Mr. Clarke
Role	Principal	Principal	Assistant Principal
% of Students with disabilities	14.0%	14.0%	23.4%
% of Caucasian	23.4%	23.4%	11.2%
% of African-American	11.4%	11.4%	69.6%
% of Hispanic	59.4%	59.4%	6.3%
% of Asian/Pacific Islander	3.4%	3.4%	1.5%
% of multiracial	2.1%	2.1%	10.5%
% of Free-Reduced Lunch	51.4%	51.4%	94.9%

% of EL Learners	26.4%	26.4%	5.1%
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*Note:* This table illustrates the demographic data collected from participants' school districts. It is adapted from the Illinois State Board of Education (2020) and the Ohio Department of Education (2020). If enrollment was less than 10, the district did not calculate the district report card results.

### **Data Collection**

The three administrators were examined as they transitioned from a traditional school structure to a remote and online model. All interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom Video Communication. The BIPOC male researcher conducted all six interviews with the three school building administrators. For twenty years, this researcher served as an elementary, middle, and high school building administrator in urban schools. As a result, the BIPOC male researcher's years of experience provided expertise with the roles of school building leaders across three different school levels.

Participants reviewed and signed consent to have interviews recorded. The BIPOC male researcher conducted two virtual semi-structured interviews using Zoom with each administrator. The three administrators were issued the following pseudonyms to protect their identities: Mr. Johnson, Mr. Lindahl, and Mr. Clarke. They worked in three Midwest public schools. Mr. Lindahl was first interviewed on September 14, 2020, from 12 p.m. to 1:00 p.m., and the second interview occurred on October 6, 2020, from noon 12:40 p.m. Mr. Johnson was first interviewed on September 18, 2020, from 2:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., and the second interview was October 2, 2020, from 11:00

a.m. to 11:35 a.m. Mr. Clarke was first interviewed on September 30, 2020, from 11:00 a.m. to 11:55 a.m. and the second interview was October 14, 2020, at 10:00 a.m.

The first interview included eight demographic questions, followed by six open-ended questions (Appendix A) to incite the leaders to share their experiences as building leaders when their schools closed in the spring of 2020 (Glesne, 2016). Additionally, two follow-up questions (Appendix A) explicitly focused on their relationships with stakeholders- students, parents, central office, and teachers during the spring of 2020. The second interview with the school building administrators asked two open-ended questions, designed with the intent for leaders to tell their stories during the COVID-19 pandemic as school administrators from the fall of 2020 (Appendix A). The two interviews were within a couple of weeks of each other. They focused on building administrator positional responsibilities and primary concerns. All three school districts were remote in the spring and fall of 2020.

The interview audio recordings were transcribed using transcription software with additional verification by the researchers (Amberscript, 2021). Subsequently, the six transcriptions were uploaded to Dedoose Version 9.0.17 (2021), a web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed-method research data. The research software Dedoose was used to organize and code the multiple transcribed qualitative data interviews. The researchers made a concerted effort to mitigate personal bias, preconceptions, and beliefs in this study by independently utilizing dramaturgical coding to highlight themes (Table 2) and commonalities on Dedoose, which allowed emerging themes (Saldana, 2016). Dramaturgical coding is "appropriate for exploring

intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions in case studies" (Saldana, 2016, p. 146). Also, dramaturgical coding provided the researchers with a coding method that assisted in understanding the "execution" (Saldana, 2016) of school leadership roles during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

### *Analysis*

The frequency of each theme was measured, and the top three were selected. Some related themes such as "teacher online meetings" and "supporting from home office" were merged into one theme, referred to as relating categories in qualitative research. The researchers conducted three data sessions after individually coding all three participants' interviews. Saldana (2016) stated the coding process in qualitative research is "interpretive" and "collaborative" (p. 37). Group projects with multiple researchers coding data should "rely on intensive group discussion" to achieve "consensus" (Saldana, 2016). Therefore, the researchers worked to be reflexive and aware of personal bias by bracketing one another during the administrator interviews and consistently discussed "whether our understanding of the phenomenon" was skewed or altered by personal biases (Kim, 2016).

Member checking was used by restating the response with the three participants to ensure validity. Creswell and Miller (2000) state that validity in qualitative research can be achieved in member checking—ensuring how the participants understood their experience as school building administrators and their perspectives as leaders in this lived experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" in qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

## Results

Three main themes were summarized in Table 2 in this research study: school structure, new leadership roles, and relationships. The first theme stated in the study addressed the shift in the school structure from the school building administrators' perspectives when schools abruptly closed in March 2020 and attempted to open in August 2020. Administrators created online school structures without the guidance and support from the central or district office. The second theme in this study covered the shifting or new leadership roles the three school building administrators claimed due to pandemics. Through online meetings, the three administrators attempted to support teachers, students, and parents with virtual curriculum implementation. The third and final theme of the study was relationships. School building administrators determined that their students struggled socially and emotionally, noticed increased anxiety levels, and normal communication practices among stakeholders were disrupted and fractured. The three school building administrators focused more on foundational relationship dynamics during the pandemic, as they were concerned about the safety of their students since the stability of attending a school facility in person was no longer an option.

**Table 2**

*Coding Results from Blind Review of Data*

<b>Researcher</b>	<b>1 BIPOC Male</b>	<b>2 BIPOC Female</b>	<b>3 White Female</b>
<b>Themes that emerged in blind independent coding</b>	<b>Theme 1: School Structure</b>	<b>Theme 1: School Structure</b>	<b>Theme 1: School Structure</b>
	Technology	No directions from the district	Technology issues Hotspots Technology Bell schedule an online school
	District office confusion	Limited technology	
	Virtual bell schedule	Lack of online training	
		Online school w/ bell schedule	
	<b>Theme 2: New Leadership Role</b>	<b>Theme 2: New Leadership Role</b>	<b>Theme 2: New Leadership Role</b>
	Online support meetings	Teacher meetings online	Teacher meetings online
	Need professional development	Professional development support	Professional development for teachers with online instruction
	<b>Theme 3: Relationships</b>	<b>Theme 3: Relationships</b>	<b>Theme 3: Relationships</b>
	Communication with staff/faculty	Communication	Student basic needs concerns Relationships w/staff and faculty
	Shift to safety	Social/emotional	Anxiety Safety
	SEL	Anxiety/confusion	Communication
	Student safety concerns priority		

*Note:* This table illustrated the individual coding of the three researchers that included the three major themes and assigned subthemes under each one. The researchers, through data discussions, were in consensus on three dominant themes.

## Theme One: School Structure

The three school building administrators expressed comparable statements that pertained to school structure. The challenges of conducting a normal school structure day when schools were closed challenged the leadership roles of the school building administrators.

Upon return in August of 2020, Mr. Johnson's school district, at the direction of the Curriculum Coordinators (a team of district administrators), returned to an online learning model. This online learning model was based on an in-person school structure: students met synchronously with their teachers at prescribed times in virtual "classrooms." Administrators in this district would simply join classroom Zoom sessions and observe teachers giving online instruction. Participant "Mr. Johnson" claimed:

"My role as an administrator was to start the day with a recording for all of our students using Facebook and Twitter with morning announcements. I tried to use encouragement and stay engaged with teachers throughout the day. My role as an administrator is to gather student Zoom identification, and I would coast throughout the day and interact with those classrooms. I find a lot of my job is supportive at the moment and offering recommendations as needed but more so being that voice of optimism and positivity."

Mr. Johnson talked further about the structure of his school during remote learning:

"So there wasn't a lot of bulk to what we did in the spring. In the fall, we have been back to school for four weeks now. Our curriculum coordinators at the district office put together a virtual curriculum based upon our typical curriculum



and created rigorous, structured schedules for the day. We call it asynchronous vs. synchronous learning. So morning time is synchronous before 11:30 a.m.

Teachers live with lots of small and whole group instruction. Toward the end of the morning, there will be some break-out groups, maybe with reading specialists and intervention specialists for tier three services and interventions. After lunch, it's more asynchronous. Teachers can post videos or options working with small groups or related services. There are five to six students at a time."

The synchronous, remote learning model that Mr. Johnson's school district utilized was similar to that of middle school principal Mr. Lindahl's school implemented. When asked about his role as a leader, Mr. Lindahl shared that previous to March 2020, his role included "control[ling] day to day operations, the figurehead of school, behind the scenes information gathering. Run day to day behind the scenes. Running the school." Mr. Lindahl reflected on how traditional schooling had changed in the wake of a pandemic. During summer 2020, many options were presented by the district office to building leaders in his district. There was a sense that they wanted to adhere as closely as possible to the traditional school structure previously operated before the pandemic. This meant the system integrated a traditional bell schedule based on seven, 48-minute class periods. The school district even attempted to maintain the typical structure of providing intramural sports and activities for students, even though students were online learning. Just as Mr. Lindahl and Mr. Johnson remained steadfast on maintaining traditional school building leadership roles in a virtual school structure, the third school building administrator, Mr. Clarke, experienced similar challenges in his role.

Mr. Clarke's COVID-19 story focused on schools' traditional structure that encompasses providing students with positive relationships, much-needed free-reduced meals at breakfast and lunch, and extra-curricular opportunities. He stated that eliminating a structured school system that includes athletics and other extra-curricular activities provides students with the unstructured time that is not beneficial to their education and future.

These public school administrators' stories demonstrated that students, faculty, and administrators are relying on a traditional school model and system. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the strengths and weaknesses of traditional school structures and the inequity in different schools and districts. For school leaders, navigating learning in an online world was unpredictable, at best. School leaders' roles, the structure of how schools operate, and the ability to connect with both teachers and students were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that school leadership scholars could have never anticipated or possibly prepared to address. Because the responsibilities of the three school leaders shifted within the school structure, they discovered that their administrative tasks and job responsibilities during COVID-19 altered their roles and evolved to something new.

### **Theme Two: New Leadership Role**

All three school building administrators claimed their leadership roles had changed into something unique to their prior experiences before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The second theme in the case study determined by the researchers was new leadership roles.

After students and faculty were sent home in March, Mr. Lindahl's role pivoted to helping teachers with new technology. He emphasized supporting teachers with "develop[ing] plans and creating a big class." He stressed that he wanted teachers to know that "we are invested, and we could help them out if they had questions and got buy-in." The administrators' roles transitioned from leading a school and keeping the day-to-day operations intact to coaching veteran teachers in using technology to communicate and deliver curriculum to students. Mr. Lindahl's statement provided evidence that he had to shift his job responsibilities to support his teachers with new technology. In addition, Mr. Lindahl expressed how his leadership role had shifted with decision-making. He expressed that his central office superiors provided him autonomy by allowing him to give options to his faculty about their workday. This was not the case before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The level of autonomous decision-making was a shift from his building-level leadership practice before the pandemic, and Mr. Lindahl was a bit leery about the change. Typically, principals in his school district before COVID-19 had little autonomy to determine how a teacher's workday should be structured and had given little thought to safety from the lens of a virus. Public school teachers have contract language negotiated by their union to provide parameters for structuring a teacher workday. Safety concerns have historically focused on security. With the pandemic, Mr. Lindahl faced decision-making he had not experienced before. He experienced uncertainties regarding his ability to make decisions. He had to consider that the consequences of his decisions could result in a teachers' union grievance. Mr. Johnson also found his leadership role had shifted during this time.

Mr. Johnson shared that even the purpose of his communication shifted; his focus for a time was solely on technology and access to technology for students and teachers, especially in the spring of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic initially forced school closure. Participant Mr. Johnson stated:

"I would say our biggest priority was to make sure that we were able to get kids their chrome books... They were going to need their devices. They normally would get them in the morning and then turn them in the afternoon. We had about a week-long process with families coming in, and that had to sign out a Chromebook and pick them up. I know I had to get families' hot spots... that didn't have Internet. This was something I wasn't prepared to do, but we had no choice. We went to the neighborhoods and set them [hotspots] up in neighborhoods. Our biggest priority was getting kids devices and internet access, so they [could] continue to work at home."

Based on Mr. Johnson's statement, his greatest concern as a school building leader during COVID-19 was to ensure that students had technology devices with functioning Internet. The administrative tasks of assigning laptops are typically reserved for school building technology specialists or library media center staff, not a building administrator responsible for areas aligned with teacher evaluations, leading school improvement plans, and managing the school building. The third building school leader that experienced similar changes in his leadership role was Mr. Clarke.

Mr. Clarke was the only high school building administrator in the sample and shared that his role had significantly changed because administrators were required to

attend more central office meetings with increased involvement. This was not his experience as an Assistant Principal before COVID-19. Participant Mr. Clarke claimed:

"Really we have been more involved with central office with a lot more meetings. Maybe it has something to do with the change in leadership or just the fact that everybody is out of crisis mode. Personally it's been hard because we have not met all the 9th graders yet."

Mr. Clarke's statement demonstrated that his district experienced a change in leadership at the central office and served as a school leader during a pandemic. Another change Mr. Clarke experienced as a school building administrator in his leadership role was distributing Chromebooks and orienting students for a few weeks. Participant Mr. Clarke stated:

"We have an orientation for kids where they picked up Chromebooks and got information on Google classrooms and Kickboard. We ran that for a couple of weeks as well. And that was face to face. Not meeting new kids has been a struggle. Normally, we would do all this [technology distribution and orientation] in first-period classrooms on the first and second day of school. Admin. [Administrators] had to do it this fall for a while because we didn't know what was going to happen."

Mr. Clarke's role had succumbed to an increased presence at central office meetings and technology distribution and orientation. Under normal circumstances in his traditional leadership role as a school building administrator, Mr. Clarke would defer this responsibility to teachers and technology specialists. However, Mr. Clarke's new

leadership role responsibility required his leadership to shift from distributive leadership to delegating technology dissemination and orientation to teachers and technology specialists who served in schools, adding it to his professional role out of necessity. Because the responsibilities of the three school leaders shifted within their leadership roles, they concluded that the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted relationships among students and teachers.

### **Theme Three: Relationships**

All three school building administrators stated that their relationships with students, teachers, and the school community had changed due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The third theme in the case study that was determined by the researchers was relationships. The three school building leaders shared that students' mental health, basic needs, and safety were all negatively impacted by not having physical access to school and the support network of teachers and administrators. In addition, the three school building leaders attempted to sustain or establish student relationships by communicating through videos or opening the building for a short time for students and families to secure food. As indicated in the student report card demographics in Table 1, over 50 percent of students qualified for Free-Reduced Lunch (FRL). Mr. Clarke, the sole high school administrator in the study, captured the absence of these positive relationships among administrators, teachers, and students. Participant Mr. Clarke expressed:

"The most important part is the emotional connection. Many of our students have great relationships with staff in the building and not having them in person every

day is a crisis. We provide so much to families. There is a kind of loss from people when they are not in the building. [Things like] the food pantry on Fridays with kids getting food. With COVID, I don't think it was utilized as much... The relationship piece is very hard for our kids and families. Coming in feeling safe here every day for 8 hours, and I think that has been a hard transition for everyone. Kids and teachers are saying they can't wait to get back. They are missing teachers... A lot of our kids play sports, and when all that was canceled a lot of our senior kids missed out on their senior year, as they have good relationships with the coach. It gives them something they can do and make them feel part of something. Now kids were sitting home all night and hanging out with friends, and sports gave structure. Our kids lost a lot of that, and we worry about them not having that safe place to be."

Another school building administrator, Mr. Johnson, claimed that his relationships with teachers were impacted because the information from central office was typically last minute and constantly changed. Participant Mr. Johnson voiced:

"It was difficult because the information was a wait-and-see process [referring to the possibility of returning to campus]. So a lot of times, I didn't have the information until the last second [referring to the remote learning plan]. That affected relationships because there was a lot of 'I don't know.'"

Mr. Johnson felt he was at a loss because he was not provided with the necessary information his teachers and school community expected from their school building

leader. Then, in the early fall, Mr. Lindahl provided insight into how the relationships between teachers and students shifted because of the pandemic.

Participant Mr. Lindahl shared, "Student wise relationship get to know kids and know what is going on with them the first couple of days... for staff they're use to daily personal action and now teachers are worried about compliance with kids, setting up screen, logging in at certain times, which has set up stagnant virtual class. Turn on your screen. Kids are used to talking to one another. Working through it... Kids talking to teachers."

Mr. Lindahl's statements inferred that teachers commonly build relationships among students during the first few days of school in the fall. However, the COVID-19 pandemic eliminated the initial relationship and rapport-building practices typically among educators focusing on technology and compliance.

These public school administrators' stories indicated that students, faculty, and administrators rely on a traditional school model and system. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the strengths and weaknesses of traditional school structures and the inequity in different schools and districts. For school leaders, navigating learning in an online world was unpredictable, at best. School leaders' roles, the structure of how schools operate, and the ability to connect and communicate with both teachers and students were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that school leadership scholars could have never anticipated or possibly prepared to address.



## **Discussion**

The three school building administrators in this research shared their experiences when schools closed in March 2020 and attempted to reopen in August 2020. The findings were significant to educational leadership research because the researchers examined the challenges school building administrators encountered when the absence of a traditional school environment was eliminated. The researchers found that the current roles of school building administrators remain aligned to the roles discussed in Getzels and Guba's (1957) Administrative Theory. The researchers identified the ways the COVID-19 Pandemic exposed the weaknesses in school leadership preparation by highlighting the ineffectiveness of building administrators to lead in a virtual and unpredictable learning environment. The researchers contend that school leadership preparation programs must reimagine graduate-level courses in Educational Leadership by reframing and redefining administrative roles in virtual learning environments.

### **School Structure**

The first predominant theme was school structure. Getzels and Guba (1957), in their Administrative Theory, state "institutions are structural" (p. 425), based on a "hierarchy of relationships" (p. 424) that exists to meet the goals of the organization. The purpose of a building administrator, within the structure of the institution of school, is to provide leadership and supervise people in specific roles, specifically teachers (Getzels & Guba, 1957; Dornbusch et al., 1996). More importantly, building administrators in the structural system of schooling are held accountable by superiors for the academic achievement of their students.

When the administrators in this study experienced the chaos that the COVID-19 Pandemic brought to their school systems, they attempted to hold on to structural aspects like announcements and encouragement. For example, Mr. Johnson, an elementary principal, stated when his students and teachers pivoted to remote learning, he would still do morning announcements even though students and teachers were in a structural education environment that was completely virtual. The principal's actions were well-intentioned; however, the structure of school had been reduced to virtual classrooms, requiring the building administrators to make decisions suited for new environmental demands. Another example of building administrators clinging to the school structure was mentioned earlier in the stories section of this study. The middle school administrator's building maintained the bell schedule structure while their students and staff were in a virtual environment. Again, building administrators were grasping to integrate face-to-face structural practices into a virtual learning structure that did not seem to fit. As Getzels and Guba (1957) stated in their Administrative Theory Framework, "institutions are normative" with "role expectations" for each stakeholder in the organization (p. 425-426). The building administrators in this study inserted the standard structural "norms" of their building administrator positions as a default mechanism because they were ill-prepared to lead their schools in a virtual setting.

Based on the experiences of the three-building administrators during COVID-19 and their responses to hold on to the traditional school structure, school districts must consider and seek ways to prepare building leaders to effectively lead schools if and when schools close in the future. For building administrators to effectively lead when a

school structure pivots from in-person learning to a virtual model, they must have the appropriate training to lead schools during a crisis.

Kaul et al. (2020) examined school principals' approaches to crisis management during COVID-19, and their findings revealed four key aspects: a priority on basic needs for staff and students, technological needs to access teaching and learning, need for multimodal modes of communication, and instructional focus on social-emotional learning (Kaul et al., 2020). Traditionally, school district induction plans for new administrators and principal preparation programs train principals on the nuts and bolts of school leadership, specifically "managing personnel and resources strategically" and "engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers" (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 75). Because educational stakeholders, including teachers, students, and administrators, have experienced a pandemic crisis that has closed schools, school districts and university principal preparation programs should consider integrating courses that help prepare future and current administrators with developing skills revolving around an instructional focus on social-emotional learning, technology needs to support teachers and students, as well as different modalities to communicate with all stakeholders (Kaul, et al., 2020). Based on the experiences of building administrators during COVID-19, it is paramount to discuss and review the role of a building administrator and what we learned from the study.

### **New Leadership Role**

The second theme found in this study was the new leadership role. In Getzels and Guba's (1957) Administrative Theory, organizational "roles" have specific "normative

rights and duties," otherwise known as "role expectations" (p. 426). Under normal circumstances in a school setting, building principals' roles and duties focus on teacher instructional practices, managing personnel, forming school improvement goals, examining and discussing student achievement data, facilitating professional learning community meetings, communicating with faculty and students, supervision on the playground or hallways, completing teacher evaluations, etc. (Burgett, 2014; Sebastian et al., 2018; Grissom et al., 2021). The three building administrators discovered the challenges due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Their building administrative roles became unclear and unfocused as teachers and students conducted school in a virtual environment at home. As a result, administrators had to take on new leadership roles, specifically roles that were aligned to working as technology specialists.

When Mr. Johnson discussed the priority of providing students with Chromebooks, he acknowledged that it was a new priority in his evolving role as administrator. Mr. Johnson's statement demonstrated that his role as an administrator was to ensure that students had access to laptops and an Internet connection. Mr. Johnson realized that his traditional leadership role that commonly revolves around teacher induction, evaluations, school improvement, etc., was reduced to a position of meeting the basic technology needs of students at their homes. Based on the evidence, Mr. Johnson could not fulfill his "normative" principal tasks aligned to his role as a building administrator (Getzels & Guba, 1957). Now that school institutions have had the experience of being thrust into a virtual school setting without physical interaction in a

brick-and-mortar facility, it is paramount to reimagine the role of building administrators in a school environment.

School institutions must formulate an action plan that encompasses and defines the role of a building administrator in a virtual environment and support them in leading a building during a crisis, such as a pandemic. Starr (2020) believed that school district superintendents must take the lead, and during these times of crisis, they must direct principals to assemble school personnel to identify students that are lacking in basic needs. Next, Starr (2020) stated that principals, teachers, and other school personnel would have to revamp curriculum and learning plans for teachers to deliver in a virtual model. Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic, school organizations have that the role of the principal will have to be flexible and have the capacity to pivot from physical to virtual gatherings. For building administrators to pivot from a physical to virtual school environment successfully, they will have to establish positive conventional and unconventional relationships with all stakeholders.

### **Relationships**

The third theme in the study was relationships. As mentioned in the school structure section of the findings, the school structure is based on a "hierarchy of relationships" (Getzels & Guba, 1957, p. 424). For building administrators to accomplish their purpose for the school organization they must have the leadership capacity to build relationships with their stakeholders. Building administrators "develop and interact with people in and around their school: teachers, support staff, parents, and the broader community" (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 56). When principals or administrators interact with

their constituents, this simple yet important aspect of their positions may result in creating a "positive relationship" with teachers (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 56). During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the building administrators and teachers relied on their established relationships with students that were created by face-to-face interaction during normal school structured days. As Mr. Clarke stated during his interview, "The most important part is the emotional connection. A lot of our students have great relationships with staff in the building, and not having them in person every day is a crisis."

Since the inception of the COVID-19 Pandemic, individuals serving in educational leadership or classroom roles have learned that when school pivots to a virtual environment, things dramatically change, and institutional roles become blurred. In a physical school environment, administrators can create and foster existing relationships by performing classroom walk-throughs or regular observations, walking the hallways during a student transition period, making small talk with teachers and students, and hosting collaborative meetings with staff professional learning communities. However, when educational stakeholders cannot gather due to a crisis, how can school administrators, teachers, and students continue to foster or sustain these critical relationships that many students need to thrive? Equally as important, administrators may want to consider creating a virtual onboarding and induction system for students and teachers that will establish a relationship before clearance is given for all stakeholders to return to school in person. Therefore, building administrators may want to expand their repertoire of relational skills to foster positive relationships with their stakeholders when the school environment pivots to online learning.

Franklin (2020) believed that school administrators could increase their presence in virtual classrooms to be seen by teachers and students. Building administrators should become creative with communication by sharing pictures via social media, hosting a virtual coffee with teachers and families, and virtually sharing excellent student work. Finally, Franklin (2020) emphasized that building administrators must set realistic expectations for teachers that are virtually instructing students. Building leaders that can establish clear expectations with virtual learning, specifically encouraging teachers to unplug once they are finished instructing to help alleviate teacher burnout. School leaders in a virtual learning environment looking to enhance and sustain positive relationships with their stakeholders will demonstrate that relationships matter.

### **Limitations and Conclusion**

The researchers in this case study identified substantive data and detailed descriptions of the cases; however, their findings did not represent all White male school building administrators in predominantly schools serving students of color in the Midwest during the COVID-19 Pandemic school shutdown in March 2020. Still, the researchers can apply critical analysis and inductive reasoning to provide their understanding and shed light for further research (Stake, 2000).

The three-building administrators in the study were representatives from two different Midwestern states and three school levels: the elementary, middle, and high school, which are limitations, as the stories from the building administrators only provided a glimpse into their lives during an abrupt school closing in the spring and a questionable reopening in the fall. Perhaps this research would have benefited from an

ethnographic study that would allow the investigators to truly embed themselves into the administrator's experiences with closing and opening a school year during a pandemic. Another limitation of the study pertains to reducing bias as investigators. All three investigators have served in K-12 school districts in leadership and teaching positions across the elementary, middle, and high school levels and have also been affected by the pandemic as current university education professors. Hence, the investigators' backgrounds may have "shaped" the interpretation of the interview responses. However, every effort was made to reduce bias through reflexive awareness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers individually coded the information, created themes, and discussed and debriefed during regularly scheduled meetings. The regularly scheduled meetings provided the researchers time to compare data and come to a consensus if two of the three researchers agreed on the appropriate theme.

The researcher's understanding of how the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted building administrators across three levels of schooling has increased to a certain degree. The school leaders provided a unique perspective into their experiences navigating their leadership role in uncharted territory. District offices provided minimal support and direction, leaving the building administrators to lead their students and teachers without action or strategic plans. Unpreparedness for leading a school during a pandemic forced the administrators to rely on skills that revolved around a physical interactive school structure and traditional leadership practices. As research has shown, "Threat and stress make people more determined to preserve their social structure and traditions" (Pounder, 1998, p. 102). As school districts reflect on the experiences of COVID-19 on school



leaders, it is time to reinvent, reimagine, and recreate building graduate-level courses and professional development for current administrators that will equip them to lead when the next crisis takes place effectively.

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## Appendix A

### A Case Study on the Experiences of Administrators During COVID19

#### Interview Script

##### Demographic Questions (Part A)

1. What is your title and role? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How many years have you been an administrator? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What grade levels attend this school? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the enrollment size of this school? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is the Racial Demographic of this school? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What percentage of students attending this school have IEP's? \_\_\_\_\_
7. How many teachers are employed at this school? \_\_\_\_\_
8. What is your racial background? \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview Questions (Part B)

### Interview 1

- Q1. Can you describe your role as an administrator at \_\_\_\_ prior to March 2020?
- Q2. Thinking back to mid-March 2020, can you tell me about your concerns and challenges about curriculum implementation among teachers?
- Q3. Tell me about the early days of remote learning for you. What were your priorities as your students and teachers transitioned? Expand on how you might have been emotionally impacted. What were your primary concerns at this time? (Can you describe the process you used to manage this transition?)
- Q4. Tell me about a particularly challenging experience and/or a particularly rewarding experience with remote learning in the spring of 2020.
- Q5. Can you describe how your personal/home life might have been affected and/or altered due to the abrupt change?
- Q6. Can you describe the process you have gone through to prepare for this school year?
- (Follow-up with appropriate probing.)*
- Q7. Can you describe your relationships with students, parents, central office, and teachers during the spring of 2020?
- Q8. Can you describe your relationships with students, parents, central office, and teachers during the summer/fall of 2020?

## **Interview 2**

Q9. You said in the spring your primary concern was \_\_\_\_\_. Can you talk about your primary concerns now as you navigate the fall?

Q10. Can you describe how your teacher evaluation practices have been affected and/or altered due to remote learning, or the potential of moving to remote learning?