Community-Centered School Leadership: Radical Care and *Aperturas* During COVID-19

Leticia Alvarez Gutiérrez
University of Utah

Taeyeon Kim iD
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Sonny Partola iD
Paul J. Kuttner iD
University of Utah

Amadou Niang
Salt Lake City School District

Alma Yanagui
University of Utah

Laura Hernández
Community Advocate Network

Gerardo R. López
Michigan State University

Jennifer Mayer-Glenn
University of Utah

We share school leaders' perspectives on Zoom videos concerning the needs of immigrant and refugee families in Title I schools. In these videos, participants crafted and shared personal narratives about their leadership experiences during the COVID-19 era of education. Rooted in participatory design research methods, the process of designing these videos were both a research project and an intervention to assist families and school leaders to better understand each other. We present a close analysis of administrators' perspectives and describe how our codesigned video methodology enabled participants to coconstruct new meanings of school-community relationships during the pandemic through a radical care framework. We conceptualize these reimaginings as aperturas—cracks in the dominant family engagement paradigm that allow us to collectively work towards transformative ends which we term community-centered school leadership. We conclude the article with recommendations for how both school leadership and research can approach and reimagine family engagement post-pandemic.

Keywords: *apertura, COVID-19, family school relationships, radical care, school leadership, solidarity driven codesign*

Introduction

It has been well established that school leadership is vital in the development of strong school-family engagement, particularly in the context of supporting students in culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) schools and communities. However, there is still much to learn about the intersection between family engagement and school leadership from an equity standpoint (Alvarez Gutiérrez, 2017; Auerbach, 2009; Wright & Kim, 2022). In addition to the significance of relationships between home and school on students' growth, the literature has highlighted the importance of developing collaborative and authentic relationships with families as one of the core aspects of successful leadership to advance equity (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2019). Although school leaders' individual beliefs and capacities are critical in shaping equity-driven practices (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2020), the impact of these practices vary. Research has shown that contextual factors, such as cultural norms, political discourses, and economic struggles, may restrict leaders' actions toward equity (Leithwood et al., 2019). School leaders were most recently confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated many of the inequities that affected students' lives and communities. Leaders had to intensively navigate how their leadership practices could improve equity for their students and families, while critically examining the impact of their actions. Yet we know relatively little about how school leaders reconceptualized and expanded their leadership roles by engaging with families to advance equity throughout the pandemic, thus making this research critical to our understandings of school leadership and equity during times of crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented global chaos that mandated businesses, travel, and schools to close their doors in March 2020. Schools immediately began transitioning to virtual learning, causing new difficulties and frustrations for students, families, teachers, and school leaders. Educators had to quickly redesign their lessons and learn how to teach and engage their students virtually (Alvarez Gutiérrez, et al., 2020). This shift brought unprecedented challenges, especially for students and families who did not have access to technological resources. In fact, it was estimated that worldwide, there were more than 1.6 billion children in 190 countries that were impacted by school closures due to the pandemic (United Nations, 2020), and the digital divide was exacerbated because many did not have access to the internet and, thus, were not able to attend online classes.

Along with digital disparities, the emergence of COVID-19 brought to the surface the class and racial injustices that run through CLD communities. With the transition to remote learning, the pandemic and its economic impact ravaged communities of color. Families were asked to take on new roles as coeducators while facing an array of challenges, including lack of computer and internet access, job loss, illness, death, and food insecurities (Alvarez Gutiérrez et al., 2020; Amiot et al., 2020). These issues put additional strain on family-school relationships (Lowenhaupt & Hopkins, 2020), which have long been marred by distrust, discrimination, cultural assumptions, and social barriers (Auerbach, 2009; Ishimaru et al., 2016). Thus, the pandemic provided school leaders with countless opportunities to center *radical care* (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021) in building and engaging CLD students and their families during COVID-19.

During the spring of 2020, we—a research team made up of CLD families, researchers, and educators—launched a new effort in the city to address growing family-school disconnects. We brought together Latinx and Black families of immigrant and refugee backgrounds, as well as educators and administrators in Title I schools, to cocreate a series of Zoom videos. In the videos, participants crafted messages to share with one another, based on their experiences during distance learning and their visions for improving COVID-era education. The process of designing these videos was both a research project and an intervention to help families, educators, and school leaders learn from one another and was rooted in participatory design research methods (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Ishimaru et al., 2019). The videos were shared through social media and websites in order to spark new conversations and promote creative educational possibilities during the COVID-era education.

In this article, we offer a close analysis of one of the four videos we cocreated. More specifically, we present the data of the video we cocreated in collaboration with school leaders. Our focus on school administrators is guided by an understanding that they are a critical force behind successful family-school-community relationships (Ishimaru, 2014). Equitable collaborations (Ishimaru, 2019) and culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa, 2020) are both vital to school leaders' roles. Equally important are school leaders' approaches to family engagement through a critical care framework because it is an avenue to challenge inequities and deficit views of families while also moving "beyond simply talking about educating every child to taking action for positive and transformative change" (Long et al., 2016, p. 18). COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of a critical care approach to school leadership while also demanding that administrators be innovative when connecting with the community, thereby supporting students and their families.

In the process of creating the video, school leaders described the pandemic as an opportune time to reimagine how they approached education and expressed their desire to connect with families in new ways that could improve the educational experiences of CLD communities. They envisioned permanent changes to postpandemic education and resisted the idea of returning to "normal"—a status quo that they recognized was excluding the needs and priorities of CLD students and families. We conceptualize these reimaginings as *aperturas*—openings or cracks for new possibilities

in the dominant family engagement paradigm that allows for collective work toward transformative ends. As Ishimaru and Bang (2016) write, the concept of aperturas stems from the field of critical pedagogy to describe "the convergence of personal, political and social phenomena that brings a group of people together to create transformational change with and for students, families, and communities" (p. 8). In this case, the social and political upheaval resulting from COVID-19, combined with experimentation and critical reflections from families and school leaders, seem to have created such a convergence.

We argue that the pandemic has provided various aperturas for school leaders to radically shift and reimagine long-held understandings of their role in the lives of students and their families. More specifically, our research addresses the aperturas—new perceptions and practices taken up by school leaders during the pandemic that helped disrupt educational inequities and placed radical care (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021) at the center of school leadership. Our main goal was to explore how school leaders reimagined their roles in the lives of minoritized immigrant and refugee families during the pandemic. Our research was guided by the following question: How did educational leadership roles shift as a result of the pandemic in the context of serving marginalized students and families?

This research contributes to scholarly work on school leadership that seeks transformative and equitable family-school relationships by centering the voices of school leaders advocating for radical care in the time of crisis. We begin by introducing *community-centered school leadership* as a framework for this study, which builds on the scholarly work of radical care in educational leadership. We then describe our codesigned video methodology and how this methodology served as an apertura for school leaders to reflect on their reconceptualizations of family-school relationships in a pandemic context. Next, we explore how the experiences of school leaders provide insights into the challenges and possibilities of school-community relationships during COVID-19. We describe key themes that arose from the school leaders' experiences and practices, highlighting the multiple barriers they faced while facilitating learning in the home, as well as the aperturas that allowed them to reach out and connect with students and families in innovative ways. We conclude the article with recommendations on how community-centered school leadership can assist administrators in reimagining their roles post- pandemic to promote radical caring and trusting relationships with CLD families.

Community-Centered School Leadership: Towards Radical Care

We situate our inquiry in the scholarship of community-engaged leadership informed by the literature of critical care because notions of care are fundamental to school leadership, especially in times of crisis (Harris, 2020; Mutch, 2015).

Critical care "involves embracing and exhibiting values, dispositions and behaviours related to empathy, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance and calculated risk-taking" (Wilson, 2016, p. 557). These aspects of critical care are especially important for school leaders to practice during difficult times with marginalized students and families. The COVID-19 crisis, for example, required school leaders to adjust their practices and center families' knowledge, cultures, and epistemologies—all of which lead to more equitable family-school partnerships (DeMatthews, 2018; Hong, 2019; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2020; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2020; Mapp et al., 2017). However, due to the onerous U.S. history of racism, colonialism, and inequity, minoritized families' involvement in education has often been disregarded by schools (Alvarez Gutiérrez, 2017; López et al., 2001; Martinez-Cosio, 2010; Wright & Kim, 2022). Within the traditional school model, working-class and immigrant communities are often viewed as those who lack the social resources and cultural capital to engage with education in productive ways (Martinez-Cosio, 2010). Challenging such deficit views, scholars have suggested several strategies to cultivate more equitable and collaborative family engagement, including viewing families and communities as experts who can bring a wealth of knowledge to support students' learning (Cahill et al., 2016; González et al., 2006; López et al., 2001; Yosso, 2005) and sharing power with families to make decisions (Alvarez Gutiérrez, 2017; Hong, 2019; Martinez-Cosio, 2010; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021; Warren et al., 2015). The school leaders' role in this process includes amplifying the voices of marginalized communities and challenging the status quo to promote justice and equity.

Similarly, research on critical care addresses an active stance of school leadership that advocates for students and families of color. The concept of critical care goes beyond the traditional concept of care that focuses on trust and relationship building (e.g., Noddings, 2005) but instead adopts a more equity-driven stance that acknowledges race, power, and sociopolitical conditions as central issues (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Cahill et al., 2017; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999; Wilson, 2016). Wilson (2016), for example, highlighted the importance of leadership that acknowledged students' and communities' racialized experiences and emphasized how power dynamics played out in sociocultural conditions outside the school building. Therefore, critical care requires actions including having school leaders challenge inequitable school systems by changing formal and informal structures of schooling that impact the racialization of students (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006).

Radical Care in School Leadership

Building on theories of critical care, Rivera-McCutchen (2021) developed a framework of radical care to expand

effective school leadership models in urban schools. In this article, we consider dimensions of radical care (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021) to be essential components of community-centered leadership with the following elements: (a) adopting an antiracist social justice stance, (b) cultivating authentic relationships, and (c) taking deliberate actions for change (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). Adopting an antiracist social justice stance entails "an abiding commitment to anti-racism and social justice" (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021, p. 270), which includes "disrupting the status quo" (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021, p. 271) and being aware of how structural racism impacts the community both inside and outside the school and taking actions that challenge the status quo. Cultivating authentic relationships between school and families, as well as among parents, is critical and requires culturally responsive climates, trust, and spaces for families with similar backgrounds where they can share concerns and experiences. Essential to cultivating authentic relationships includes actionable care for individuals beyond academics and "attending to the socioemotional well-being of the children" (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021, p. 273), which was critical during distant learning in the time of COVID-19.

Given the pandemic context, we argue that community-centered school leadership is centered in radical care and can serve as a model for successful school leadership. Our inquiry explores school leaders' "shifts" in conceptions and practices that utilize radical care in supporting families and communities during COVID-19. We found that the conditions and crisis imposed on education by COVID-19 brought new challenges, as well as aperturas for school leaders to navigate school-family relationships to support holistic aspects of student learning. Thus, examining "shifts" in leadership actions and perceptions in this context would offer implications and possibilities for community-centered leadership. For example, we illustrate that during the year of virtual learning, school leaders were routinely present physically in the community, which was an apertura that allowed them to connect with families and address the inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. We attest these actions to community-centered school leadership because they demonstrate the flexibility school leaders were willing to employ to radically care for and meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students and families.

Background on the Project and Methodology

The Family-School Collaboration Design (FSCD) Project was launched in 2016. It is a part of the Collaborative Family based at the University of Utah and is supported by University Neighborhood Partners, a university department dedicated to building campus-community partnerships. The mission of the FSCD Project is to codesign spaces that foster family voice and equitable family-educator collaboration in schools. Our focus is on working with CLD families and school personnel in Title I schools in the west side of the city and nearby neighborhoods. The west side of the city is home to the majority of the city's minoritized families, including large and growing communities of immigrant and refugee backgrounds. The neighborhoods have experienced long histories of economic, cultural, and social marginalization, as well as entrenched inequities in education (Hunter et al., 2009; Mai & Schmitt, 2013). The main partners in this effort are a network of family leaders mostly from the city's west side Spanish-speaking communities, the city's school district, and the flagship university's College of Education. Although some of our members have moved on to other institutions, they remain part of the project.

The FSCD Project uses a research methodology called *solidarity-driven codesign* (Ishimaru et al., 2019). This methodology is rooted in design-based research in education, which is about advancing educational theory and practice by enacting, studying, and revising educational interventions in real-life learning situations (Collins et al., 2004). At the same time, solidarity-driven codesign draws from participatory and community-based research approaches (Beckman & Long, 2016; Strand et al., 2003), as well as decolonizing methodologies (Patel, 2015; Smith, 2013). It involves a structural critique of power hierarchies and an examination of how those hierarchies shape the topics under investigation and the relational dynamics and learning possibilities in the process of partnering. This methodology is also committed to creating change in the here and now while collectively imagining new possibilities for the future (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016).

Solidarity-driven codesign involves a four-step iterative cycle of (a) relationship building and theorizing about a topic, (b) designing and developing solutions, (c) enacting or piloting solutions, and (d) analyzing and reflecting on the project. As Ishimaru et al. (2019) write,

> In solidarity-driven co-design we engage families and communities as experts and decision-makers in identifying problems and investigating and implementing solutions over time. The aim of this approach is to make policy decisions and design educational practices, tools and organizations in ways that build solidarities in the moment as well as over time. We take the idea of "walking our talk" to heart as we work to enact the relational changes we wish to see in the world in the process itself. (p. 12)

Our core practice for carrying out solidarity-driven codesign is the "design circle" (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016). Design circles are participatory, and their structure draws from Indigenous talking circle practices. In a design circle, community members come together to codesign theories of change and solutions. As Ishimaru and Bang (2016) explain, "Design circles are in-depth, reciprocal working groups or focus groups that aim to engage stories, experiences, and expertise within our communities in order to catalyze action within a particular context" (p. 14). Design circles are not

generally meant to be one-time events but rather a series of events that move the design/research process forward. Much attention is given to how codesign is facilitated to counter and even overturn normative power hierarchies, centering the experiences and knowledge of nondominant communities.

Codesigned Zoom Videos

When COVID-19 prompted the closure of schools and workplaces, we were in the piloting phase of our most recent design process. We launched codesigned Zoom videos with families, educators, and school leaders. As is often the case, the design process began within our nine-person core research team. Our core research team is a microcosm of the collaborative codesign work that we do, and its evolving membership includes CLD families, professional (or former) K–12 educators, organizers, university professors, researchers, and graduate students—sometimes with one person representing more than one of these roles. As a group we are committed to social justice in education, value reciprocal partnerships between schools and communities, and respect students and families as experts of their own knowledge and experience.

The context of the pandemic forced us to think creatively of how to continue, despite not being able to meet in person, to include the voices of the families we work with. Thus, it led us to the idea of codesigning a video, recorded through Zoom. It would also be an opportunity for family partners to share their advice, experiences, and ideas about COVID-era education. The idea was inspired in part by a recorded Zoom video that one of our members created with colleagues to honor the 2020 spring's graduates. The use of video as a design medium is in line with the recommendation in solidarity-driven codesign to "engage in multimodal (visual, oral, etc.) and creative activities" (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016, p. 7). Our group had previously engaged in collective drawing, comic books, and other visual design methods, and families in the project had previously identified video as a tool that was more accessible and engaging to minoritized families than written products. Engaging with Zoom as a platform was not just a COVID-related accommodation. It was, itself, an apertura: an emerging medium for video creation to share the voices of families in an accessible and family-led manner (Goldberg, 2020). The fact that we were creating a video about family voice in education on the same platform that they were using to engage in school added an additional layer of relevance to the work.

Past research on synchronous online focus groups has shown Zoom and other video chat software to be a viable and even at times preferred tool for qualitative data collection, despite technical challenges (Archibald et al., 2019; Morgan & Lobe, 2010). One of the major barriers to conducting online focus groups has been digital access and literacy

(Forrestal et al., 2015). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, as schools and other meetings went online, most of the families we worked with had already learned Zoom for themselves and/or for their children, so this barrier was lower than it might have been. Our project was not designed as a traditional focus group but, instead, was more akin to participatory video research methodologies, in which videos are created collaboratively by or with community members as a form of knowledge creation and social change (Milne et al., 2012; Plush, 2013). Using Zoom as the medium for such research made this an intriguing new area of methodological experimentation.

After sharing the idea with our family partners and learning that they were excited to take part, we set a date and planned the agenda in May 2020. We knew that our partners were facing increased challenges during COVID-19 related to health, employment, and housing; therefore, we did not want to make this experience a burden. We created a quick, minidesign process that could be completed in a 1.5-hour Zoom session. The sessions were facilitated by university-based and community-based team members, with translation between English and Spanish. After greeting one another and reconnecting relationally, the facilitators reviewed the agenda and shared the questions that would guide the conversations. We then broke into small breakout rooms, one in English and two in Spanish, to learn about experiences based on the prompts.

Rather than gather "raw" stories as in a traditional focus group, each participant curated their own story. After sharing initial thoughts and hearing from others, they were asked to identify which experiences, advice, or ideas they wanted to share publicly in the video. We rehearsed each person's stories, and participants offered one another advice and chose the language they were most comfortable speaking in. When we returned to the large group, families eloquently outlined and stated the multiple barriers (i.e., economic, linguistic, and technological) they faced while facilitating academic learning in the home, and called for teachers to reach out to, collaborate with, and equip them for this new reality of online learning. After the session, we did some basic editing to remove space between the stories and added titles, credits, and English subtitles for the Spanish experiences. Before posting, we consulted with the group for feedback and approval.

We then shared the family video through Facebook, texts, emails, and websites. We were unsure what kind of response we would get from this initial video and had no set plans to do others. We were pleasantly surprised that the Facebook posts prompted some discussion, particularly from teachers in the school district. Many teachers wrote that they were eager to learn more from families about what could be done to improve education for their children. Given the ongoing interest in the videos, we continued to create videos offering different perspectives. In response, between June and July 2020, we invited the teachers who had posted a comment to

the video and reacted on Facebook, as well as some others in our networks, to codesign a video using the same method. Because our focus on the videos were to strengthen family-school connections, our invitations were to teachers who had already demonstrated some commitment to community and family engagement before COVID-19. The third video brought together families of refugee background (July 2020), and the fourth Zoom video was with school administrators (December 2020). This exploratory, emergent process drew on our existing social networks while strengthening and expanding our collective relationships with an eye toward future collaborations. Due to limited space, and our interest in better understanding the role that school leaders can have on improving family-school connections, the data for the rest of this article focuses on our video project with K–12 school leaders who reflected on their experiences of leading schools during the time of COVID-19. Our focus is on school administrators because they play a critical role in forming equitable family-school-community relationships (Ishimaru, 2014).

School Leader Data and Analysis

The school leader video included nine K–12 school leaders: four assistant principals and five principals working at Title I public schools in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 2020. The school leaders were recruited from our network, and we had collaborated with most of them in some capacity. These school administrators were known for their equity-minded practices, and thus we were interested in learning about the aperturas that they experienced leading a school during the pandemic. School leaders taking part in this project were more likely to engage in community-centered forms of school leadership, such as forming meaningful and more equitable relationships with families beyond the school. Nevertheless, it was important to learn how they extended themselves and changed their practices with families during a time of crisis—the pandemic.

Table 1 shows our participants and their school backgrounds.

We followed the same method described previously with families. The discussion questions for the Zoom video, which participants received ahead of time, included, (a) What has the experience been like leading schools during COVID-19? (b) What are some of the main challenges? (c) What have you learned and what would you do differently? (d) Given the uncertainties of what will happen in this year, what do school leaders, teachers, and students need to be successful in the coming year? (e) What advice do you want to give educational leaders and policymakers?

The whole group and breakout room conversations were video recorded, and the audio was transcribed for analysis. To analyze participants' responses, four of the authors conducted multiple cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2015). First, the four research team members individually conducted line-by-line initial coding (Charmaz, 2014) to explore possible codes using memos, and then shared preliminary codes generated and analytic memos with the group. This conversation led us to be oriented toward "aha moments," the critical moments that shifted school leaders' thinking and actions for fostering genuine relationships with families. Second, we conducted focused coding (Charmaz, 2014) to generate categories which aligned with radical care as our framework, debriefed, and decided on "aperturas" as an overarching thematic code. Finally, applying theoretical coding, we identified the relationships between categories and attuned to story lining of the data (Charmaz, 2014) toward the meaning of *aperturas* in school leadership. The analysis of the school administrators' data revealed various "aperturas"—opportunities leading to ideas and actionable shifts toward strengthening family-school connections through a community-centered school leadership approach guided by radical care during the pandemic. Through the series of collaborative conversations and analysis, the following three interrelated aperturas were identified and are detailed in our findings: (a) *radicalizing understandings of equity with antiracism*, (b) *reconceptualizing leadership through authentic relationships*, and (c) *centering community needs with actions*.

Toward Community-Centered School Leadership

Radicalizing Understandings of Equity with Antiracism

School leaders viewed the disruptions caused by COVID-19 as an opportunity to confront long-held understandings about educational access and care, which led them to develop a philosophy we termed *community-centered school leadership*. School leaders found that practices within the confines of the school building did not create equitable pathways to academic learning or provide positive outcomes for all students, particularly for CLD students. The pandemic created opportunities for some of the administrators to broaden their understanding of the role that school played within the community and opened novel possibilities for them as school leaders to engage within communities. The shift began with the realization that school-centered approaches were limiting and were not reaching many of their students or families and changes were rapidly required in order to meet families' needs. Elementary school principal Derian shared his passion and relentless efforts to ensure he connected with families during the pandemic, because he realized that many were not being reached. He shared that he felt it was their "duty" and further stated that he wanted:

> to make sure our kiddos have an excellent education and an equitable education . . . to make sure that we don't lose any kids and . . . we're relentless about, you know, connecting with our families. We do whatever it takes to make sure that we connect with our families.

TABLE 1
Participants and School Demographic Information

Participant name	Position	School (grades)	School size	Free or reduced lunch (%)	Students from minoritized communities (%)
Cameron	Assistant principal (AP)	Hopeful Elementary (PK–6)	455	84.62	85.49
Alicia	AP	Aspiring Elementary (PK–6)	459	86.06	79.96
Stacy	Principal	Star Elementary (PK–6)	474	100.00	88.82
Chuma	AP	Snow Middle (6–7)	804	21.77	24.00
Johnny	Principal	Red Rock Academy (7–12)	438	86.53	78.77
Amy	AP	Red Rock Academy (7–12)	—	—	—
Hannah	Principal	Justice Elementary (PK–6)	472	91.31	87.92
Derian	Principal	Sanguine Elementary (PK–6)	324	100.00	82.10
Clara	Principal	Spirited Elementary (PK–6)	612	84.31	89.22

Note. The school demographic information is based on the 2018–2019 school year data available at the National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov/datatools/).

Derian was adamant about reaching the community and connecting with families because he knew that without family connections, the school could lose students. He shifted his practice and went into the community to make direct connections with students and families, which he had not done prior to the pandemic. It was elementary school principal Hannah who highlighted that the pandemic created an opportunity to address inequities that already existed within the education system. Referring to minoritized students, she commented,

> I feel this is a disruption [COVID-19] that, though it is hard, it was really needed because I believe that the system is not designed to help our kids, and I felt that last year was really hard on us. And I just feel that we have been failing kids forever. There is a push to go back to what we were doing, and we forget that that wasn't working.

Hannah emphasized the failure of the education system several times during the Zoom video and expressed concern about returning to practices that were inequitable and exclusionary for minoritized students. She further stated, "This system has never worked for kids of color. I'm going to say it again: This system has never worked for kids of color. We know that. All of us know that." Here, she expressed her frustration toward the school system that, she believed, was not intended to serve the needs of minoritized students, suggesting this shortcoming was an important opening for reconceptualizing current school practices that extended beyond the school walls and into the community. The pandemic provided an opportunity for both Derian and Hannah to reflect upon their understanding of their roles as school leaders to move beyond the confines of the school in order to connect with families and radically care for students. Hannah's comments, in particular, point to the development of adopting an antiracist stance (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021), which begins by acknowledging the ways that the "system" (i.e., schools) have "never worked" for racialized students.

COVID-19 also forced school leaders to confront the various inequities that families and students faced outside of the school prepandemic. Many of them had not recognized the various struggles that families faced prior to COVID-19 (i.e., food and home insecurities) because they focused their roles and responsibilities and meeting the needs of students within the confines of the school. In many ways, the pandemic was an opportunity for school leaders to engage deeply in the community context. This new practice of physically going into the community allowed them an apertura to witness the stressful situations that students and families were facing on a daily basis, realizing that it was difficult for them to prioritize academics. Elementary school assistant principal Alicia explained how the pandemic was an apertura because it made her realize that educational access had to be reconceptualized beyond just academics and the school boundaries. She reflected on how her experience enrolling students for the 2020–2021 school year was an apertura to recognize the importance of broadening her understandings of how equity should be defined beyond having access to the internet.

> It was foolish for me to think that my students were going to hop online, on their device. Even with a hotspot provided, because they didn't have food . . . families were really struggling with basic needs, needed food, so that was a huge hurdle. A huge challenge that we needed to support our families with before we could expect for them to hop online to learn when their basic needs were not being met.

What began as an outing to register students at the beginning of a new school year resulted in a much deeper understanding of student and family needs—including insecurities to food. Alicia felt "foolish" assuming that simply providing students with devices and internet access was enough to support students' school engagement when the basic needs of the families were not met. Alicia further elaborated that there were "so many challenges the first weeks that we never

thought of before because you don't find out what the real problem is until you are in it." The epiphany led her to comment that "meeting my families' basic needs before expecting anything academic" needed to be her priority. Bearing witness to the various challenges and inequities families and students were already facing, heightened by COVID-19, was disheartening for her. However, this experience within the community helped Alicia broaden her understanding and pivot away from an academic-centered perspective to a community-centered leadership approach that allowed her to develop and cultivate authentic relationships with the students and families in holistic ways.

Similarly, elementary school assistant principal Cameron shared, "This pandemic has highlighted the impact related to access and opportunity for historically marginalized communities . . . pandemic has really highlighted the crucial role that schools play for our communities." Cameron recognized that access and opportunities were often limited because of the narrow role that schools took in the lives of students and families prior to the pandemic. Therefore, moving forward, he recognized the importance of developing and cultivating authentic relationships with families and students (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021) outside of the school, which required the role of schools to be broadened in order to serve all students. This led to his realization that focusing on practices inside the school was not the most equitable or just way of approaching family engagement.

The context of the pandemic provided these school leaders with an apertura—an opening to rethink the limited ways they had defined their roles as school leaders in the lives of students and families, especially considering that, prior to the pandemic, their roles existed primarily inside the school building. The pandemic allowed an apertura for school leaders to enter and learn more details about the conditions that were exacerbated by COVID-19 for CLD communities. This was an opportunity to rethink their roles as school leaders outside of the school boundaries, as well as recognize the important function that schools play in the lives of students and families by applying an antiracist and social justice lens (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). Pandemic conditions resulted in school leaders paying closer attention to community concerns and livelihoods that extended beyond academics and the school boundaries. More specifically, a community-centered school leadership approach within a radical care framework captures the ways in which school leaders reconceptualized their role and the role that the school takes in the community.

Reconceptualizing Leadership Through Authentic Relationships

Many of our participants had already been working with CLD families prior to the pandemic; however, it took the context of COVID-19 for them to recognize an apertura to reconceptualize their leadership roles beyond the traditional administrative duties they routinely performed within the school. Administrators in our study realized they needed to extend their responsibilities as leaders "to do whatever it took" to support student learning, which meant collaborating with teachers, families, and local stakeholders. This type of response by administrators reflects a radical care approach (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021) because they adapted their beliefs and practices to the necessities of the families and students.

Acknowledging this change, Hannah shared, "I don't recognize my job. It's completely different, and it's just recognizing that we're reinventing ourselves all the time." She shed light on how her role as a school leader was "transformed" during the pandemic by broadening her understandings of her role and her connection to the community. Derian also explained the broadening of his role as a school leader: "calling every phone number. We've been, you know, knocking on doors . . . doing whatever we can to connect with our families." Alicia followed suit in pointing to the shift in her leadership role due to the pandemic. One of the changes was her morphing into what she called a "family-school collaborator," which signaled her movement toward a community-centered approach to school leadership that necessitates being physically in the community developing authentic relationships to meet the needs of students and families. She stressed the need for adapting under the pandemic and likened her tasks to being in a "maze that is ever changing." Expanding on this point, she said,

> I've had to wear many different hats . . . I felt that I've been a family-school collaborator more than I have in the past. I've been an office secretary, a teacher, [and] just anything that is needed in the building. I'm that role for that day or for that moment . . . I'm not just the admin. I'm everything. I'm whatever is needed for the moment.

Hannah and Alicia's willingness to adapt and step into multiple roles is not uncommon for school administrators, but Alicia's view of her role as a "school-family collaborator" is significant in a *school-centered* family engagement environment where the power imbalance has largely favored impositions on CLD families instead of collaborating with them (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004; López et., 2001). Equally important was her urgency to expand her role to improve the lives of children and families inside and outside the school. Alicia pointedly shared how her leadership role was "forever changed" and broadened due to her experiences during the pandemic:

> I learned that that family engagement piece is more important than it ever has been and I've learned that by being connected and being present in their community daily it made a huge impact on them, as well as myself. I am forever changed. My leadership forever will be changed based on this experience.

As a school leader, Alicia had actively worked with minoritized families; however, her interactions occurred

primarily inside the confines of the school. The pandemic allowed her to define her role as an administrator in broader ways through a radical care framework (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021)—one that went beyond the school walls and toward a community-centered approach. Alicia embraced the multifaceted roles that leaders can take outside of the school, as her roles seemed to frequently change due to the complexity coming from unforeseen events of the pandemic. Her attention and efforts became attuned with what her team, students, and families needed at any given time.

Jonny, a high school principal, further elaborated on how authentic relationships can be achieved by leading with community-centered and antiracist approaches (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). He emphasized looking beyond the "differences" and "walls" that separate people into dominant and marginalized groups and relied on a collaborative approach to strengthening students' support networks. Summarizing the lessons that he learned from leading a school during the pandemic, he declared,

> I think what we've learned most from this pandemic is that there's a difference and a divide in many of our different communities and those who are marginalized. This has really highlighted some of the issues they have in terms of access, but we've also learned that the fragility of each of our individual students' support structures can be overcome by the efforts of the community and that if we work together we can help solidify that structure . . . through collaboration, provide pathways for all of our students to succeed.

His statement acknowledges the disparities in opportunities, access, and outcomes; but it also echoes the importance of recognizing the critical role that schools play in the community, as well as knowing the conditions that students are living in to provide strong support for those who are experiencing challenging times. This realization led him to reimagine genuine collaboration with CLD families, which could lead to student success.

As such, our participants conveyed that the COVID-19 pandemic created enormous leadership challenges for them, but it also led them to form alliances and authentic relationships with minoritized families and "communities of practice" that, as Jonny put it, "help solidify" the support structures of children who come from these families. These responses support ongoing conversations of shifting from traditional forms of family engagement to community-centered approaches—emphasizing the reciprocal partnerships between schools and the community to support student learning and development (Ishimaru, 2019). Furthermore, by engaging with CLD families purposefully within their communities, these school administrators' approach to leadership moved from a school-centered model toward a community-centered approach. This shift allowed leaders to revisit and broaden how they were relating to families and students outside of the school and how equity was manifested in their participation with the community. This dedication to

meaningful relationship building outside of the school was important given that leaders' commitment was vital in fostering authentic and healthy family-school-community partnerships that will last beyond the pandemic.

Centering Community Needs With Actions

With the multiple challenges that the pandemic imposed on schools, the school leaders in our study came to the realization that community-centered approaches were vital in addressing community needs. The context created by the pandemic made these leaders more aware of the importance of knowing the community in order to serve CLD families equitably. Hannah, an elementary school principal, echoes this as she spoke passionately about how the pandemic helped her understand the community's strength:

> My experience as a school leader in the pandemic has led me to really see the strength of our community both in our school community among the staff and also in our broader community with our families and with our kids.

As school leaders engaged on the path of partnerships, the pandemic unleashed their creative spirit, resourcefulness, and resilience to address common challenges they knew they could not solve without families. Collaboration with families was no longer a theory that administrators read about in academic and policy documents, but a reality that they needed to put into practice. Based on their new awareness of community-centered approaches through radical care, having broader understandings of access and equity, leadership roles, and the importance of the community, allowed for an apertura for school leaders in our study to take actionable efforts to address fundamental community needs and prioritize well-being over academics. These actions were salient in Alicia's realization that she could not expect students to "hop online to learn when their basic needs were not being met." She elaborated,

> We called the foundation and they provided a bus for us. So, we deliver 110 lunches every single day so that our kids have a daily lunch and a breakfast for the next day. We bring food bank to them. And now I can go to the parents and say "why isn't your kid online?" Because I built that relationship and see them every day on my drop-off.

By brokering food for families through community organizations, Alicia was able to form a deeper connection with students, families, and the community that went beyond academics and the boundaries of the physical school; this type of interaction did not occur prepandemic. The conditions created by the pandemic compelled her to form notions of radical care (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021) that revolved around trust and the desire to protect and provide for students and families. Moreover, such notions enabled school leaders to mobilize available resources by strategically navigating policies to

serve students and families. Further, school leadership developed through respect and equitable approaches is necessary in cultivating trusting relationships with CLD families and communities.

Hannah provided examples of how her staff and she took the needs of the community seriously, pursuing efforts to address the various needs that had been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and extended beyond the school:

> We've helped connect [families] with rent, medical, dental, glasses, all of that. I think what we are seeing is that families who were already maxed out, and experiencing a lot of trauma, then a pandemic hit, and it's too much!

Similar to Alicia, Hannah pursued a community-centered approach to school leadership by responding to the needs of her students and families and recognized that these everyday necessities had to be considered part of being successful in education. This was an apertura that school leaders embraced philosophically and took actions to remedy the dire situations that many families were experiencing. In other words, they took a radical care approach that created new understandings of their role as school leaders.

Amy, a high school assistant principal, also pursued a community-centered approach by acknowledging the various ways that nontraditional students are impacted outside the school, including employment, immigration, health, and parenting. She recognized the various challenges to remote learning while also acknowledging the benefits it had for students who had many responsibilities outside of school:

> You know some of what we've been doing with remote instruction that has been really hotly criticized working really, really well for some of our students. . . . We've got students who work full time jobs and are still able to go to school asynchronously and earn credits for high school graduation. . . . Students with kids, who are parents, who would have to be out on maternity leave, are able to attend class. . . . And those are the kids who are getting left behind before this and now they are possibly doing better than some of their peers who have a more traditional high school experience. For me it's really important that we don't lose those children or those students, in our attempt to get back to a quote unquote normal where they were not valued in our, in our traditional systems and they weren't really considered.

Amy recognized the opportunities for educational access that were made available through pandemic for nontraditional students who had unique circumstances and needs. Online learning allowed these students the flexibility to control their learning to be successful through the virtual school system (Kaden, 2020). Amy recognized the importance of being more inclusive of these students and later expressed "not giv[ing] up flexibility and some level of ownership for our [her] students" postpandemic. Amy valued "flexibility" and "ownership" that can be achieved from digital education by maintaining this new approach into postpandemic education in order to be more inclusive of students' needs.

As such, our participants suggest that the pandemic disrupted the "normal" school system that does not take into account sociopolitical contexts that minoritized students and communities have to navigate. The COVID-19 pandemic provided our participants with various catalysts to reimagine education and relationships, as Alicia, Hannah, and Amy described. The participants did so while remaining attuned to the social contexts and needs of CLD families and students. The push to engage with communities and students in their living spaces altered the way administrators in our study thought about school leadership and community-school partnerships and pivoted towards a radical care approach.

Furthermore, our data suggests that school leaders reassessed their role within the community and made concerted efforts to address some of the everyday family concerns (i.e., food insecurities and health) because they realized through the pandemic that these issues were strongly linked to education. The shift toward community-centered leadership roles consisted of taking actions to support the families who were struggling due to the pandemic. School leaders expressed that they had to revise their priorities on what students and families needed and adopted holistic approaches to serve them by going into the community and learning directly from families. These leaders witnessed for themselves the pandemic challenges and enacted a community-centered leadership approach by enacting radical care and taking action to help solve some of the problems families faced. This is in contrast to the traditional roles that these leaders took prior to the pandemic where students were viewed as singular, and only within the confines of the school. Moreover, the notion of radical care gave school leaders in our study the opportunity to challenge conventional views that schools are the default space where students and families can engage with education.

Once the basic needs were met as illustrated previously (i.e., food, transportation, health-related issues), we found that remote instruction forced by the pandemic ironically created an apertura for school leaders to recognize, despite the digital divide, that online learning was actually working well for some students who were struggling academically prepandemic. These students were now thriving because the online system provided some learners more accessibility and flexibility given various responsibilities (i.e., caretaking, employment, international location, and parenting), which forced school leaders and us to consider what postpandemic education should look like for these "students now thriving."

Concluding Remarks: Reimagining School Leadership for Community With Radical Care

Our analysis of school leaders' responses during the pandemic illustrate how they broadened their views and practices

with families through equity, leadership roles, and centered community needs with actions and principles that Rivera-McCutchen (2021) describes as radical care: (a) adopting an antiracist social justice stance, (b) cultivating authentic relationships, and (c) taking deliberate actions for change. The pandemic illuminated the various fundamental inequities experienced by CLD families and students, leading our participants to apply an antiracist and social justice lens within the community. In doing so, school leaders in our study expanded their roles and responsibilities to meet the necessities of the families and students through authentic relationships, and embraced multifaceted roles beyond the school walls. With a deeper connection within the community, leaders in our study employed strategies and actions to meet the needs of students and families. We referred to this as "community-centered school leadership." Our key findings, inform and expand educational leadership research and practice, and offer several implications for community-centered leadership.

First, building on the leadership literature and importance of equity and family-school collaboration (DeMatthews, 2018; Hong, 2019; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2019), this study illuminates how the pandemic served as an apertura for a community-centered school leadership approach to radically emerge. Whereas our participants were considered equity-driven, social justice inclined leaders who had advocated for the needs of CLD students and families prior to the pandemic, COVID-19 emboldened them to go beyond the school walls, walk into the community, "think out of the box," and take actions that furthered their understandings of family-school collaboration. For instance, a salient message they delivered through the videos was to radically rethink education for the future, suggesting the pandemic disrupted the "normal" ways that school systems and leaders approach students and families. Normalcy referred to traditional school models that embraced deficit views of students and communities of color (Martinez-Cosio, 2010), were embedded in the history of racism and colonialism (Cahill et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2020; Wright & Kim, 2022), and valued accountability-driven policies lauding scores and indicators over the needs of students and communities (Khalifa, 2020; Wright & Kim, 2022). Although our participants were critically minded leaders, it took the pandemic for them to recognize the power of community-centeredness with radical care expanding their role as leaders to support students and families holistically. For instance, at the beginning of the school year, school leaders were focused on ensuring that COVID-19 did not interrupt student enrollment or access to coursework. However, as the pandemic progressed, school leaders realized that they needed to intervene in addressing families' immediate needs, (i.e., access to food, shelter, healthcare, and other basic needs), as well as reimagine education postpandemic as Hannah's questions suggest:

Why are we not thinking outside the box? Why do I have to convince district leaders to just let us try something different? Because that is what is going to change us. Going back to what we were doing isn't ever going to be the answer because it was never working in the first place.

Such a demand for rethinking education speaks to notions of radical care, which involve reexamining equity, possibility, priority and seeking radical hope (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). Therefore, we suggest that reevaluating equity and social justice leads to opportunities that radically shift long-held understandings of school leadership and their roles in the lives of students and their families. We describe these shifts as "aperturas"—"entry points for new research and intervention that reconfigure" (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016, p. 8) education and its relationship to CLD communities. Although these aperturas originated during the pandemic, they remain vital for education following the pandemic.

Second, we want to highlight how our participants embraced radical care and engaged with critical reflection. Even though school leaders in our study were already considering the ways schools could play more equitable roles in the lives of CLD students and families, they consistently engaged with critical self-reflection to better address the needs of students and families. This finding aligns with the literature that suggests that critical reflection plays an important role for school leaders to achieve equity and cultural responsiveness (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016; Khalifa, 2020; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). Furthermore, our study suggests that school leaders' engagement with critical reflection is part of an ongoing development of leadership values and skills in advancing an antiracist and justice stance (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021). This suggests that leaders' continuous critical examination of their position and practices work in tandem with community-centered school leadership towards radical care.

Third, our study suggests that the research methodology we used—solidarity-driven codesign for the larger project and codesigning Zoom videos for the current study—were critical in strengthening family-school connections, which can benefit research on community-centered school leadership (Ishimaru et al., 2019; Ishimaru & Bang, 2016). For example, we observed the invitation to the interactive virtual space empowering our participants. Whereas the research team offered a virtual space with a broad structure, participants' individual and collective voices remained central in the space, and they curated their speech to make it public during the pandemic. Our methodology itself was an apertura through which empathy, solidarity, and community were strengthened via the relationships between and among participants and our research team. We believe that the fundamental values in our methodology, such as fostering reciprocal thinking and practices, dismantling normative power hierarchies, and centering the knowledge of communities,

enabled us to weave knowledge from the community and field to identify problems and reimagine solutions.

Implications for Community-Centered Leadership

Our study offers several implications for school leaders as students, families, educators, and administrators will embark on the new school year. Unlike the prevalent hope of shifting back to "normalcy," our findings suggest that there exist major opportunities to continue a community-centered school leadership and ongoing reimagination of family-school collaborations. Our participants provided personal accounts of how they developed equitable and lasting partnerships among CLD families and students. By continually centering community needs, school leaders can foster trusting school-community relationships that speak to equity and radical care. Schools, then, not only support student success, but also contribute to community thriving (Ishimaru et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2020). Trusting and equitable relationships vary by school, district, community, and time; however, the school leaders in our research were examples of the ways that school leaders can interrupt and address social inequality in their school communities and partake in inquiry concerning their roles during and after major events like a pandemic.

Moreover, building on the *aperturas* illuminated in our study, the findings encourage educational leaders and policymakers to reflect on practices and policies in the time of crisis. Research indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided students with greater autonomy of when and how they engage with schoolwork (Kaden, 2020). To support students particularly from CLD communities to successfully utilize such autonomy in the current and future school systems, we argue that community-centeredness is key to developing school policies and practices of leadership. As our participants highlighted, educational leaders and policymakers need to carefully reinvestigate the traditional school system that does not work for CLD students and reimagine the new system by centering voices of students and families. This should be done as a reciprocal process with radical care through the equitable collaboration between families and schools as a form of community-centered school leadership.

ORCID iDs

Taeyeon Kim [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2020-9851
Sonny Partola [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4192-4114
Paul J. Kuttner [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4739-1358

Open Practices

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Authors

LETICIA ALVAREZ GUTIÉRREZ is an associate professor in the Department of Education, Culture, and Society at the University of Utah, 1721 E. Campus Center Dr. SAEC#3280 Salt Lake City, UT 84112-9256; email: leticia.alvarez@utah.edu. Leticia engages in community-based research to build collaborative and equitable education with BIYOC, families, educators, and communities.

TAEYEON KIM is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln; email: tkim@unl.edu. Her research focuses on how leaders' voices and strategies intersect with school organizations and policy contexts.

SONNY PARTOLA is a PhD student in the Department of Education, Culture and Society at the University of Utah; email: sonny.partola@utah.edu. Sonny is interested in improving the relationships between minoritized families and schools.

PAUL J. KUTTNER is an associate director with University Neighborhood Partners at the University of Utah; email: paul.kuttner@partners.utah.edu. Paul is a qualitative researcher, committed to engaged scholarship conducted in partnership with youth, schools, and communities.

AMADOU NIANG is an African immigrant and refugee community leader and an English-language-development teacher; email: niangam925@gmail.com. He is interested in family school relationships.

ALMA YANAGUI is a parent of five and a community organizer/assistant partnership manager for University Neighborhood Partners at the University of Utah; email: A.Yanagui@partners.utah.edu. Her research interest is to improve the outcomes of minoritized students and families.

LAURA HERNÁNDEZ is a mother of five, a community advocate, and a school community council member at her children's school; email: laurahernandez99@msn.com. Laura's research interest includes strengthening the relationships between Latinx families and schools.

GERARDO R. LÓPEZ is a professor in the Department of Educational Administration at Michigan State University; email: gerardo@msu.edu. His research interests are in parent involvement, school-community relations, immigrant education and issues of diversity/difference within educational policy.

JENNIFER MAYER-GLENN is the special assistant to the president for Campus-Community Partnerships and the director of University Neighborhood Partners; email: j.mayer-glenn@partners.utah.edu. Jennifer is interested in community partnerships.