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COVID-19 Impact on Principal Self-Efficacy

Lee Westberry and Tara Hornor

Abstract

Recent educational research has focused on the COVID-19 impact on students, both educationally and emotionally. Researchers have even begun studying the impact of the pandemic on teachers with virtual instruction; however, very little research exists on the COVID-19 impact on principals. The purpose of this research is to study the impact of COVID-19 on P-12 principals. Specifically, the focus of the mixed-method study is studying the pandemic's impact on principal self-efficacy. The study aims to answer the following research questions: 1. What impact has the COVID-19 Pandemic had on principal self-efficacy 2. Are there any unintended consequences from the pandemic that have impacted the principalship? Results show that principals experienced a considerable drop in confidence levels when transitioning from a brick-and-mortar environment to the virtual environment. However, the prolonged nature of the pandemic provided the time and forced principals to improve their leadership practices.

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted the world in a myriad of ways: health systems, business and industry, and schools. In fact, national debates still exist about fully opening schools to serve students five days per week with face-to-face instruction (Franko, 2021). Teachers and teacher unions have strong opinions about safety issues (Garrison, 2021; Will, 2020), and parents have strong opinions about the same (Thompson, 2021). Recent educational research has focused on the COVID-19 impact on students, both educationally (Black et al., 2020; Praghopapati, 2020) and emotionally (Cao, et al., 2020; Elmer et al., 2020). Researchers have even begun studying the impact of the pandemic on teachers with virtual instruction

(Barton, 2020; Kaden, 2020); however, very little research exists on the COVID-19 impact on principals.

Principals are the individuals who are charged with being the instructional leader of the school (Mirfani, A.M., 2019; Naidoo, 2019; No name author, 2020); building relationships with staff, students, and the community (Ciuffetelli et al., 2011), defining the culture (Cohen et al., 2009; Grissom & Bartanen, 2019; Kelley et al., 2005), and managing school operations and personnel (Grissom et al., 2015). In fact, in a recent report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation (Grissom et al., 2021), the authors, after a synthesis of literature, determined the same four domains of behavior of school principals that have the greatest impact on school outcomes:

1. Engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers,
2. Building a productive climate,
3. Facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities, and
4. Strategically managing resources and personnel. (XV)

The authors continue to state, “that if a school district could invest in improving the performance of just one adult in a school building, investing in the principal is likely the most efficient way to affect student achievement” (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 40).

The purpose of this research is to study the impact of COVID-19 on P-12 principals. Specifically, the focus of the mixed-method study is studying the pandemic’s impact on principal self-efficacy. The pandemic has impacted teachers and students intensely; so, logic dictates that principals have been impacted as well. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What impact has the COVID-19 Pandemic had on principal self-efficacy?

2. Are there any unintended consequences from the pandemic that have impacted the principalship?

Literature Review

Research does not dispute that leadership is a fundamental component of a school's success (Day et al., 2016; Goolamally & Ahmad, 2014; Frissom et al., 2015; Gurr et al., 2020; Wallace Foundation, 2016). With increased accountability measures and an increase in societal needs, the demands of the principal have drastically increased. Today's principals are required to not only serve as building managers, but they must also serve as instructional leaders and leaders of school improvement (Hallinger, 2010; Kowalski, 2010; Mirfani, A.M., 2019; Naidoo, 2019; No name author, 2020).

Leadership Practices

School management practices have been studied at length, but now leadership practices are being examined more closely (Cansoy et al., 2020; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). The emphasis on leadership practices will help districts identify candidates who possess the needed qualities to become a successful principal as well as serve to guide professional development programs (Fikuree, 2020; Robinson, et al., 2008). Hitt and Tucker (2016) identified five essential domains of leadership practices:

1. Facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students;
2. Establishing and conveying a mission a vision;
3. Building professional capacity;
4. Creating a supportive organization for learning, and
5. Connecting with external partners (p. 542)

Hitt and Tucker (2016) continue to postulate that the principal's effectiveness in the domains of leadership have a direct impact on enabling teachers to improve student achievement. Without a clear vision or mission, an organization cannot move as one in the same direction. In that regard, creating a supportive learning environment not only applies to students but also to teachers (Grayson & Alvarz, 2008). Building professional capacity not only references building leadership capacity in the building but also facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students. Professional development and growth plans for teachers not only serve to fill a leadership void, but also support efforts in the classroom (Yalcinkaya et al., 2021). Lastly, education cannot do it alone; partners are essential to support the work of schools, and these partners are found in parents as well as the business community (Cockett et al., 2017; Đurišić & Bunjevac, 2017).

Task Effectiveness

Grissom and Loeb (2011) posit that the effectiveness of leadership can be measured in the effectiveness of task accomplishment. This research redirected the focus from instructional leadership practices to all tasks completed by a principal, including managerial tasks. While some view instructional leadership tasks and management tasks as opposite ends of a spectrum (Bolman & Deal, 2017), others feel the two skill sets overlap (Wang, 2016). In fact, Grissom and Loeb (2011) conclude that effectiveness in completing managerial tasks such as hiring, purchasing resources, textbook selections, etc. complement the instructional leadership domain of the principalship, and thereby have a positive impact on student achievement: "Rather, we might conceive of effective instructional leadership as combining an understanding of the instructional needs of the school with an ability to target resources where they are needed, hire the best available teachers, and keep the school running smoothly" (p. 1119).

Self- Efficacy

The link between effective leadership behaviors and task effectiveness may be found in the concept of principal self-efficacy. Lee and Bobko (1994) studied Bandura's (1986) concept of self-efficacy and noted the following:

Those who have a strong sense of self-efficacy in a particular situation will devote their attention and effort to the demands of the situation, and when faced with obstacles and difficult situations, these individuals will try harder and persist longer (p. 364).

In essence, self-efficacy is a social cognitive theory (SCT) that states the degree to which one believes in his/her abilities will impact his/her effectiveness accordingly (Bandura, 1977). A volume of research does exist to show that a principal's self-efficacy has an impact on school effectiveness (Hallinger et al., 2018; Federici & Skaalvik, 2011; Federici & Skaalvik, 2012).

Three major assumptions exist with this SCT:

1. People can learn through observation, even if they have had no prior experience.
2. Reinforcement is key to learning, but it is not all external. Intrinsic motivation is key to the mental preparedness to learn.
3. Changed behaviors do not necessarily result from something that has been learned.

Self-regulation is necessary in order for change to happen and be sustained. (Bandura, 1991)

In the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which constitutes unfamiliar territory for many, these three assumptions must be examined. First, many schools across the world have altered the modality of instruction and the academic calendar due to the pandemic. "Close to 80% of the world's student population is affected by school closures in 138 countries" (Chang & Yano, 2020, p. 1). Consequently, traditional teaching and learning have been shifted to

some form of virtual learning (Black et al., 2020; Kim, et. al, 2020; Stage et. al., 2020). Because of the decisions made by state and federal officials, principals were forced to act. Many have never had the opportunity to observe how to effectively lead a school in a virtual environment.

The second assumption addresses principals' intrinsic motivation to learn. Principals, under increasing pressure, have succeeded in leading schools in progressively ambiguous environments with dwindling resources (Cosner & Jones, 2016; Weiner & Holder, 2018). However, principals have more recently been noted to have a higher level of frustration with the lack of autonomy at the school level (Weiner & Wouflin, 2017) and increased burnout (Skaalvik, 2020). This increased frustration and burnout may have an impact on motivation, and thereby contribute to leadership vacancies (Lemoine, et al., 2018).

The last assumption is that principals must self-regulate learning to create sustainable change and impact self-efficacy. Bandura (1991) states that to self-regulate, one must self-monitor one's behavior, judge those behaviors in relation to personal norms and environmental factors, and affect self-reaction. This self-regulation helps facilitate the successful pursuit of personal goals (Inzlicht et al., 2021). The question remains if principals not only have the autonomy to formulate those personal goals but also if they have the background schemata necessary to form those goals.

Expansive research has been conducted on teacher self-efficacy. This research shows that teacher engagement and job satisfaction are positively related to self-efficacy (Kasalak & Dagyar, 2020). However, less research has been conducted on principal self-efficacy as it relates to instructional leadership. Instructional leadership has previously been viewed as a top-down approach wherein the principal is the specialist (Blasé & Blasé, 1999) and works closely with teachers, directing teaching and learning (Hornig & Loeb, 2010); however, more current research

highlights the collaborative nature of instructional leadership, in which teachers are a large part of the process (Ylimaki & Jacobsen, 2013) which includes goal setting, curriculum collaboration, and professional development that builds capacity (Ma & Marion, 2021). This more recent instructional leadership practice actually increases teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Liu, Bellibas, & Gumus, 2020).

Skaalvik (2020) provides an explanation that explains the outcry for increased instructional leadership skills among administrators:

An assumption in social cognitive theory is that people are motivated to avoid situations and activities for which they have low mastery expectations. The lack of a direct link between self-efficacy and motivation to leave the principal position does not contradict this assumption. Avoiding instructional leadership does not require that one leave the position as a principal but may also be achieved through prioritizing other management responsibilities. (p. 492)

Because of the importance and increased accountability for instructional leadership, self-efficacy for instructional leadership has been proven to be predictive of a principal's emotional well-being and motivation (Skaalvik, 2020).

Impact on Collective Self-Efficacy

Principals with a strong self-efficacy are more likely to persevere through the challenges faced in schools and positively impact teacher self-efficacy (Li & Liu, 2020; Liu & Hallinger, 2018; Sehgal et al., 2017). In fact, a principal's self-efficacy has a positive correlation to the collective self-efficacy of a school (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2020; Supriadi & Suryana, 2021). This collective self-efficacy is the confidence that both the individuals (teachers, students, and principals) as well as the collective whole will be able to carry out the behaviors of teaching and

learning (Bandura, 1997). These self-confident beliefs have previously shown evidence as predictive behaviors in academics (Bandura, 1997).

As a consequence of the pandemic, societal norms (isolation and social distancing) as well as individual beliefs (safety), have changed; the question remains if the collective self-efficacy that once existed still remains. Administrators have the responsibility to grow capacity in their buildings (Brown, 2015; Stringer & Hourani, 2016), which directly impacts teacher confidence (Li & Liu, 2019; Liu et al., 2020; Ozdemir et al., 2020). However, the pandemic's impact on teachers may not leave room for more responsibilities and additional capacity building (Barton, 2020; Kaden, 2020). This time constriction may have an impact on teacher self-efficacy.

With newly defined parameters of instructional leadership, principals could look to collaborative leadership practices and devise systems that afford the needed time for true collaboration. Meaning, principals should develop systems that provide differentiated support for teachers based on the strengths and weaknesses of teachers through a reflective process done in collaboration with teachers. In essence, instructional leadership is conducted with teachers, not to teachers (Glickman et al., 2014). Hallinger and Heck (2010) further suggest that collaborative leadership encompasses three critical components:

1. Vision – A vision for future actions and goals for learning are created together with stakeholders.
2. Governance – Governance indicates empowering the staff to share in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluating school programs as well as setting school policy and defining school practice. This also includes recognizing and praising the staff commitment to the cause.

3. Resource allocation – The allocation of resources includes ensuring that teachers are free to inform administration of classroom needs and administrators allocating resources to support teaching and learning.

Considering these three factors as critical to collaboration, communication must be constant, and all interactions must be transparent in order to build trust (Mondal, 2020), especially during uncertain times such as the Covid 19 pandemic. According to Ross and Bray (2006), the critical components of collaborative leadership may contribute to increased collective self-efficacy.

Methodology

Numerous research designs and methodologies have been employed to investigate the self-efficacy and confidence of K-12 principals. However, few research studies have focused on how the transition to virtual principalship influenced leaders' confidence levels. The complexity of transitioning to a virtual leadership environment, diversity of stakeholder needs, as well as the myriad of challenges necessitate a thoughtful creation of the research design (Leavy, 2017). The changing role and expectations of virtual principals also requires in-depth consideration in the research strategy. For these reasons, this study employs a mixed-method research design, including both quantitative survey research and qualitative structured interviews.

Participants for the qualitative component of the study were selected using a purposive sampling strategy of principals and superintendents serving in public K-12 school districts in South Carolina. Two hundred and seventy principals and district leaders serving within the state were asked if they would be willing to share their perspectives in individual research interviews. Forty-three principals and district leaders in two large districts were willing to participate in this study. Ten were selected to participate in the interviews using a randomized process. The research participants shared one critical characteristic which met the inclusion criteria for the

research study - holding a role as a principal or superintendent at the time of the study. Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) assert that even a research sample that is small may provide great insight and information on the research topic. The quantitative component of this study employed an online survey to gain the perspective of principals and superintendents currently serving in K-12 educational settings throughout South Carolina. Two hundred and seventy online surveys were administered, and 77 principals and superintendents participated, yielding a 28.5% response rate.

A mixed-method design was utilized in this research study because the research questions focused on principal and superintendents' confidence levels in brick-and-mortar and virtual instructional environments. Levy (2017) asserts that utilizing a mixed-method research strategy is particularly powerful in gaining broader perspectives and a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. This research strategy enabled both statistical analysis of participants' quantitative ratings as well as individual principal's rich personal reflections on personal experiences to be compared with other participants in the study (Creswell, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 2015; Leavy, 2017).

The survey instrument presented two questions on principal confidence and employed a 5-point Likert scale. The qualitative component of this study utilized 10 structured individual interviews with current principals and superintendents. The survey and interview questions were each aligned to one of the study's two overarching research questions and utilized questions to encourage research participants to elaborate on their perceptions of their confidence levels as a principal. Throughout each interview, open-ended questions were utilized to gain insight about their transition to the virtual principalship. The interview questions focused on two important areas including gaining insights about leaders' confidence levels and their experience

transitioning to virtual principalship. The researchers ensured the interview questions were relevant and appropriate by purposefully constructing the interview questions to be open-ended, by analyzing research literature, and by aligning questions with one of the study’s overarching research questions, (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Each interview was recorded for transcription to increase data trustworthiness (Creswell, 2018). The research interviews were conducted utilizing video conferencing software spanning a two-week time period.

Research Participants

The participants in the quantitative component of this study included 77 principals and superintendents serving within K-12 schools or districts in South Carolina. Participants in the qualitative component of this study included 10 principals and superintendents serving within K-12 schools or districts in South Carolina. Each of the study participants recently gained experience as a virtual principal or superintendent associated with the shift to online instruction in response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The participants in this study were diverse in years of educational leadership experience, race, and gender, increasing the likelihood of the representativeness of the sample to be generalizable to a wider population of K-12 principals. Interview participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to de-identify the research participants.

Table 1.

Interview Participant Demographic Characteristics

Participants (n=10)		Principal Experience
Gender	Race	

1. Melanie	13 Years, High School
Female	African American
2. Hanna	8 Years, High School
Female	Caucasian
3. Jack	1 Year, High School
Male	African American
4. Donna	3 Years, High School
Female	Caucasian
5. Hudson	3 Years, High School
Male	African American
6. John	4 Years, High School
Male	Caucasian
7. Christina	17 Years, Superintendent
Female	Caucasian
8. Don	29 Years, Superintendent
Male	Caucasian
9. Kay	9 Years, High School
Female	Caucasian
10. Bell	5 Years, Middle and High School
Female	African American

Data Analysis

Creswell (2018) states, “The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (p. 183). In the survey analysis, data was examined by aggregate results as well as disaggregated by gender, years of experience as a principal, and by K-12 school characteristics associated with technology resources, geography, and socioeconomic indicators. The study employed two survey questions, asking participants to rate their own confidence level as a principal in brick-and-mortar and virtual instructional environments. The survey utilized a five-point-Likert scale, which ranged from 1 (very low confidence level) to 5 (very high confidence level).

Following the conclusion of the first research interview, the researchers utilized a thematic, constant-comparison analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Using a thematic analytic strategy, the researchers engaged in multiple stages of coding, clustering, and classifying words to ensure saturation was reached and to gain insight about developing themes, categories, and patterns in principals’ confidence levels (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers frequently revisited the participants’ interview data utilizing a constant comparison analysis technique. This inductive analysis led to four themes emerging from the data that answered the study’s overarching research questions and provided insight into principals’ confidence levels. While the thematic analysis was a critically important component, the analysis of published research literature was also a key component of the analytic process. The previous research literature on principal self-efficacy and confidence was instrumental in assessing the data collected in this research study and evaluating the research findings. Research literature assisted in better

understanding emerging themes, categories, and patterns in the study’s findings and help in corroborating the results.

Results

Table 2

PRINCIPAL CONFIDENCE LEVEL

Percent of Respondents Reporting Job Confidence

	1	2	3	4	5	Principals Reporting High or Very High Confidence Level
	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	
Confidence Level as a Principal in a Traditional Instructional Environment	0% N=0	1.3% N=1	2.6% N=2	23.4% N=18	72.7% N=56	96.1% N=74

Confidence Level as a				31.2		
Virtual Principal	0%	7.8	51.9%	%	9.7%	40.9%
	N=0	%	N=40	N=2	N=7	N=31
		N=6		4		

Principals and superintendents participating in the quantitative component of this study answered two survey questions designed to generate insight about the following overarching research question: How did the transition to virtual principalship influence leaders’ confidence levels? Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the participant responses to two survey questions where principals and superintendents rated their confidence levels as principals in traditional instructional environments as well as their confidence levels as virtual principals. As depicted in the table below, over 96% of principals rated their confidence as “high” or “very high” in traditional instructional settings, while less than half that amount, only 40.9% reported a “high” or “very high” confidence level in virtual settings. The differential in the percentage of principals reporting “very high” confidence levels when leading in traditional environments (72.7% of respondents) and virtual principalship (only 9.7% of respondents) was noteworthy. Principals were far more likely to rate their confidence level as a virtual principal as “moderate” (51.9% of respondents), whereas only 2.6% of principals rated their confidence level as “moderate” in traditional instructional settings.

Table 3 depicts principal confidence levels in traditional instructional settings and in virtual settings, disaggregated by gender and school demographic indicators, including Title 1 and geographic categorizations. As depicted in the table below, like the aggregate results, principals consistently rated their confidence level as “high” or “very high” in traditional instructional settings, ranging from 90.9% in rural school settings to 100% in urban and suburban

settings. A noteworthy differential emerged in the percentage of principals reporting “high” or “very high” confidence levels in virtual settings, ranging from 29.4% of principals in Title 1 schools to 55.6% of principals in urban schools.

<p>Table 3</p> <p>PRINCIPAL CONFIDENCE LEVEL</p> <p>DISAGGREGATED BY GENDER AND SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS</p> <p>Percent of Respondents Reporting High or Very High Confidence Level</p>								
	Aggregate (N=77)	Female (N=45)	Male (N=31)	SES Non-Title 1 (N=42)	SES Title 1 (N=34)	Suburban (N=35)	Rural (N=33)	Urban (N=9)
Confidence Level as a Principal in a Traditional Instructional Environment	96.1%	97.8%	93.5%	97.6%	97.0%	100%	90.9%	100%
	N=74	N=44	N=29	N=41	N=33	N=35	N=30	N=9

Confidence								
Level as a		35.6	45.1		29.4		36.4	
Virtual	40.9%	%	%	50%	%	40.0	%	55.6
Principal	N=31	N=1	N=1	N=21	N=1	%	N=1	%
		6	4		0	N=14	2	N=5

Table 4 depicts principal confidence levels in traditional instructional settings and virtual settings, disaggregated by years of experience and school technology categorization. As highlighted in the table below, principals consistently rated their confidence level as “high” or “very high” in traditional instructional settings, ranging from 90% in schools without 1:1 technology access to 100% from leaders with over 16 years of experience. However, the percentage of principals reporting “high” or “very high” confidence levels in virtual settings were much lower, ranging from 36.1% of principals with less than five years of experience to 58.3% of principals with over 15 years of experience.

Table 4

PRINCIPAL CONFIDENCE LEVEL

DISAGGREGATED BY EXPERIENCE AND SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

Percent of Respondents Reporting High or Very High Confidence Level

	Aggregate (N=77)	Technology Non 1:1 (N=10)	Technology 1:1 (N=67)	1-4 Years of Experience (N=36)	5-15 Years of Experience (N=29)	Over 16 Years of Experience (N=12)
Confidence Level as a Principal in a Traditional Instructional Environment	96.1% N=74	90.0% N=9	97.0% N=65	94.4% N=34	96.6% N=28	100% N=12
Confidence Level as a Virtual Principal	40.9% N=31	40.0% N=4	38.8% N=26	36.1% N=13	37.9 % N=11	58.3% N=7

Findings remained consistent, with confidence levels in the virtual principalship rated much lower, across all disaggregated views of the data.

Interview Results

Principals and superintendents who participated in the qualitative component of this study answered a variety of interview questions designed to generate insight about the following two overarching research questions: How do principals describe their transition to virtual principalship? How did the transition to virtual principalship influence leaders' confidence levels? Research participant responses were strikingly similar despite differences in years of experience, gender, race, and ethnicity.

An analysis of the individual interview data highlights the vast majority of the participants interviewed in this research study reported the transition to virtual principalship initially rattled their confidence level as instructional leaders. In fact, the majority of principals participating in this study used the term “flying by seat of our pants” when describing the transition to virtual leadership. Hanna, an experienced high school principal elaborated on her transition to virtual leadership,

This is year nine for me in this seat and after a while you get to a point where you feel like you've seen pretty much everything and how to handle everything. And what it did was it basically took me down to being a first-year principal again in some cases. I'll be honest in saying that unlike first-year principals who you know are first-year principals and people are giving them support, I think we all felt like first-year principals again in so many cases. No one knew how to support us because they were flying by seat of their pants too in terms of what is needed.

Jack, a first-year principal, shared the following observation,

The transition was frightening. I'm the only high school in my district so I don't have other high school principals within my district to bounce ideas off of...I do

have other principals throughout the state and throughout the country that I could call but their circumstances are totally different than my circumstances- they might have a plethora of resources to pull from whereas I might not. So I'm having to be innovative in some of the decisions that I make.

When asked how the transition to virtual influenced her confidence, Donna, a high school principal with three years of experience, chuckled and stated,

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being confident, any day walking into my building I feel I'm at a nine. With virtual, I'd put myself at a three maybe a four.

Each of the interview participants also asserted the transition to virtual principalship offered several silver linings and unexpected areas of personal and organizational growth. Interview participants identified three distinct advantages that emerged as a result of the transition to virtual principalship: 1) increased self-efficacy and confidence; 2) growth in instructional leadership skills; and 3) enhanced team cohesion. The following sections present the data gained relating to each of the aforementioned areas to provide insight on principal and superintendents' perceptions about strengths gained through their transition to being a virtual principal.

Increased Self-efficacy and Confidence

During the individual interviews, all 10 principals and superintendents expressed self-efficacy and confidence gains resulting from the transition to the virtual principalship. Donna, a high school principal with three years-experience, shared,

I've become stronger. I've spent more time on curriculum than I've been able to in the past. I do feel we are better prepared if we do need to shut down...whether it's a pandemic, a hurricane, or an ice storm.

Hanna, an experienced high school principal, also shared, “I've had to become really a lot more savvy.” Similarly, Jack, a first-year principal, shared,

I think I'm an expert now. I can go anywhere and get any job...I've grown leaps and bounds.

John, a high school principal with four years of experience, stated,

The confidence factor is huge and feeling like I'm supported by my district is huge as well. So, I've got confidence in what I do on a daily basis now. I'm confident I have confidence from my district because I've produced gains in the years that I've been here that has induced that confidence, but it allowed me to be focused on what I think is probably the most critical aspect of leadership during this time, which is keeping the morale and the mindset of teachers checked in. So, I say one thing we've done successfully is we've had a tremendous focus on supporting our teachers.

Growth in Instructional Leadership Skills

Growth in instructional leadership skills and experiences was a second critical finding identified by the overwhelming majority of interview participants. Hana, an experienced high school principal, stated,

I fought change...I have always [believed] kids need to be in school, they need to be in front of teachers...I guess I wish I wouldn't have been so stubborn.

When asked if the transition to virtual had impacted her instructional leadership, she readily replied,

Yeah, it really has. It was an “aha” moment for me when I realized when I was popping into these classrooms and I’m having these conversations with teachers how much I really didn’t know what was going on in my building. Even though I thought I did, even though I thought I had a good handle on it. That’s when you see your weaknesses.

Likewise, Melanie, an experienced high school principal, commented,

You gotta look at the details of everything. And I think even as a brick and mortar leader, I paid attention to those little things, but now I’m even paying attention closer to not only what I do, how I do it, but I’m paying attention to my people and my leadership team as well, to make sure that we are communicating.

Jack, a first-year principal, shared the transition had helped him “refine data collection and disseminating that data.” Kay, an experienced high school principal, noted the transition helped her in “learning how to manipulate technology for best practices.” In addition, Donna, a principal with three years of experience noted the transition had caused her to be “much more engaged with students and curriculum.”

Christina, an experienced superintendent, shared,

I think that we are, we’re more deliberate. We’re more thoughtful...we’re more thoughtful of the needs of our teachers...What type of professional development do they need? What type of learning experiences do they need?

Enhanced Team Cohesion

All of the interview participants expressed that working through the challenges associated with transitioning to virtual instruction led to enhanced team cohesion. This sentiment is described by Christina, an experienced superintendent who stated the transition “strengthened

our team.” Melanie, a high school principal with over 10 years-experience shared that her team “communicates even better.” She further elaborated that her team has,

Grown even stronger as a family, working together. We are all in this together – to make it work it’s going to take us all.

Similarly, Jack, a first-year principal, shared,

I’m surrounded by a lot of hardworking, dedicated people who understand the struggles of this community and want to see change and want to see our progress and move in the right direction.

Kay, an experienced high school principal stated,

The structure of communication really solidified to be more routine. We’d have a department meeting once a month during a regular school year, that would happen more often now because we had more questions. We had more concerns. We had more work that we had to do in terms of identifying the tools and sharing the tools that were going to make a robust learning experience for students.

Discussion and Future Implications

The surveys revealed that principals experienced a considerable drop in confidence levels when transitioning from a brick-and-mortar environment to the virtual environment. In fact, the decrease in confidence levels was consistent across race and gender. However, one notable difference was in the decrease in confidence in Title 1, rural schools versus urban schools.

Although both groups experienced a drop in confidence levels, the impoverished, rural school principals suffered a larger loss in confidence. As expected, principals with less than five years of experience suffered a larger loss in confidence than seasoned administrators with over 15 years of experience.

Because the Covid 19 Pandemic has impacted schooling for over a year, principals have learned and have grown. Interviews revealed some unintended consequences that have benefited administrators:

1. Increased time on instructional leadership practices
2. Intentionality in data analyses
3. Increased collective self-efficacy

Because instruction was being delivered virtually and principals did not have to spend time on student discipline, more time was spent in the virtual classroom, providing feedback.

Consequently, with principals freed from perpetual parent meetings, more time was spent with data analyses and school planning. Lastly, because teachers had more questions and concerns, principals were forced to communicate more and seek input, resulting in collaborative leadership practices. Though these SC principals initially experienced a significant drop in confidence levels, the prolonged nature of the pandemic provided the time and forced principals to improve their leadership practices.

Because of the nature of this pandemic and the duration of the absence from traditional schooling, principals adapted and improved practices. Future studies should examine the impact of the transition from the virtual environment back to the brick-and-mortar environment. Do principals maintain the improved leadership practices, or do they revert back to old practices? Additionally, this study's focus was in one southern state. Additional research on a cross-section of the country, which embodies cultural differences, would dictate if the results were transferrable. Lastly, the nature of the Covid 19 Pandemic was isolating and scary for many. For those who were concerned for personal and family safety, confidence levels may have been impacted further than expected. Therefore, a study of principals focused on change in the

instructional environment without the added stress of a health pandemic may yield different results. This type of study could help inform higher education practices and professional learning programs for principals.

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