Pandemic-Informed Principal: Lessons Learned In Urban Schools

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Abstract: *The covid-19 pandemic impacted the schooling processes in K-12 systems. Principals navigated many challenges both during remote online learning and after returning to in-person education. This study explored the processes that 11 charter high school principals experienced during the pandemic. Using thematic analysis of interview data from 11 school principals, researchers aimed to understand how urban school principals' perceptions towards online education practices in underprivileged communities have changed towards both online learning and schooling in general during the covid-19 pandemic. The goal of this examination is to then make recommendations for systemic reform. Five themes emerged: 1) school principals' differing experiences with online learning during the pandemic, 2) challenges and opportunities in transitioning to online learning during the pandemic, 3) equity problems, 4) perspectives of school principals on online learning during the pandemic, and 5) shifts in school principals' perceptions of online learning. Findings suggest important implications for principals, district leaders, policymakers, and researchers.*

Keywords: Covid-19, Urban Schools, K-12, Online Learning, Equity, Leadership, Principal

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted teaching and learning at all education levels across the world (Dare & Saleem, 2022). During the pandemic and in the post-pandemic world, school leadership in K-12 education has played and continues to play a critical role in delivering quality education to students, despite facing challenges in this process (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023; Constantina et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that marginalized groups were the most affected because they were ill-equipped to face the challenges associated with the pandemic (Jackson, 2023; Virella, 2023). To be more specific, the pandemic exacerbated inequities that public-school K-12 students from low-income and minority backgrounds were experiencing even before the pandemic. This was especially evident in these students' lack of technology access and lack of academic support at home,

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thus hampering students' ability to engage effectively with virtual learning (Jackson, 2023). As Harris and Jones (2022) correctly noted, school leaders also faced challenges, and they were "walking a tightrope without a safety net" because they were not provided proper guidance on how to lead their schools during the pandemic (p. 244).

The results of the Spring 2020 COVID-19 survey of 957 school principals across the U.S. demonstrated that approximately 80% of leaders of schools that served large populations of students of color and students from lower-income households (or target schools) could provide instructional materials to students despite challenges while 85% of nontarget school (low-poverty schools) principals reported providing the same support (Hamilton et al., 2020). A comparison of the responses from target and nontarget schools related to the challenges of "lifting of requirements regarding student attendance or instructional time" demonstrated higher rates for target school principals. This was because at least 30% of target school principals reported that they had experienced a moderate or very major need for support, compared to 19% of the nontarget school principals, who provided a similar response (Hamilton et al., 2020, p. 6). This breakdown of target and nontarget schools provides substantial evidence demonstrating disparities in the support and resources for teaching and learning across the United States.

A follow-up survey of school principals of K–12 public schools was administered in 2021 to examine principals' perspectives on inequities in approaches and resources for delivering remote learning across schools that served diverse student populations (Perera & Diliberti, 2023). The survey results revealed that school principals needed support from district leaders, such as effective strategies for tackling students' technology problems, challenges related to remote learning, and teacher training for distance learning (Perera & Diliberti, 2023). School principals also reported the need for prioritizing the goals for emergency preparedness, reducing learning gaps, and addressing students' mental health and their overall well-being. Specifically, over half of U.S. public school principals (54%) surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that their schools need additional resources to increase their capacity to reduce student misbehavior (Perera & Diliberti, 2023).

The responses suggest that students' social and emotional well-being is of particular concern to school leaders of high-poverty schools. Principals in target schools were more likely than their counterparts from nontarget schools to express a major or very major need for quality materials to support social and emotional learning (Perera & Diliberti, 2023).

Consistent with Perera & Diliberti's (2023) findings, DeMatthews et al. (2023) reported similar outcomes based on the data collected from the "RAND American School Leader Panel (ASLP) 2020 COVID-19 Distance Learning Surveys: Principals" (RAND, 2020). Most principals reported that they were unprepared in offering online education, using a learning management system (LMS), providing teachers with training on online distance education, giving students access to adequate technology, and having remote learning plans in place in case of school closures. For example, 83% of the principals in urban areas reported that they had no remote learning plan in place before the pandemic. Generally, schools struggled with providing their students with access to technology such as computers, internet access, and

online learning materials. Only 61% of the principals serving high-poverty/minority populations reported that they could provide devices to at least those students who needed them, if not all students. When it comes to support for principals from the district leadership, principals in urban areas reported that they had a higher need for support systems as opposed to the principals in suburban areas. Regarding student achievement, more principals noticed that vulnerable students were especially at risk or likely to be negatively affected by the closure of schools.

Moreover, the results of the 2021 Learn Together Surveys (LTS) that were administered to 1,686 secondary principals and teachers in March 2021 through the RAND Corporation's American Educator Panels found that 72% of principals reported that the stress from their jobs was either a moderate or major concern (Kaufman et al., 2021; Superville, 2022). Out of the principals surveyed, 36% of female principals and 38% of school leaders of color reported having continuous job-related stress while less than 25% male and white principals reported experiencing the same type of stress. The survey results also demonstrated that about 42% of principals serving schools with large numbers of students of color said they experienced continuous job-related stress compared to 26% of their peers in schools with small non-white student enrollment (Superville, 2022).

It is necessary to explore the challenges faced by school principals in order to understand how the perceptions of urban school principals in underprivileged communities towards online education practices have changed towards both online learning and schooling in general during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining such challenges, this study aims to make recommendations for systemic reform.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts of an equity-oriented crisis leadership framework served as the theoretical lens in this study. The pillars of equity-oriented crisis leadership are essential in examining how leaders act during a crisis and develop strategies to overcome it (Virella, 2023) because the theoretical underpinnings of this framework stem from crisis leadership and management concepts formulated by numerous scholars (e.g., Boin et al., 2005; Smith & Riley, 2012). Commenting on the shortcomings of those concepts, Virella (2023) contends that they fail to provide evidence for addressing the crisis of underrepresented and historically marginalized groups of people.

The equity-oriented crisis leadership framework provides a mechanism to examine a school leader's efforts to create an equitable school or district. This is important because the core of this framework is the belief that schools can support and make long-lasting change in the school system through equity-oriented leadership during a time of pandemic and other crises (Virella, 2023). The pillars of this framework are grounded on major assumptions, such as district and school leaders' approach to the crisis (e.g., "lead[ing] from the balcony"), that would be beneficial for facilitating equitable outcomes (Virella, 2023, p. 6).

The underpinnings of this framework are "hope, equity-oriented mindset; inclusive decision making; resource allocation, deprivation, and diffusion; equitable systems and structures; inclusive communication; equity-oriented critical self-reflection and advocacy for radical change" (Virella, 2023, p. 6-7). This framework also provides a technical vocabulary to discuss equity in crisis response. Elaborating further on these concepts, Virella (2023) states that *hope* in the equity-oriented crisis leadership conceptual framework serves as the foundation of supporting school leaders' vision of a future success for their students, focusing primarily on marginalized populations who have been disproportionately impacted by crises. An *equity-oriented mindset* is understood as leaders' awareness of racial, gender, and other inequities in their education system as well as the strategies that they develop to overcome the barriers to equitable outcomes. The concept of *inclusive decision-making* implies that leadership should develop inclusive decision-making processes while being committed to considering diverse perspectives and including the community at every step. *Resource allocation and deprivation* is also an essential concept in this framework because school leaders should think about how resources are allocated and which population would be deprived from the deserved resources (Reardon et al. 2019; Virella, 2023). According to Virella (2023), the features of *equitable systems and structures* include policies and procedures that don't deny or limit the ability of marginalized populations to participate actively in a school community. Therefore, *inclusive communication* is essential to transmit all school communication to families, utilizing multiple forms of communication, such as newsletters, social media, text/voice messages, and adapting the language to prevent miscommunication and maximize access to information. *Advocacy for radical change* implies promoting equity because school leaders can identify systemic racism and advocate against structural oppression that could heighten during a crisis by formulating their responses to the experiences of marginalized populations. Finally, *critical self-reflection* is an essential pillar of the equity-oriented crisis leadership framework because school leaders' ability to reflect may function as a key role in changing the conditions of underserved populations who were negatively impacted by a crisis. However, as Virella (2023) contends, the pillars of equity-oriented crisis leadership should be viewed as suggestions for leaders in taking actions, bearing in mind that the framework is iterative and depends heavily on the impact of each crisis.

Literature Review

Literature on school leadership during the pandemic is diverse. As McLeod and Dulsky (2021) correctly noted, early seminal works published at the start of the pandemic were mostly conceptual, discussing leaders' responsibility or leadership traits that promote effective leadership. Since then, articles have mostly been empirical in nature, discussing the challenges dealt with by school leaders.

Conceptual Studies on School Leadership during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Several scholars (e.g., Hamilton et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Netolicky, 2020) commented on different aspects of school leadership during the pandemic, making some recommendations. For instance, Hamilton et al. (2020) noted that school principals' primary responsibilities should be students' safety, health, and education. Netolicky (2020) argued that, during crisis, "[school] leaders must act swiftly and with foresight but also with careful consideration of options, consequences and side effects of actions taken. They must communicate with clarity and purpose but also with empathy and humanity" (p. 392) Regarding school leadership during the pandemic, Harris (2020) also highlighted that the evidence from the leadership of school principals during the pandemic demonstrated the importance of context-responsive leadership because school leaders had to develop strategies to address the many challenges that arose, such as a lack of resources and personnel.

Engaging students in the learning process and producing quality learning outcomes were major challenges during the pandemic. Thurston (2024) recommended more humanized learning environments by fostering connection, empathy, and social presence to enhance student engagement and success.

Scholars (e.g., Bagwell, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020) also underscored that school leaders should practice strategic leadership by sharing their vision with their staff members while also considering a range of impacts (e.g., individuals' well-being and management of resources). Leithwood et al. (2020) noted that during the pandemic, the principles of good leadership should remain constant, including having a clear vision and helping staff to acquire necessary skills. Bagwell (2020) emphasized that school leaders who practice an adaptive leadership approach could better support their schools in navigating the challenges of uncertain educational environments. An adaptive approach can be taken by building organizational and individual resilience as well as by distributing leadership responsibilities, such as collaboration and relationship-building.

The importance of communication during crisis was also discussed extensively in Heath and O'Hair's (2020) work, where they highlighted the role of communication in leaders' credibility, awareness, understanding, satisfaction, and enactment. According to Heath and O'Hair (2020), if leaders have credibility, they can raise their employees' awareness about crisis and risks by developing strategies for response based on the evaluation of risk levels. When leaders are satisfied with their strategies, they can take appropriate measures based on their decision through community dialogue. Therefore, responsiveness of the employees to a crisis heavily depends on leaders' communication (Heath & O'Hair, 2020). Other scholars, such as Fernandez and Shaw (2020), recommended that academic leaders focus on best practices, try to see opportunities in crisis, communicate clearly, connect with others, and distribute leadership within the organization.

Based on their literature review of best practices of school leadership during crisis, Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) found that researchers agreed that principals had to make changes in their daily leadership practices and that these practices differed significantly from their normal leadership roles and responsibilities because they had to deal with many challenges, such as logistical challenges (e.g., adopting an effective responsive strategy), academic challenges (e.g.,

supporting teachers and students in their transition to online learning), and organizational challenges (e.g., facing obstacles in ensuring safety of teachers and students).

As for the leadership practices of school principals, Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) reported that school resilience served as an important factor in the principals' strategic response planning and the choices of leadership styles suitable in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Distributed and collaborative (or collegial) leadership styles were the most effectively integrated in crisis response strategies during the pandemic because a distributed leadership style helped school leaders to recognize crisis and organize their responsive strategy. Distributed leadership also helped school leaders include the school community in the decision-making process, which in turn led to community resilience. Collaborative leadership helped the school leaders bring a sense of belonging by acknowledging the collective work of teachers, students, and families, which was beneficial for better educational outcomes. Harris and Jones (2022) also emphasized that distributed leadership was used as a default leadership response during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis because school leaders had to connect with the community, apply shared decision-making, and learn to solve novel issues. Thus, they practiced collaborative and responsive leadership styles.

Empirical Studies on School Leadership during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Findings from empirical studies (e.g., An et al., 2022; Brion & Kiral, 2021; Francois & Weiner, 2022; Kaul et al., 2020; Rigby et al. 2020; Varela & Fedynich, 2020) regarding the lived experiences of school administrators demonstrated that there were some challenges that they had experienced, such as ensuring the effectiveness of online learning and working with students and families. For instance, Kaul et al. (2020) found that 120 principals in 19 states in the U.S. struggled to deal with the challenges they faced, such as providing technical support for students and ensuring their students' social and emotional well-being. Principals also underscored the key aspects of leadership during the pandemic, such as addressing the basic needs of both students and staff members and expanding the modes of communication. Rigby et al. (2020) identified effective practices for K-12 education leadership through findings based on the interviews of 13 school district leaders. These findings included treating families as equal partners in learning, providing opportunities for high-quality remote learning at home, and making inclusive decisions by involving multiple stakeholders. Varela and Fedynich (2020) reported that school leaders in the U.S. were generally confident in serving students, staff, and parents during the pandemic, "but [they] felt a lack of resources and a preponderance of student inequities complicated the experience" (p. 1). Based on their findings, the researchers recommended providing necessary support for school leadership during crises in general. An et al. (2022) identified some factors that should be considered when planning sustainable online learning in schools in high-needs school communities. These factors include accessibility to stable internet connections and electronic devices; usability of technology; wellness of students, both physical and mental, while considering students' social and emotional health; and ensuring that support measures are in place for home, school, and peers. This type of planning involves joint efforts from parents, teachers, and others. Brion and Kiral (2021) examined how 30 American educational leaders led during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings revealed that school leaders struggled with social unrest over racial

issues and logistical difficulties. In their study, Francois and Weiner (2022) discussed how 29 urban school principals across the United States could contribute to teachers' growth and addressed the issues related to online learning through internal accountability (e.g., principals' collaboration with teachers); and addressing parents' requests on adjusting the school day (e.g., fewer, or more synchronous online learning) as part of market accountability; and making some difficult decisions per their moral accountability such as closing schools before their district or state mandates in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenology approach to examine school principals' perceptions of online learning during the pandemic. In this study, *phenomenon* refers to the school principals' experiences regarding online learning practices during the pandemic. Phenomenology, as a research method, focuses on individuals' experiences with a goal of examining phenomenon as experienced by people through their stories (Kafle, 2013). The phenomenological approach also helps interpret the experiences of participants by revealing the details within an individual's experience that may otherwise go unnoticed (Kafle, 2013). Thus, the lens of phenomenology allows for a better depiction of the essence of experiences through the process of meaning-making. Thematic analysis (TA) is a systematic method for analyzing a qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was deemed appropriate for examining the perspectives of school principals about school leadership during the pandemic.

The following questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of urban school principals in underprivileged communities towards online learning practices during the pandemic?

RQ2: How did the perceptions of urban school principals change towards online learning practices during the pandemic?

RQ3: What are the common challenges and opportunities that surfaced during the pandemic regarding online learning practices?

RQ4: How did schools' online learning practices change after returning to in-person learning?

Data Collection

Ethics approval was obtained from the researchers' affiliated institution prior to data collection for the purpose of this study. The IRB approval was received in May 2023.

Convenience sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2016) was used in the present study because the researcher was acquainted with several principals. At the time of data collection, all participants were employed at charter schools in the Midwest, primarily working in high schools in urban districts. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews running 45 to 75 minutes in order to collect rich data. The research questions and the interview protocol were formulated based on findings from relevant literature. To maintain social distancing and due to the geographical location of some of the participants, the interviews took place and were recorded through the Zoom platform. Noor

et al. (2020) recommended that interview protocol should be developed to avoid negative questions and technical language so that participants would have a clear understanding of each question. Following this recommendation from Noor et al. (2020), the interview questions used in this study were simple and easy to respond to, helping the researcher to make sense of the principals' leadership practices during the pandemic and their ideas about how to provide the best possible remote learning environments for students (Appendix B).

Study Context

At the time of the study, the participants were employed as principals in college prep charter high schools. The schools belong to a network of schools located in historically underserved urban communities across the Midwest, offering STEM-focused, college prep, and high-quality education to more than 13,000 students, most of whom identify as African American, Hispanic, or Latinx and come from disadvantaged families. The schools aim to cultivate a school culture that fosters respect, courage, integrity, curiosity, and responsibility while prioritizing equity, universal design, and trauma-informed practices. As a student-centered charter school network, the schools remain committed to providing their students with a safe, supportive, and enriching environment. The schools within this network are committed to a comprehensive education tailored to every child's unique needs, starting with their social-emotional health. Such commitment helps students acquire essential social and emotional skills to position them for academic and personal success because the proper formula for academic success starts with meeting students at their most basic needs.

Participants

In total, 12 high school principals were invited to participate in this study via email and 11 of them participated (Appendix C). Those who responded to the invitation were asked to sign a consent form prior to participating in research activities (Appendix D). Participants were allowed to opt out from the study at any time during data collection. Out of 11 participants, three of the school principals identified themselves as female; the other eight school principals identified themselves as male. All school principals worked at urban high schools that served underrepresented communities, meaning that at least 65% of the student population was African American and an average of 90% of the student population was eligible for free or reduced lunch. In four urban schools, the Hispanic student population was at least 40%. Table 18 presents the demographic profile of participants. The principals' leadership experience varied; some had more than five years of experience while others had been in their role for less than three years but had served as assistant principals either prior to or during the pandemic.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Age group	Pseud	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	SPED students in schools (%)	ESL students in schools (%)
40-50	Murat	Male	Asian	10	10
50-60	Zafer	Male	Asian	10	15
50-60	Matthew	Male	African American	12.7	23.6
50-60	Janet	Female	White/Caucasian	15	15
35-40	Samuel	Male	White/Caucasian	10	25
50-60	Lisa	Female	White/Caucasian	11	12
40-50	Beth	Female	White/Caucasian	16	38
30-40	Metin	Male	Asian	11	10
30-40	Alex	Male	White/Caucasian	12	30
40-50	Mehmet	Male	Asian	22	1
50-60	George	Male	African American	13	78

Data Analysis

To ensure the anonymity of the participants, the researcher assigned a pseudonym to each principal. The audio recordings were transcribed using automated transcription through rev.com. The automated transcriptions were checked twice to make sure all interview segments were transcribed accurately. Necessary corrections were made prior to data analysis. Data analysis was done manually by printing out the transcripts and highlighting the segments related to research questions (Saldaña, 2009). The data collected from interviews with school principals yielded rich information regarding the lived experiences of school principals. However, even when data is rich, it is not possible to include all information in a qualitative study; therefore, researchers need to "winnow" the data (Guest et al., 2012, p. 69), which refers to a process of focusing only on salient data and analyzing the parts of that data that the researcher considers essential. Thus, a thematic approach was utilized for data analysis (King, 2004).

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step analysis helps identify and organize codes into themes. As suggested by Braun and Clark (2006), the initial phases of data analysis (familiarizing yourself with the data and generating initial codes), require the researcher to read the transcripts multiple times and make notes next to phrases that they would then turn into codes. The researcher followed this process for this study. Descriptive codes were assigned to the sections that were related to research questions responses and the theoretical framework. In the third step, the lists of codes were combined into overarching themes. In the fourth step of TA, themes were reviewed, and potential sets of themes were identified. In the fifth phase, the significance of the themes was determined, and the themes were named as a response to each research question. In the final phase, the themes were produced to discuss the experiences of principals. Thus, using thematic analysis helped the researcher create an overall narrative of

the participants' experiences by describing in detail what the different themes revealed about the topic.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is understood as a technique that researchers apply to persuade the readers that their research findings are credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance trustworthiness, this study employed generalizability, an audit trail, and the sharing of researcher bias. Since phenomenological inquiry was applied in this study, "high-level inference" was used because this research method aims to generalize beyond the subjects (school principals) and their individual contexts (Ercikan & Roth, 2006, p. 21). The use of high-level inference is further justified by its potential to reveal the commonality of experiences, especially if a researcher is interested in portraying different perceptual experiences that exist within a particular group of participants involved in a phenomenological study (Ercikan & Roth, 2006).

Another method was an audit trail, which in qualitative research refers to documenting how a study was carried out, thus providing a transparent description of the steps taken throughout a research project (Carcary, 2020; Halpern, 1983; Koch, 1994). According to Halpern (1983), an audit trail entails keeping detailed records of data, field notes, and transcripts, all of which are helpful for a researcher in organizing the data and effectively reporting the research process. Moreover, an audit trail helps the reader understand the rationale for the use of certain methodologies to provide explanations and evidence from the study (Koch, 1994). Providing detailed descriptions of accounts (e.g., the study's context, the research methods, and examples of raw data) is helpful for evaluating the merits of the qualitative study (Carcary, 2020). In this study, the researcher kept track of the records related to the research and provided both a rationale for choosing the research method and explanations of each step of the research process.

Researcher Bias

According to Cresswell (2013), researchers engaged in qualitative research need to reflect on their own positionality in the study by sharing their personal background and professional experiences that would affect their interpretations (e.g., the themes they develop and the meaning they ascribe to the data). Sharing researcher bias is necessary because the professional background of the researchers is critical in describing which findings they selected and deemed important. Thus, the researchers' contribution to the study can be useful and positive rather than detrimental (Creswell, 2013).

The primary researcher of this study had served as a principal in the same charter school network for 13 years, from 2009 to 2022. Despite the fact that the primary researcher was not a principal at the time of the study, his extensive principalship experience in elementary,

middle, and high schools allowed him to have an insider view into how principals performed their jobs. Moreover, since the primary researcher was a high school principal during the pandemic, it allowed him to delve deeper into the pandemic processes that principals experienced.

An insider view could potentially limit the primary researcher's objectivity in the study. To remain unbiased, he engaged in analytical memos and self-reflections. This technique helped reduce researcher bias. Moreover, the researcher followed ethical principles of analyzing and reporting research (interviews, transcriptions, and writing the article).

Findings

The primary researcher analyzed the data utilizing a constant comparison technique (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), which helped develop codes relating to research questions and identify emerging themes (King, 2004). The data analysis began with the primary researcher reading all the responses in order to gain a sense of the information. Next, a codebook was developed, including definitions of the codes for further segmentation of the data. The iterative process ensured no bias in the analysis by comparing the codes, themes, and definitions. Finally, themes were formed based on a consensus about overlapping and redundant codes (Walther et al., 2013).

In qualitative research, the purpose of the data analysis is to aggregate data into a small number of themes, usually somewhere between five and seven (Creswell, 2013). Concepts that emerged in relation to research questions were grouped under categories that potentially yielded a set of broader themes. In total, five themes were formulated based on interview data that clarified the school principals' experiences during the pandemic, which provided insights into the challenges that the school principals experienced. The five themes were as follows: 1) school principals' differing experiences with online learning during the pandemic, 2) challenges and opportunities in transitioning to online learning during the pandemic, 3) equity problems, 4) perspectives of school principals on online learning during the pandemic, and 5) shifts in school principals' perceptions of online learning.

School Principals' Differing Experiences with Online Learning During the Pandemic

Since all school principals were employed in charter schools, some of the schools within this network were using an online platform prior to the pandemic for students to engage in credit recovery by choosing an elective online course. Thus, when the students had to transition to online teaching and learning, four out of 11 school principals (Mehmet, George, Murat, and Zafer) reported that online learning did not present major challenges. For instance, Murat said:

> *Even before the pandemic, we were using an online platform for students to earn credit in high school. You know, sometimes these kids need credit recovery or a different elective option. Also, there were some students who were college-bound, so they had an opportunity to pick up online courses even before the pandemic. That is*

something that we have been using for eight years before the pandemic. So, it was not too hard to move our instruction to online instruction. Moreover, the teachers were already using Google Classroom and assigning the work through the Chromebooks.

Murat's school and some other high schools had an online platform in place even before the pandemic, and the platform was utilized successfully. Such schools usually offer online learning for multiple purposes, such as credit recovery, expanding elective offerings, and promoting college-readiness. Principals whose schools were using Google Classroom as a learning management system did not face major challenges in transitioning to online learning during the pandemic.

Another school principal, Zafer, shared a similar experience:

When I listened to the other principles from other schools, I can clearly say that our experience was completely different, with almost no big problems because we started to use Edgenuity platform for online classes, credit recovery two years before the pandemic, Also, just a few months before the pandemic, when the first news about the pandemic started to appear in the media, I asked all my teachers to get a level-one certification from Google Classroom, and whoever got those level-one certificates, would get a monetary bonus. So, when we were closed in March due to the pandemic, our teachers were already prepared to teach online courses through Google Classroom because 70% of them already had their level-one certificate from Google Classroom.

Similar to Murat's experience, using an online platform even before the pandemic helped Zafer's school transition to online learning without facing major challenges. Zafer also shared how he took a proactive approach by encouraging his teachers to participate in trainings for online teaching so that they could be ready to teach. Teacher-readiness for online teaching was at 70% prior to the pandemic, which helped his school transition into remote online learning more easily when the pandemic hit.

However, some other school principals' perceptions of online learning practices differed significantly. For instance, Janet shared:

Online learning was limited partially because we gained additional technology only during the pandemic. So, that technology was not as available pre-pandemic. We had some teachers who were more versed in understanding and using programs, but others were not. We had to do more to encourage the use of technology at that point. So, there was a difference in that regard. Moreover, there was no real readiness for moving on with this online practice. We had some success with Google Classrooms, but that did not necessarily work well with younger students, of course. We did some very creative things with, uh, delivering books and notebooks and, and trying to communicate via educational platforms that we had.

As Janet explained, online learning technology was not available before the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, the school administration had an additional responsibility to encourage teachers to use technology as there was no real readiness for this transition. Because of this, the school staff had to develop some creative solutions, such as delivering books to younger students. Such practices maintained remote learning with limited interactions with students. Therefore, unpreparedness for emergency closures limited such schools' ability to move forward as desired.

In this regard, George commented:

We told our families that we'd try to do live online classes. If not, we'd do asynchronous instruction on certain days. So, there were no kids in the building, but teachers were coming in and working in their classrooms. We had technology where the kids could see the teacher in the classroom. We were trying to keep it as normal as possible with our teachers. We obviously were quarantining and making sure everybody was in their rooms. We just made that work.

George shared that the school had worked with families, explaining to them that they would offer synchronous classes whenever possible. They emphasized synchronous classes because they wanted to make the students see that the classes were going on as normal with the teacher being in the classroom. Teachers worked separately in their own classrooms and quarantined when necessary. This practice helped them to deliver synchronous online learning.

As seen from the findings, some school principals in this study reported that they had been using an online platform even before the pandemic. The preparedness of the schools and staff facilitated a smoother transition into remote online learning and boosted student engagement and attendance in online classes. However, the school principals whose schools had no prior online learning experience struggled with maintaining undisrupted learning during the pandemic. The lack of access to technology, along with the inability to properly train teachers and students to use such technology, prevented those school communities from making the proper transition into remote online learning. Such principals were caught unprepared and had to quickly come up with creative solutions. They offered alternatives such as sending paper materials to students' homes and expected the parents to help their students with their learning.

Challenges and Opportunities in Transitioning to Online Learning During the Pandemic

At least six principals (Beth, Mathew, Samuel, Janet, Alex, and Metin) reported facing real challenges when transitioning to an online mode of learning. Despite the challenges, some principals shared the lessons they learned during the pandemic; these principals found this experience to be an opportunity for the future of teaching and learning in their schools.

Challenges

Challenges varied from school to school. For instance, recalling her experience, Beth shared:

At that time, the administration was planning how we were going to do it right, asking questions, such as "What was our plan? How are going to post things online? Are we going to do live teaching through Google Classroom?" We were trying to culminate a plan. And then, we did culminate a plan at the beginning, and that was transitioning to online learning. In March 2020, we were just bare bones in it and just trying to get something off the ground. We were kind of just trying to get some sort of education done because teachers were scrambling.

According to Beth, the school administration struggled because they did not have a plan in place to deal with the unexpected constraints of the pandemic. Therefore, they had to develop a plan for online learning in a very short period of time. She mentioned that teachers faced big challenges with teaching during the pandemic as well.

Samuel also commented on the challenges of online learning experience. He shared:

Ultimately, some of the biggest challenges were having students focus on a virtual environment. So, we noticed a lot of students were there, but they weren't really paying attention. They were on their phone, or the camera was like facing the ceiling. So, teachers would constantly ask students to focus; we set expectations like, "We have to see you." "Yeah, your camera must be on. You must move, and you have to work with me." But it was hard for some students who wanted to hide their faces. And a lot of social-emotional scenarios. Virtual online bullying grew a lot during that time. There were complaints about virtual bullying.

According to Samuel, one of the biggest challenges of online teaching and learning was student engagement. Students did not want to turn on the camera or they were not paying attention during online classes. As Samuel explained, there were also some social-emotional learning problems that surfaced during the pandemic, such as online bullying.

Mathew also commented on the social-emotional learning problems that he noticed arising during the pandemic and how the school administration prioritized addressing these challenges. He said, "Social-emotional learning was big. So, our main focus was on social-emotional learning. That was our priority."

Later, Mathew also commented on other challenges, such as the lack of quality education and teacher burnout that occurred during the pandemic. He shared:

The number one challenge was, and this may sound kind of off-brand, but it was quality education. And the reason why I say that is because we had so many teachers in and out sick. Number two was the number of people that were out sick. How do you manage a building when you have so many people out sick? Number three, how do you manage all the protocols? Number four, how do you manage the impact COVID is having on your overall school community? Mentally, how do you manage, how do you keep a school together when they are dealing with intense problems around COVID, frustration being upset? Number five, teacher coverage. Teachers

were burnt out because they had to cover for other teachers. They did not have a break, and that took a toll on the staff.

Mathew provided an extensive list of challenges they had to deal with during the pandemic. He expressed concerns about the quality of education and the teachers' burnout, some of which was caused by teachers having to substitute for each other due to getting sick. Implementing COVID-19 protocol was hard as well. Mathew explained how he was also concerned about the impact of the pandemic on the community at large.

Overall, all principals reported that their schools did not have remote learning plans in place before the pandemic. Prior use of online learning tools by students and staff determined the severity of challenges in transitioning to remote online learning at the beginning of school closures. Seven out of 11 principals had major challenges transitioning their schools into remote learning. Unpreparedness and going into unknown processes resulted in teacher burnout. Nine out of 11 principals reported major levels of teacher burnout; as such, they had to lead their school communities by dealing with such challenges. Student engagement was reported as a major challenge by 10 out of 11 principals. All principals reported concerns about the quality of learning taking place. Again, the social-emotional well-being of students was a concern of all principals. When schools opened their doors to students and staff, eight out of 11 principals reported they were constantly stressed about managing building operations, maintaining a healthy environment for all, and following quarantine procedures.

Opportunities

Although the school principals reported many challenges, they also found silver linings in the process of learning to adapt during the pandemic, noting opportunities that were beneficial for further teaching and learning. In this regard, Janet shared:

I think it was a double-edged sword because we learned a lot about technology. We learned a lot about teaching students and using our resources. It was almost a flip-flop where, you know, before we had to, you know, encourage people to use their technology, now we must go back and encourage people to use their direct instruction and communicate directly. It is still an amazingly rich place to be with new technology, one-on-one computers, and the things that you can do with that, if you do it correctly, are amazing. Also, I think that we found out a lot about the home life of our students, that teachers became much more aware of what our students were going through in terms of what their struggles are in terms of what their home life looks like.

Janet shared that a good lesson that their school had learned was discovering new uses for technology and resources and developing effective ways to use them. She mentioned that in the post-pandemic time, she still encourages people to use technology because she finds it to be very helpful for learning. Another thing she mentioned was learning about their students and the real struggles that they dealt with during the pandemic.

In this regard, Samuel shared:

We saw the need for technology because the pandemic has completely changed our dynamic of how we were utilizing technology and the best practices of it. It's like an expectation now for all teachers. All teachers use either a Google classroom or Schoology. Now we've moved phase into Schoology. So now it's like expected that everything's online and posted. So, this really moved us forward in that regard. Also, we secured technology development and advancement through funds. For example, each classroom now has an 85-inch flat screen, a touchscreen computer monitor, in the front, which has replaced a lot of the projectors. So, I believe like after COVID, this was something that helped our vision to promote a virtual system of education.

Samuel's explanation of opportunities that resulted from the pandemic resonated with Janet's opinion about technology. As Samuel said, the pandemic taught leadership about the need for technology because technology was helpful for moving forward with education. With available grants, they could buy technology that would help them promote virtual education.

All principals reported that they had received additional funds during the pandemic to enhance the use of technology for instruction and learning. Six out of 11 reported that this was a big opportunity for their schools to either obtain technology for all students or to upgrade their technology devices, such as purchasing Chromebooks for students or adding smartboards in classrooms.

As seen from the principals' responses, they dealt with numerous challenges. They reported that they developed some strategies to overcome those challenges in order to provide quality education. At the same time, some of the school principals identified some opportunities, including getting to know their students and families better and seeing the benefits of using technology to support teaching and learning.

Equity Problems

The challenges that came about from the pandemic also uncovered numerous problems relating to equity, such as students lacking support from family. For instance, Alex shared:

There were things that were out of our locus of control, which is families' access to the internet. We could not rely on parents because there were just so many other different variables in place. Many of them were still at work. Many of them lacked the skills to help their children, especially for their high school students. So, it was hard to provide individual support or instruction to them.

As Alex explained, there were problems related to providing quality education to some students because their families lacked resources to provide support for learning at home. This caused major disruptions to students' learning because their usual support mechanism (provided by schools) no longer existed. They were left alone in the learning process. Matthew shared a similar experience. He said:

It was a very difficult equity position because many of our students did not have the support at home, or the ability to join into our available programs or what was available to them, whether it was asynchronous or synchronous. And grades became a huge issue for us in terms of how you evaluate who passes and who doesn't pass, and, and how is that fair to students, who didn't have access to the support, and that was a large portion of our students. Other schools were grappling with this as well.

According to Mathew, many schools, including his, struggled in dealing with the lack of parental involvement and the scarce resources at students' homes. This created a dilemma in assessing student learning. Principals could not penalize students with failing grades because lacking parental support at home was not something that students or principals could control. Ten out of 11 principals reported that they softened their grade promotion policies. Six out of 11 principals reported that they implemented no-hurt grading policies during the pandemic.

Lisa made a statement that diverged from Alex's and Mathew's regarding family support:

We, as a school, offered our families Chromebooks if they needed devices. They could come and sign one out and borrow Chromebooks from us. We did have enough, so we could accommodate those requests. We also partnered with the local internet company that offered free internet packages to those households that had school-aged students. During school hours, from seven to four, Monday through Friday, they had free internet service.

Lisa's experience differed from Alex's and Mathew's. As she explained, their school had resources to accommodate families' needs, such as the ability to provide free internet and devices to be used for remote learning. The partnership with the local businesses helped to solve the problems related to equitable learning.

As explained above in the findings about challenges, most equity-related problems were related to technology access, internet access, and parental support at home. All principals reported that they did their best to overcome such inequities.

School Principals' Perspectives on Online Learning During the Pandemic

When asked about the perceptions of online learning practices during the pandemic, principals' perspectives varied. Some of them saw it as a positive process because it helped them in various ways. For instance, Metin shared:

I think it helped with capacity building for those who stayed, because everyone got out of their bubble, got out of their safe zones, one way or another, some of the teachers left the field. But those who stayed gained a whole other perspective regarding education, uh, regarding their capacity as well. Because for most of the teachers, technology was a thing that usually they don't even want to get involved with. So, I remember, before pandemic, when we go to the classroom, we would observe the teacher and look for evidence of technology use. And you wouldn't see that at that time. But with COVID, the teachers got exposed to all these different tools and resources, and the same thing with the students. So, it helped with understanding

of education, uh, to me, and help build capacity in teachers, admins, everyone, to be honest.

Metin shared how the pandemic encouraged both teachers and students to use technology. He explained that when conducting teacher observations prior to the pandemic, they did not see much use of technology because teachers did not bother using it. Online teaching, according to Metin, provided an opportunity for building capacity in instructional technology and gaining new understandings of teaching and learning.

Samuel also commented on how his school made some changes after the online learning and teaching experience. He said:

Well, as the principal, myself, I had extensive meetings with the leadership team to develop a whole new guidebook for everyone in terms of all stakeholders: for parents, students, and teachers to kind of know what to do. The first thing we did was to modify the bell schedule. So, it was a synchronous course where everyone had to show up at the same time. The teacher was, you know, ready to teach. Instead of 45 minutes, we reduced it to 30, I believe 30 or 35 minutes in this range because we believed that 45 minutes would have been too difficult to focus for eight hours of the day for students, uh, on the computer screen. And, uh, that ended up working well because a lot of the teachers gave students classwork to do after.

As Samuel shared, the school administration decided to adjust some school processes, such as their bell schedule. They shortened the class periods from 45 to 30 minutes because 45 minutes of an online synchronous class seemed long for both students and teachers. In developing a new guidebook, he ensured that all parties, such as parents, teachers, and students, had access to clear guidelines and new schooling processes.

All principals reported that because online learning was the only option, they had to do the inevitable. Some did not have high expectations about this. For example, Murat stated that in the first year of the pandemic, they expected the students to sign on only once a week. However, seven out of 11 principals declared that they were proponents of online learning even before the pandemic. Zafer stated:

Online learning or online schools are good for some students. I've always defended the idea of online schools. We must have a fully online school. It's a different way of serving the kids who learn in a different way.

Shifts in School Principals' Perceptions of Online Learning

After the schools returned to in-person learning, school principals reported they still faced some problems, such as dealing with mental and health issues. For instance, Matthew shared:

There was an incredibly higher amount of mental health and behavioral issues that came up and had continued to come up. There was a lot more burnout from parents, from teachers. When we returned to school, one of the biggest challenges was the stamina of the students and the staff in terms of thinking about what a day in school looks like. How they managed the expectations of school again, and what it meant to be a student changed radically. It was almost like whiplash for these staff and students.

Mathew explained that returning from remote online learning to in-person schooling created unique problems, such as more burnout of parents and teachers. Students came back with additional mental and health issues. Managing the well-being of an entire school community and getting everyone back to regular routines created additional challenges for school principals.

In this regard, George said:

> *This past year some of our data went down for the first time since the pandemic. They [students] were not prepared. They did not cope well of being socially and emotionally together. We saw a lot of childish behavior. We are now starting to kind of get back to some sense of routine.*

George's experience was no different than Mathew's. Students were not prepared to return to in-person learning. They had forgotten expectations and the daily routines. According to his observation, students had trouble coping socially and emotionally. In addition to these negative effects on student behavior, the return to in-person learning also demonstrated that student achievement went down. Learning outcomes were lower than pre-pandemic times. It has taken a significant amount of time for students to get used to their regular school routines.

Teachers, as professionals, also suffered significantly with the return to in-person learning. Mathew shared:

> *We had to establish expectations. There were a lot of things that needed to be retaught to adults. A lot of people did not want to come back to work. It was a battle. So, we had to go back and help people understand, "yeah, we know this is a tough time." So, we created things in the building for teachers to get mental support. Uh, we created a wellness center. We adjusted our meeting times, or we cut back on meetings. It was all to help the adults. But at the same time, we are still accountable for student accountability.*

Mathew explained how returning to normal school hours entailed challenges, such as establishing expectations and providing mental health support for teachers. These strategies were essential for providing in-person learning after the pandemic. Principals had an additional responsibility of dealing with the mental well-being of teachers as the pandemic had a significant impact on their lives. Lisa also shared how during the pandemic she grew to recognize the positive aspects of online learning. She said:

> *I would say one of the gains and opportunities such as fostering a stronger relationship with our parents. That was one of the positive impacts because we were*

able to gain and kind of bolster their confidence in us through those challenging years. I think it helped strengthen our relationship with a lot of our parents. Another gain or opportunity I think is the way in which we utilize technology in our classrooms. There were a lot of positive takeaways from tools and those resources, and effectively to bolster performance and, um, engagement. So, I think that there is more of a use of those resources post pandemic, just because teachers are more versed in that and can use it. Now they can pick and choose and use different platforms more effectively.

Lisa discussed how online learning and teaching practices in the post-pandemic era changed the way the teachers looked at the use of technology. As she said, teachers could use technology and resources effectively to enhance performance and engagement of students. She mentioned that online learning could also strengthen the school's relationship with parents and their confidence in school administration.

Janet shared that she thought of online learning as beneficial for helping students who worked to support their families. She suggested offering a flexible model in the future so that students could take classes after work. She said, "I have become a huge fan of online learning. I saw it as an opportunity. Many high school students work to help their families. That is reality. We should think about how to come up with a flexible model that can help students."

Four out of 11 principals reported that they gained more positive attitudes toward online learning after the pandemic processes. Five out of 11 principals stated that they had already valued the importance of online learning and there had been a need for it. Therefore, their perceptions towards online learning remained the same. However, two out of 11 principals reported negative changes in their perceptions. For example, Matthew stated that his students struggled the most and they needed in-person learning. Therefore, he would minimize the use of online programs for awhile and keep learning experiences in-person when possible. Similarly, Mehmet stated that online learning decreased his students' motivation to come to school. His low-income students would rather work during the day and make extra money for their families than attend online classes. He added that in-person attendance and student enrollment still suffer because his students do not even believe in going to school as much as they did before the pandemic.

As the findings about the school principals' perceptions of online learning demonstrated, some of them saw it as an alternative means of schooling for students who struggled with supporting their families and attending classes. Several school principals also shared that online learning contributed to an accelerated learning of technology and the development of specific skills, which in the long run not only benefitted students but also helped teachers gain transferrable skills that helped them become more comfortable using technology.

Discussion

The findings in relation to the first research question about urban school principals' perceptions of online learning practices in underprivileged communities during the pandemic were categorized under the theme *School Principals' Experience with Online Learning During the Pandemic*. The findings discussed under this theme demonstrated that some of the school principals took a proactive approach, such as encouraging teachers to earn a Google classroom

teaching certificate or using online platforms that were already in place prior to the pandemic, which helped make the transition to online learning easier for the students, teachers, and school administration. This finding is aligned with the leadership principles as outlined by scholars (e.g., Bagwell, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020) who strongly recommended that school leaders practice strategic leadership by setting a clear vision and expectations and by helping staff to acquire necessary skills. Principals whose schools did not have prior exposure to online learning practices struggled in transitioning their school communities into remote online learning, which is consistent with the findings in Kraft et al. (2020).

The findings in relation to the second research question are discussed under the themes: *Perspectives of School Principals on Online Learning During the Pandemic and Shifts in School Principals' Perceptions of Online Learning*. When asked about their perceptions of online learning practices during the pandemic and whether their perception of online learning changed during the pandemic, principals' responses varied. Several school principals mentioned how they adjusted the duration of synchronous classes, realizing how difficult it would be for students to stay focused for longer periods in online classes. This finding partially resonates with Francois and Weiner's (2022) study that reported on how school principals addressed parents' requests to adjust the school day (e.g., less or more synchronous online learning), focusing primarily on marginalized populations who have been disproportionately impacted by crises. When viewed through the lens of the theoretical framework that was employed in the current study, the concept of *inclusive decision* is applicable to the leadership strategies (Virella, 2023) that school principals developed during the pandemic because they practiced inclusive decision-making processes by being committed to considering the diverse abilities of learners.

The findings in relation to the third research question are discussed under the themes: *Challenges and Opportunities in Transitioning to Online Learning During the Pandemic and Equity Problems*. Most principals reported facing real challenges when transitioning to an online mode of learning, such as teachers' burnout and the implementation of various COVID-19 protocols. This finding is consistent with Brion and Kiral's (2021) study that investigated how educational leaders led during the COVID-19 pandemic and reported that school leaders struggled with crisis difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as logistical issues in implementing social distancing protocol. Providing equitable education was also among the challenges that the principals had to deal with. When viewed through the lens of equity-oriented crisis leadership, these principals engaged in critical self-reflection during interviews by sharing the leadership strategies they practiced during the pandemic. In this process, they reported their reflections on the conditions of underserved populations who were negatively impacted by a crisis and recounted how they tried to address this issue to ensure equitable education for all students. In other words, their statements show that they developed an *equity-oriented mindset* by being aware of racial and other forms of inequities in the education system and developing strategies for overcoming these barriers toward equitable outcomes. The school principals also considered equitable *resource allocation* to ensure that underserved students were not deprived of resources for accessing online learning. Principals in urban schools had to pay more attention to equity-related matters. This is consistent with DeMatthews et al.'s (2023) findings that principals serving in vulnerable communities had higher concerns about their students' education and well-being. Some principals in this study also reported that the pandemic provided an opportunity for them to connect with families and provide adequate support. This finding resonates with Rigby et al.'s (2020) study that some of the effective K-12 leadership strategies employed during the pandemic crisis included

treating families as equal partners in learning and providing opportunities for high-quality remote learning at home.

The findings in relation to the fourth research question were categorized under the theme *Shift in Perceptions of Online Learning*. Principals in this study reported that even after their schools returned to in-person learning after remote learning, they still faced some problems, such as mental and health issues. As the principals explained, the students were not prepared to return to in-person learning and could not cope well socially and emotionally. This finding resonated with Kaul et al.'s (2020) study that reported that during the pandemic, school principals across the U.S. struggled to address students' social and emotional well-being and to respond to the basic needs of both students and staff members. Moreover, principals had an additional responsibility of dealing with the mental well-being of teachers and keeping them motivated because the pandemic had a significant impact on their lives. Considering both students' and teachers' special circumstances, principals had to spend a significant amount of energy re-establishing procedures, routines, and expectations in their schools. This was of little surprise as all of the principals in this study worked in underserved communities, and students in such communities struggled more during the pandemic, as indicated in the studies by DeMatthews et al. (2023) and Dare and Saleem (2022).

In sum, this study's findings were consistent with the literature that examined school leaders' perceptions of online learning and their leadership strategies. The most important finding was that the schools where these principals were employed had enough resources to provide quality education for students. Some of the school principals' proactive strategies helped to facilitate an easier transition to remote learning, demonstrating that these leaders had already been practicing some elements of equity-oriented crisis leadership.

Recommendations for Practitioners

As previously indicated, research on school leadership during the pandemic and post-pandemic period has highlighted the importance of school leaders employing effective strategies to facilitate quality remote learning while also offering support to students and their families. In alignment with existing literature, the findings of this study reinforce the concept that principals can play a pivotal role in providing remote learning and support to teachers, students, and families, showcasing resilience despite the challenges associated with online learning during a pandemic. Consequently, this study has practical implications, suggesting the implementation of district-wide training programs for principals on effective leadership strategies during crises, such as a pandemic.

In preparing for crises like pandemics, especially when focusing on online learning, school principals can take key steps for effective readiness. Principals participating in this study highlighted the value of access to online learning platforms prior to the pandemic and emphasized their role in facilitating a smoother transition to remote learning. Hence, principals should build a strong online learning system by investing in secure platforms and ensuring everyone has access to digital tools and knows how to use them. This sets the stage for effective transitions between in-person and online teaching during crises. To address differences in students' access to technology, principals need to make sure that everyone has equal opportunities. Establishing clear communication procedures, including regular updates and accessible channels, is vital for

maintaining an effective online learning environment. Principals must also stay vigilant about online security, regularly checking and updating measures to protect against potential threats.

Within the scope of this study, school principals emphasized the significance of collective leadership, underscoring the need for collaboration with administrative personnel, teachers, and families to plan and deliver remote learning and to address various challenges. Therefore, collaboration and ongoing training are crucial. Principals should work closely with educators and tech experts to create and regularly update plans for online learning. Providing continuous training for teachers in digital teaching methods builds a shared knowledge base that strengthens overall preparedness. Encouraging collaboration among educators within schools and across districts allows for the sharing of best practices and resources, thus making educational institutions more adaptable.

Recognizing the human side of online learning, principals should support mental health and emotional well-being by providing resources and counseling services. Practical preparedness includes organizing practice runs of online learning scenarios with all involved parties, identifying challenges, and refining plans. Lastly, a commitment to ongoing improvement is crucial. By gathering feedback from teachers, students, and parents, principals can make informed decisions and continuously enhance the effectiveness of online learning during crises.

Conclusion

The principals in this study discussed the challenges that they dealt with regarding online teaching and learning in K-12 settings. Some of the leadership strategies they developed were effective in helping both students and teachers during the pandemic. However, teachers in some charter schools struggled to get their schools to embrace online learning. The school principals who took a proactive approach by encouraging their teachers to learn technologies reported that teachers were comfortable in using different technologies during the pandemic. As indicated in prior research (Bagwell, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020), schools with proactive principals were better equipped for a smoother transition to remote online learning, which boosted student engagement and attendance in online classes. Therefore, this study offers practical recommendations for school principals, such as preparing teachers for teaching during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. This strategy will not only help to improve teachers' instructional strategies, but it will also help them learn how students can thrive in online learning settings if teachers are prepared during crisis. DeMatthews et al. (2023) had similar findings and proposed the same recommendation for principals and practitioners. Moreover, school principals should create communities of practice among charter schools and support each other by exchanging experiences in teaching and learning. Future research should include the responses of teachers who work at schools where the student body is comprised primarily of students from underprivileged communities in order to explore their perspectives on online teaching during and after the pandemic. Finally, principals whose schools and teachers were more ready for online learning even before the pandemic expressed reduced concerns about learning loss. Hence, future research could explore the effectiveness of technology preparedness training for teachers and students in preventing learning loss during crises such as pandemics.

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