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## Impact of School Closures on Principal Leadership and Identity

Isela Pena  
*University of Texas at El Paso*

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IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLOSURES ON  
PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP  
AND IDENTITY

I SELA PEÑA

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Administration

APPROVED:

---

Rodolfo Rincones, Ph.D., Chair

---

Teresa Cortez, Ed.D.

---

Don P. Schulte, Ed.D.

---

Guillermina Núñez-Mchiri, Ph.D.

---

Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

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2020

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my family upon whose shoulders I stand. It is through their continuous sacrifices that I have enjoyed the privilege of embarking in the pursuit and completion of this degree. They are the constants in my life that give me purpose and a reason to forge ahead. For their love and support, I remain forever in their debt.

IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLOSURES  
ON PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND IDENTITY

by

ISELA PEÑA, M.Ed., J.D.

DISSERTATION

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation presents findings from a phenomenological qualitative study of three principals who experienced school closures. This research aimed at exploring the impact of school closures on principal leadership and leadership identity. Utilizing the Ackerman's and Maslin-Ostrowki's (2002) concept of the wounded leader, this study framed the school closure as a critical incident which caused these principals to experience a wounding, thus providing them an opportunity to reflect and create a narrative around their experience, and through this examination, potentially undergo a transformation leading to professional and personal growth. Through semi-structured interviews, three school principals who experienced school closures, shared their experiences and as such, narrated a story of restitution, chaos, and/or quest. Through the storytelling itself and the type of the story shared, the experiences of these principals emerged and the impact on their leadership and leadership identity was revealed.

Three general themes around how these principals experienced school closures emerged from the data analysis: 1) schools are closing, now what?; 2) co-opting the principalship; and 3) absence of emotions. These themes also revealed the type of stories the principal created around their experiences. Two principals told restitution stories and the third, began with a chaos story but completed the storytelling with a quest story, reflecting a transformation in her leadership identity and practice. Through storytelling, these principals engaged in sensemaking of the wounding experience and its aftermath. The findings of this study highlight the importance of recognizing critical incidents in leadership and the wounding that occurs as a result, but more importantly, the role emotions and opportunities for self-reflection play on the exercise of leadership and leadership identity development. This study also uncovers the absence of opportunities for school leaders to engage in self-reflection and an exploration of the emotions wounding produces. In the final chapter, the implications around these findings and future research considerations are presented.



## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vii
Table of Contents.....	viii
List of Tables.....	xi
List of Figures.....	xii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	2
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Authority for School Closure.....	3
Texas Principal Certificate Standards.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	9
Research Question.....	9
Significance of the Study.....	9
Background of the Study.....	11
Summary.....	14
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks.....	15
Education as a Public Good.....	15
Literature Review.....	16
School Closures.....	17
School Leadership.....	18
Distributive Leadership.....	20
Transformational Leadership.....	20
Instructional Leaders and Learning-Centered Leadership.....	21
Social Justice Leadership.....	22
Leadership and Identity.....	24
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework.....	26
Critical Incidents and Wounded Leader.....	27
Restitution, Chaos, and Quest.....	28
Sensemaking.....	29

Chapter 3: Methodology .....	31
Purpose of the Study and Research Question .....	31
Research Methodology .....	32
Role of the Researcher .....	33
Study Participants .....	35
Data Collection Procedures.....	37
Ethical Considerations .....	40
Data Analysis .....	41
Delimitations and Limitations of the Study .....	43
Summary .....	45
Chapter 4: Findings and Data Analysis .....	46
Introduction and Principal Profiles .....	46
Eva .....	48
Jane .....	51
Olivia.....	53
Findings Related to Leadership, Identity and School Closures .....	56
Schools Are Closing, What Now? .....	56
Co-opting the Principalship .....	59
Absence of Emotions .....	61
Findings Related to Wounded Leader Framework .....	64
Restitution Story .....	65
Chaos Story to Quest Story .....	66
Summary .....	68
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings and Implications .....	70
Summary of the Results.....	70
Interpretations of Findings.....	71
Theme 1: Schools Are Closing, What Now? .....	71
Theme 2: Co-opting the Principalship .....	72
Theme 3: Absence of Emotions .....	75
Storytelling: Restitution Story and Chaos to Quest Story .....	78
Implications for Practice .....	79
Implications for Policy.....	79

Implications for Principal Preparation Programs.....	80
Implications for Districts .....	82
Implications for School Leaders .....	83
Recommendations for Future Research.....	84
Conclusion .....	86
References.....	88
Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter .....	95
Appendix B: Sample Email Script.....	97
Appendix C: Questionnaire.....	98
Appendix D: Individual Interview Sample Protocol .....	99
Vita .....	101

## **List of Tables**

Table 1.1 §241.15 Standards Required for the Principal Certificate .....	5
Table 1.2 Demographic Data of Affected Communities .....	13
Table 1.3 Zone Where the Impacted School is Located .....	13
Table 3.1 Description of Participants.....	37
Table 3.2 School Campus, Outcomes, Administrators .....	37
Table 4.1 Participants Current Story in the Narrative Framework .....	64

## List of Figures

Figure 4.1: Wounded Leader Storytelling Framework.....	47
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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

There is an abundance of research on school leadership ranging from the different styles of leadership to its impact on culture, student learning, accountability, and other facets of education. Existing research on school closures also explores this issue from many lenses including the impact on students, parents, teachers, communities in general, student learning, marginalized groups, school governance, and even from a geopolitical and geospatial perspective (Bierbaum, 2016; Brummet, 2014; Deeds & Pattillo, 2015; de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Ewing, 2018; Finnigan & Laver, 2012; Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni, 2010; Shiller, 2018; Smith, 2012; Steiner, 2009; Stroub, 2017). Despite knowing that leadership matters and that principals are a key component to school culture (Beatty, 2007) and second to teachers in impacting student learning (Leithwood, et. al., 2004), research on school closures places principals in the periphery. Yet, we know school closures have been occurring in this country for a variety of reasons, such as population shifts leading to low-enrollment and fiscal deficits, and we can expect them to continue (Basu, 2007; Bierbaum, 2016; Finnigan & Lavner, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Meier & Gasoi, 2017; Shiller, 2018) The need to examine the impact of school closures on principal leadership and identity stems from the gap in the literature.

My interest in this dissertation topic is a result of my own experience in K-12 public school systems both as a product of public schools and having worked in K-12 systems in a professional capacity, and my profound interest in the use of storytelling as a way of learning and growing. In conducting this study, I set out to examine and reach a deeper understanding of the impact school closures, which I label as a critical incident, have on leadership and leadership identity in hopes of contributing in some small way to the existing research on leadership and to how principals are prepared and supported during these challenging experiences. By better preparing principals, outcomes for students and families can be positively impacted, increasing the possibility of transforming lives and elevating communities in the process.

The need to understand the impact critical incidents have on leadership is now more relevant than ever. As I was in the process of completing this dissertation, public schools throughout the nation were closing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This layered wounding experience resulting from temporary school closures and the multi-layered complexity of the crisis the pandemic presents, makes understanding the impact of critical incidents on leadership even more timely and sets the stage for further research that addresses the impact and potential growth for school leaders resulting from critical incidents.

This study is stemmed from school closures that took place in Lone Star Independent School District (Lone Star ISD), a pseudonym for a large urban school district in Texas. In the sections that follow, I set the stage for this study by including information on who has the authority to close schools in Texas, the Texas principal standards, discuss the purpose and significance of the study, and provide relevant background information on Lone Star ISD as it applies to this study.

### **Authority for School Closure**

School districts in Texas, like in many other states, are governed by a board of trustees (Texas Education Code [TEC], §11.051). The board of trustees is expected to “oversee the management of the district” (TEC §11.051). While the Texas Education Code enumerates some specific power and duties, it makes no mention of school closures. However, this statute does state “[a]ll power and duties not specifically delegated by statute to the agency or to the State Board of Education are reserved for the trustees” (TEC §11.051). School districts across the state have board policy that speaks to the district’s school attendance areas, giving the board of trustees the authority to adopt attendance zones. It is from TEC §11.051 and local attendance policies that school boards in Texas derive the authority to approve a school closure.

It should be noted however, that the board of trustees does not make these decisions in isolation. Typically, school district administration will conduct research that includes financial, enrollment, facility conditions, and geographic considerations, develop a closure process or

timeline, hold community meetings to gather stakeholder input, and provide the board of trustees a few options on which schools to close. There are also external considerations such as city growth patterns, influx of charter schools into a community, and political support of the privatization of public schools that influence school closures decisions.

While school closures have occurred around the nation in other larger urban centers (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015), Texas has also experienced school closures, particularly in Houston and Dallas (Stroub & Richards, 2016). There is legislation that gives the Texas Education Agency the authority to close charter school campuses by revoking the school's charter and the authority to revoke accreditation to an entire school district for financial mismanagement and academic underperformance (TEC §§39.051-39.051; Smith, 2012). However, this has happened only a handful of times (Smith, 2012). Given the historical issues with Texas school finance<sup>1</sup>, namely an inequitable funding system dating back to the 1949 passage of the Gilmer-Aiken legislation which since its inception created inequitable funding between wealthy and poor school districts by establishing a minimum foundation program (known today as the Foundation School Program) that provided funding for public education through state and local funds (Cardenas, 1997), and state demographic shifts, school districts are beginning to experience conditions that are forcing them to consider closing or consolidating school campuses. In some districts, these difficult decisions have been recently made and in others, talk of closure is just beginning. As we know from existing research, school closures can have a detrimental effect on

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the Gilmer-Aiken Laws of 1949 minimum foundation program's reliance on a local funding, the law also allowed for local enrichment (Cardenas, 1997). This enabled districts to raise funds above their minimum local share through local property taxation, which impacted property poor school districts (Cardenas, 1997). It is also important to note that the minimum foundation program, to this day, provides funding for the maintenance and operation of the school program disallowing any expenditures on capital outlay, building maintenance, or furniture and equipment for schools (Cardenas, 1997; Mudrazija and Blagg, 2019). Since 1968 to the present day, the Texas public school finance has been heavily litigated. *San Antonio v. Rodriguez*, a federal lawsuit raised the issue of the inequities in the funding structure, "challenging the constitutionality of the state's reliance on local property taxes as the primary source of school funding" (Mudrazija and Blagg, 2019, p. 2) based on the Equal Protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (*San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, n.d.). In a 5-4 decision, finding no constitutional right to education, the federal lawsuit shifted future claims to the state level (*San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, n.d.). In the years that followed, a series of cases known as Edgewood I through VI successfully challenged the education funding structure, bringing about legislative changes in school funding including SB 7 and most recently, HB 3 (Cardenas, 1997; Mudrazija and Blagg, 2019; Svitek, 2019).



entire school communities and on student achievement (Stroub & Richards, 2016). Schools are often representative of a person’s roots (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002). They are places that provide communities and individuals a sense of identity, a sense of belonging. A loss of such places causes disruption of the psychological processes of attachment, familiarity, and place identity can lead to psychological disorders (Fullilove 1996).

**Texas Principal Certificate Standards**

According to the principal certificate standards, individuals interested in being principals in Texas are charged with the following general knowledge and skills: school culture; leading learning; human capital; executive leadership; strategic operations; and ethics, equity and diversity (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018). While these are the broad descriptions of a principal’s responsibilities, even within the descriptions of each standard, there is no mention of facilitating school closures as is evidenced in Table 1.1. These standards are also very much task oriented, as has historically been the case with school leadership where the concerns lie heavily with “management from the organizational level to the classroom level” (Mullen, Fenwick & Kealy, 2014, p. 7). Yet, school closures are emotionally charged events for the community, both within and outside of the school. It is unclear how well-prepared principals are to navigate their campuses through such moments of crisis and research around school closures and school leadership is limited (Lenarduzzi, 2015).

Table 1.1 §241.15 Standards Required for the Principal Certificate  
(19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018)

§241.15. Standards Required for the Principal Certificate.
(a) Principal Certificate Standards. The knowledge and skills identified in this section must be used by an educator preparation program in the development of curricula and coursework and by the State Board for Educator Certification as the basis for developing the examinations required to obtain the standard Principal Certificate. The standards also serve as the foundation for the individual assessment, professional growth plan, and continuing professional education activities required by §241.30 of this title (relating to Requirements to Renew the Standard Principal Certificate).
(b) School Culture. The principal: (1) ensures that a positive, collaborative, and collegial school culture facilitates and enhances the implementation of campus initiatives and the achievement of campus goals;

- (2) uses emerging issues, recent research, demographic data, knowledge of systems, campus climate inventories, student learning data, and other information to collaboratively develop a shared campus vision;
- (3) facilitates the collaborative development of a plan in which objectives and strategies to implement the campus vision are clearly articulated;
- (4) supports the implementation of the campus vision by aligning financial, human, and material resources;
- (5) establishes processes to assess and modify the plan of implementation to ensure achievement of the campus vision;
- (6) acknowledges, recognizes, and celebrates the contributions of students, staff, parents, and community members toward the realization of the campus vision;
- (7) models and promotes the continuous and appropriate development of all learners, including faculty and staff, in the campus community;
- (8) uses strategies to ensure the development of collegial relationships and effective collaboration of campus staff;
- (9) develops and uses effective conflict-management and consensus-building skills;
- (10) establishes and communicates consistent expectations for staff and students, providing supportive feedback to ensure a positive campus environment;
- (11) implements effective strategies to systematically gather input from all campus stakeholders, supporting innovative thinking and an inclusive culture;
- (12) creates an atmosphere of safety that encourages the social, emotional, and physical well-being of staff and students; and
- (13) ensures that parents and other members of the community are an integral part of the campus culture.

(c) Leading Learning. The principal:

- (1) creates a campus culture that sets high expectations, promotes learning, and provides intellectual stimulation for self, students, and staff;
- (2) prioritizes instruction and student achievement by understanding, sharing, and promoting a clear definition of high-quality instruction based on best practices from recent research;
- (3) routinely monitors and improves instruction by visiting classrooms, engaging in formative, evidence-based appraisal processes and conferences with teachers, and attending grade or team meetings;
- (4) facilitates the use of sound research-based practice in the development and implementation of campus curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular programs to fulfill academic, developmental, social, and cultural needs;
- (5) facilitates campus participation in collaborative school district planning, implementation, monitoring, and curriculum revision to ensure appropriate scope, sequence, content, and alignment;
- (6) implements a rigorous curriculum aligned with state standards, including college and career readiness standards;
- (7) analyzes the curriculum to ensure that teachers align content across grades and that curricular scopes and sequences meet the particular needs of their diverse student populations;
- (8) monitors and ensures staff uses multiple forms of student data to inform instruction and intervention decisions to maximize instructional effectiveness and student achievement;
- (9) ensures that effective instruction maximizes growth of individual students and student groups, supports equity, and eliminates the achievement gap;
- (10) ensures staff have the capacity and time to collaboratively and individually use classroom

formative and summative assessment data to inform effective instructional practices and interventions; and

(11) facilitates the use and integration of technology, telecommunications, and information systems that enhance learning.

(d) Human Capital. The principal:

(1) invests and manages time to prioritize the development, support, and supervision of the staff to enhance student outcomes;

(2) ensures all staff have clear expectations that guide them and by which they are assessed, including the use of and familiarity with evidence-based appraisal rubrics, where applicable;

(3) uses data from multiple points of the year to complete accurate appraisals of all staff, using evidence from regular observations, student data, and other sources to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers and staff;

(4) coaches and develops educators by conducting conferences, giving individualized feedback, and supporting individualized professional growth opportunities;

(5) facilitates the campus's professional learning community to review data, processes, and policies in order to improve teaching and learning in the school;

(6) creates opportunities for effective staff to take on a variety of leadership roles and appropriately delegates responsibilities to staff and administrators on the leadership team;

(7) collaboratively develops, implements, and revises a comprehensive and on-going plan for professional development of campus staff that addresses staff needs based on staff appraisal trends, goals, and student information;

(8) ensures the effective implementation of a continuum of professional development by the appropriate allocation of time, funding, and other needed resources;

(9) implements effective, legal, and appropriate strategies for the recruitment, selection, assignment, and induction of campus staff; and

(10) plans for and adopts early hiring practices.

(e) Executive Leadership. The principal:

(1) reflects on his or her practice, seeks and acts on feedback, and strives to continually improve, learn, and grow;

(2) engages in ongoing and meaningful professional growth activities to further develop knowledge and skills and to model lifelong learning;

(3) uses strong communication skills, understands how to communicate a message in different ways to meet the needs of various audiences, and develops and implements strategies for effective internal and external communications;

(4) develops and implements a comprehensive program of community relations, which uses strategies that will effectively involve and inform multiple constituencies;

(5) establishes partnerships with parents, businesses, and other groups in the community to strengthen programs and support campus goals;

(6) demonstrates awareness of social and economic issues that exist within the school and community that could impact campus operations and student learning;

(7) gathers and organizes information from a variety of sources for use in creative and effective campus decision making;

(8) frames, analyzes, and creatively resolves campus problems using effective problem-solving techniques to make timely, high-quality decisions;

(9) develops, implements, and evaluates change processes for organizational effectiveness;

(10) uses effective planning, time management, and organization of work to maximize attainment of school district and campus goals; and

(11) keeps staff inspired and focused on the campus vision while supporting effective change management.

(f) Strategic Operations. The principal:

- (1) assesses current campus needs, reviewing a wide set of evidence to determine the campus's priorities, and sets ambitious and measurable school goals, targets, and strategies that form the campus's strategic plan;
- (2) outlines and tracks meaningful goals, targets, and strategies aligned to a school vision that continuously improves teacher effectiveness and student outcomes;
- (3) allocates resources effectively (e.g., staff time, dollars, and tools), aligning them to the school priorities and goals, and works to access additional resources as needed to support learning;
- (4) establishes structures to regularly monitor multiple data points with leadership teams to evaluate progress toward goals, adjusting strategies to improve effectiveness;
- (5) implements appropriate management techniques and group processes to define roles, assign functions, delegate authority, and determine accountability for campus goal attainment;
- (6) implements strategies that enable the physical plant, equipment, and support systems to operate safely, efficiently, and effectively to maintain a conducive learning environment;
- (7) applies local, state, and federal laws and policies to support sound decisions while considering implications related to all school operations and programs;
- (8) collaboratively plans and effectively manages the campus budget;
- (9) uses technology to enhance school management;
- (10) facilitates the effective coordination of campus curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular programs in relation to each other and other school district programs; and
- (11) collaborates with district staff to implement district policies and advocates for the needs of district students and staff.

(g) Ethics, Equity, and Diversity. The principal:

- (1) implements policies and procedures that encourage all campus personnel to comply with Chapter 247 of this title (relating to Educators' Code of Ethics);
- (2) models and promotes the highest standard of conduct, ethical principles, and integrity in decision making, actions, and behaviors;
- (3) ensures that reports of educator misconduct, including inappropriate relationships between educators and students, are properly reported so appropriate investigations can be conducted;
- (4) models and promotes the continuous and appropriate development of all learners in the campus community;
- (5) ensures all students have access to effective educators and continuous learning opportunities;
- (6) promotes awareness and appreciation of diversity throughout the campus community;
- (7) implements special campus programs to ensure that all students are provided quality, flexible instructional programs and services to meet individual student needs;
- (8) articulates the importance of education in creating engaged citizens in a free democratic society;
- (9) communicates productively with all audiences through strong communication skills and understands how to communicate a message in different ways to meet the needs of various audiences; and
- (10) treats all members of the community with respect and develops strong, positive relationships with them.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the impact of school closures on the experiences of principals and their leadership. The context for these experiences stemmed from the school closures that took place in a larger urban school district located in Texas during the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 academic years. Specifically, this study examined what happens to the principal's leadership and principal's perception of their leadership identity as they experience school closures as either principals whose campuses were going to be closed, are closed, or as principals whose campuses received students from a closing campus. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks utilized in this study were the concept of the wounded leader (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002) and sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995).

## **Research Question**

This study was guided by one central research question: What is the impact of school closures on principal leadership and leadership identity?

## **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is that it explored the impact of school closures on leadership, an area of research where the number of studies is limited. While there is extensive research on school leadership and a growing amount of research on school closures, there is limited research on how school closures impact principal leadership and on how principal leadership is impacted by this critical context. The principal is vital to the success of K-12 school systems and yet, studies on the human side of leadership are limited, particularly in the context of school closures and in the context of critical incidents in general. At a time when principals are being asked to do more with less, such as increased accountability and decreased school funding, are facing a growing political support of school choice at both the federal and state levels, and are witnessing the increasing academic and social-emotional needs of the students they serve, the need to understand school leadership in the context of critical incidents such as school closures is essential.

In framing school closures as a critical incident, this study also explored what happens to leadership and leadership identity when principals come face to face with disruptive events which create a wound. As a result of the wounding, through reflection and storytelling, principals may experience a transformation in both leadership and leadership identity. Understanding this phenomenon of critical incidents resulting in wounds that impact leadership, particularly in the fast-changing environments of public schools, has become ever more imperative. Currently, the Texas principal certificate standards focus on the following broad performance categories, none of which speaks specifically to critical incidents: school culture, leading learning, human capital, executive leadership, strategic operations, and ethics, equity and diversity (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018). Yet, as research reveals, principals are a significant in-school factor contributing to student learning and outcomes, ranking second only to classroom instruction (Leithwood, et. al., 2004) and a critical component of school culture (Beatty, 2007). This study, in addition to expanding the research literature in this area, also helps to better understand the needs of principals in this context and provides opportunities for preparation programs and districts alike to better prepare and support their principals through this type of experience. More broadly, this study has the potential to inform future state and local policies intended to guide school closures and other critical incidents. Ultimately, the opportunity to better prepare principals and create policies that address critical incidents such as school closures will allow campuses to better serve students and communities.

As I was beginning to finalize my dissertation in the spring of 2020, our public schools nationwide were facing unplanned closures and moving to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study at a minimum may provide an entry point to begin examining leadership from this lens and gain a better understanding of the human element of leadership and the type of preparation and support principals may need to face current and future challenges.

## **Background of the Study<sup>2</sup>**

In this section, I briefly summarize the context for this study. This backdrop is important for describing environmental factors that principals in this study had to navigate both at the district and campus levels.

Lone Star ISD is one of the largest urban school districts in Texas. The district consists of 91 campuses: 11 high schools, 15 middle schools, 57 elementary schools, and 8 special campuses that include an occupational center, several magnet schools, a recovery program for students at-risk of dropping out, and an adult education school. Lone Star ISD is the largest employer in the city, with an annual operating budget of \$483 million and approximately 8,025 employees.

Lone Star ISD has experienced a steady decline in student enrollment of about 700 students per year, leaving many schools operating under capacity and adversely impacting the district's operating budget. Coupled with declining enrollment is the fact that Lone Star ISD is landlocked, limiting its potential for growth and new student enrollment. New housing developments are also primarily located at the periphery of the city, limiting the likelihood of an influx of students into the district.

In January 2018, the Lone Star ISD board of trustees approved the closure of one of its schools, Central Elementary, beginning in the 2018-2019 school year. On May 2018, Lone Star ISD announced the possibility of additional school closures, citing a \$7 million deficit in the district's 2018-19 budget. The announcement was made via a district press release and a joint press conference where the Lone Star ISD Board President and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) leader were present, displaying unity regarding the decision. They indicated the shortfall was due largely to persistent declining enrollment, urban sprawl, aging neighborhoods, and lower birth rates.

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<sup>2</sup> The information in this section is masked. To maintain the anonymity of the district, campuses, and individuals in this study, citations are not provided in the text.

The proposed closures targeted 10 elementary schools over the next five years. Homestead Elementary, Jackson Elementary, and Hamilton Elementary would close in the 2018-2019 school year and Lincoln Elementary, Rose Tree Elementary, Star Dust Elementary, and Kennedy Elementary in the 2019-2020 school year. The remaining three campuses, Grant Elementary, Washington Elementary, and Mason Elementary, were previously approved for closure through the passage of the district's 2016 school bond program and were slated to close in the 2020-2021 school year.

Following the announcement, Lone Star ISD trustees held two community meetings on consecutive days to allow for input from parents, students, school leaders, and stakeholders, with final closure decisions set to take place less than a month after the initial announcement. Close to 80 community members provided input, largely opposing the closures. On June 21, 2018, the district's Board of Trustees opted to pull the item from its agenda, postponing a vote on school closures, but warning the community that this decision would be revisited in the coming months. In December 2018, the Board of Trustees approved the closure of four schools, including three from the original list and a newly added campus: Homestead Elementary, Jackson Elementary, Kennedy Elementary, and Frost Elementary.

As additional context for the communities served by the campuses affected by the school closures at Lone Star ISD, Table 1.2 provides a few demographic data points for each of the affected communities focused on medium income, property tax values, and education levels for the community. Table 1.3 lists the schools included in this study and the zones where each school is located. This data provides a snapshot of the communities the three principals in this study served and provides context and additional insight into what was shared by the principals via the interviews about their leadership, campuses, and the impact of the school closures as discussed in Chapter 4. While the focus of this study is on principal leadership and identity, it is important to note that this data also reflects that the campuses impacted by school closures in Lone Star ISD were predominantly in communities where the salary/wage according to the 2012 tax filings was significantly lower than that of the state. School closures occurring in



marginalized communities is a trend that is reflected in the research (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009, Ewing, 2018) and deserves to be examined in the context of this community as well.

Table 1.2 Demographic Data of Affected Communities<sup>3</sup>

	<b>TX</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>Zone 1</b>	<b>Zone 2</b>	<b>Zone 3</b>	<b>Zone 4</b>	<b>Zone 5</b>	<b>Zone 6</b>	<b>Zone 7</b>
<b>Salary/Wage-2012 Tax Year (filed in 2013)</b>	52,524	N/A	18,632	20,981	29,393	37,723	26,085	56,596	33,060
<b>Median House/Condo Value in 2017</b>	161,500	123,300	62,821	90,568	110,880	N/A	98,782	199,561	111,330
<b>HS or Higher</b>	N/A	78.9%	34.9%	56.2%	77.7%	95.6%	64.0%	90.8%	79.1%
<b>Bachelor's Degree or Higher</b>	N/A	23.8%	3.3%	6.2%	15.9%	31.5%	16.6%	49.4%	17.0%
<b>Graduate or Professional Degree</b>	N/A	8.2%	0.7%	1.5%	4.3%	10.0%	4.8%	19.1%	4.1%

Table 1.3 Zone Where the Impacted School is Located

	<b>Zone 1</b>	<b>Zone 2</b>	<b>Zone 3</b>	<b>Zone 4</b>	<b>Zone 5</b>	<b>Zone 6</b>
<b>Jackson Elementary</b>						X
<b>Rose Tree Elementary</b>						X
<b>Magnolia Elementary<sup>4</sup></b>					X	

<sup>3</sup> The data on this table comes from Census Data and is also masked. Rather than to list the zip codes, which would serve as identifiers for the schools in this study, and thus the principals, I have replaced the zip codes with the labels of Zone 1, Zone 2, etc. To maintain the anonymity of the district, campuses, and individuals in this study, the citation for this data are not provided. The citation for this data lists the geographic location of the zones which would also serve as an identifier.

<sup>4</sup> Magnolia Elementary was not slated to be closed. This campus received students from a closing campus, Jackson Elementary.

## **Summary**

At the outset of this chapter, the rationale for conducting this study was presented, focusing on the absence of research on the intersection of school closures with leadership and leadership identity. To provide context for the study, a brief overview of the authority for school closures in Texas, along with the state's principal standards were included, followed by the purpose of the study and the research question. To help the reader situate this study, the background of this study included an overview of Lone Star ISD and the school closure process. The remainder of this dissertation is organized into four chapters. Chapter 2 presents the literature review around the topics of school closure and leadership and provides the theoretical framework for this study, as well as the research around identity and sensemaking. Chapter 3 introduces the methodology for this study, followed by Chapter 4 where the findings and data analysis are presented. In the final chapter, Chapter 5, the focus is on a discussion around the findings and the implications of this study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks**

This chapter provides the literature review of pertinent research around school closures, school leadership, and principal identity as background for this study. This section will be followed by the theoretical frameworks used to frame this study: the concept of the wounded leader (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002), and the theory of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking and storytelling are inextricably linked, and both are utilized to analyze the data collected through the interviews conducted in this study. Before delving into the literature review on school closures and principal leadership, this section is prefaced with my underlying belief of public education that helped guide this work.

### **Education as a Public Good**

My personal belief is that education's primary focus must center on a commitment to develop multi-dimensional human beings ready to engage in a world that is interconnected and to live in communities that experience ongoing rapid change and transformation. The purpose of K-12 education should be to develop productive, well-rounded human beings (hooks, 1994). Today's narrow educational focus on social mobility and private good elements, limits the development of multi-dimensional citizens who will be ready to engage in a global, complex, and rapidly changing society. If education can shift its focus from solely providing social mobility<sup>5</sup> for students to the more comprehensive task of developing whole human beings, the likelihood of creating school systems that are more inclusive and address the diverse needs of students and communities increases.

To do so, the goal of education must anchor itself on ensuring education is treated as a public good. Tracing the historical evolution of education from the common era (Colonial Period to the Great Depression) to the present, reveals the purpose of education's evolution from a public good to a private good (Labaree, 2010). The purpose of education underwent a

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<sup>5</sup> The term social mobility is defined as utilizing education "as a way for individuals to reinforce or improve their social position" (Labaree, 2010, p. 16).

transformation from a desire to grow and preserve the Republic for future generations, to providing social efficiency<sup>6</sup> as this country experienced economic changes, and finally to a market-based education system intended to provide students with social mobility (Jefferson, 1779; Kahlenberg & Janey, 2016; Labaree, 2010; Lubienski, 2005; Mann, 1848; Ravitch, 2010).

As education moved toward ensuring social efficiency, schools were given the charge of preparing students for their place in a growing industrial economy (Labaree, 2010). Curriculum shifted from an academic focus to vocational education, and to measuring student abilities through testing (Labaree, 2010). Today, there continues to be aggressive testing and accountability systems that some critics argue are creating lower standards and failing to prepare students for post-secondary education and life in general (Labaree, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). School choice in the form of vouchers and charter schools has also entered the education scene, and public schools are tasked with operating like private businesses (Lubienski, 2005; Ravitch, 2010). This focus on social mobility and market-based reform has failed to improve student outcomes. School choice also fails to “recognize that schools are often the anchor of their communities, representing values, traditions and ideals that have persevered across decades” (Ravitch, 2010, pp. 23-24). To meet the needs of a diverse country, education’s purpose must incorporate democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility, all anchored in the belief that education is a public good. For schools to meet these goals, they must be led by principals who are ready to face the difficulty demands of today’s complex K-12 systems and who are committed to continuous self-reflection resulting in improvement and growth of their leadership.

## **Literature Review**

This section includes the literature review of the general research on the three large concepts explored in this study: school closures; school leadership; and, leadership identity. The literature review on school closures provides an overview of the type of research that has been conducted around this topic. It is not meant to be a comprehensive review since the focus of this

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<sup>6</sup> The term social efficiency is defined as utilizing education “as a mechanism for developing productive workers” (Labaree, 2010, p. 16).

study is not on the school closure process itself, but on the impact of how a critical incident such as a school closure has on a principal's leadership. The leadership literature provides an insight into how school leadership has been researched and written about and speaks to trends seen in educational leadership. The leadership styles included in this review also speak to how principals are expected to behave and to lead, and thus provide a window into the areas of schooling principals are held responsible for overseeing. The research on leadership identity helps to connect the meaning making process as it is tied to school or educational leadership, school closures, and more importantly, the role it plays in the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used in the analysis of the data collected through this study.

### **School Closures**

The issue of school closures is not a recent trend. Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) reflects that in the 1995-1996 school year a total of 954 schools closed impacting approximately 174,000 students; from the 2000-2001 school year to 2016-2017 school year, a total of 24,991 schools have been closed in the United States, impacting approximately 3.8 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In the United States, school closures are often the result of low academic performance, declining enrollment, demographic shifts in the population, urban sprawl, and budget constraints (Bierbaum, 2016; Finnigan & Lavner, 2012; Shiller, 2018). Large urban cities like Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Wisconsin, Cleveland, Oakland, and Washington D.C., have experienced school closures over the past couple of decades (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015). The state of Texas has not been immune to school closures. Schools in Texas have closed in cases where the Texas Education Agency has revoked certification to districts due to financial mismanagement and academic underperformance (Smith, 2012). Between 2000 and 2010, Houston ISD quietly closed 72 of its 374 campuses (Stroub, 2017). Interestingly, these campuses were not forced to close by the state and were not underperforming academically (Stroub, 2017).

Decisions cited by districts for school closure often rely on neo-liberal, rational perspectives (Bierbaum, 2016). Reasons given align to the wave of market-based educational reform (Basu, 2007; Bierbaum, 2016; Meier & Gasoi, 2017). Research on school closures has focused on the impact on student learning and social-emotional outcomes (Kirshner, Gaertner & Pozzoboni, 2010; Steiner, 2009), the impact these decisions have on parents and communities, and community perceptions on their participation in the closure process (Bierbaum, 2016; Brummet, 2014; Deeds & Pattillo, 2015). Also, part of the literature on school closures is research around school closures disproportionately impacting historically marginalized communities, primarily schools in black and economically disadvantaged neighborhoods (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009; Ewing, 2018). There is a gap in the study of school closures around the area of campus leadership. There are a limited number of studies focused on the effect of school closure on principal leadership, with most studies mentioning leadership but failing to make this the focus of the study. In one study, Lenarduzzi's (2015) investigated the impact school closures, which is defined as a critical and disruptive event, on school leadership. In his study, Lernaduzzi utilized a narrative analysis approach to examine the professional and personal communications of two superintendents and six principals experiencing school closures in the Province of British Columbia, Canada. His study, "revealed the harsh impact of a critical event on the life of a principal. When a principal's school was closed it generated strong emotional responses, a tense working environment, insecurity and personal health concerns" (Lernaduzzi, 2015, p. 265). It is from Lenarduzzi's (2015) work that I first drew inspiration for this study.

### **School Leadership**

As the research around school closures reflects, student learning is often negatively impacted by school closures, particularly for students of color (Stroub & Richards, 2016). Congruently, research shows that when it comes to in-school factors that contribute to student learning and outcomes, "leadership is second only to classroom instruction" (Leithwood, et. al., 2004, p. 7). Principals, through their leadership, also contribute to creating, fostering, and

determining a school's culture (Beatty, 2007). School culture includes a campus environment focused on teaching and learning, a climate of high expectations for students and teachers, and on creating spaces where everyone feels values and trust is continuously cultivated. Therefore, this section focuses on the existing literature on educational leadership.

Research on K-12 school leadership characterizes different approaches to campus administration. "The leadership role that administrators assume shapes how they approach their practice, what they are able to accomplish, and how they think about their work; most important, it also shapes what they feel and believe the role permits them to feel" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 8). Educational leadership has historically been defined through the lens of management, stemming largely from Frederick Taylor's scientific management theories (Mullen, Fenwick, & Kealy, 2014). In more recent decades, school leadership has developed theories that expanded on this scientific management style leadership and moved toward incorporating the whole individual.

Research on effective leadership practices generally focuses on studies of leadership through the lens of the individual's characteristics, organizational perspectives, or through broadly defined leadership styles, but not readily in the context of school closures (Lenarduzzi, 2015). For example, studies on school leadership have defined effective school leadership by the characteristics and actions taken by the individual person. The definition of effective leaders includes leaders who: possess self-confidence in their ability to accomplish goals (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012); make themselves visible throughout the campus and during extra-curricular activities (Harrison, 2010; Gibbs & Slate, 2003); are selfless and place the needs of others in front of the leadership role (Hunter, 1998); create a vision and demonstrate actions directed at implementing that vision (McCarthy & Baron, 2010); are charismatic leaders who facilitate transformational learning (Knutson, Miranda, & Washell, 2005); and impact student learning by facilitating teacher growth (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Bredeson, 2000). Studies have also defined and labeled school leadership in broader categories. These categories include: distributive leaders (Spillane & Healey, 2010; Friedman, 2004; Malin & Hackmann, 2017;

Spillane & Healy, 2010); transformational leaders (Friedman, 2004; Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016); instructional leaders (Ovando & Cavazos, 2004; Reardon, 2011); and, social-justice leaders (Theoharis & Toole, 2011; Capper & Young, 2014; Kemp-Graham, 2015).

### **Distributive Leadership**

There are distributive leaders who understand that leading does not rest solely with the role of principal but is shared and practiced throughout the organization in a collaborative manner (Spillane & Healey, 2010; Friedman, 2004). Through distributive leadership, everyone throughout the school system is empowered to take the role of formal and informal leaders (Malin & Hackmann, 2017; Spillane & Healey, 2010). Principals who exhibit distributive leadership display “actions [that] are strategic and distributed, and they utilize multiple pathways to influence learning” (Copland & Knapp, 2006, p. 72). Often, the focus of distributive leadership is directly on impacting instructional change at a campus with the principal as the learning leader, but highly dependent on interactions and leadership of others in what Spillane (2006) calls the leader-plus of leadership.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leaders on the other hand usher change by shifting the values, beliefs, and needs of a campus (Friedman, 2004). These types of leaders are often described as charismatic or inspiring (Freidman, 2004; Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016). Transformational leaders focus on providing “intellectual direction [that] aims at innovating within the organization, while empowering and supporting teachers as partners in decision making” (Hallinger, 2005, p. 371). In addition, transformational leaders are able to inspire increased motivation, can refocus the attention of followers away from their own self-interests and toward the good of the collective, and achieve higher levels of morality (Peters, 2010 as cited in Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). These leaders also “challenge processes by seeking opportunities to challenge the status quo, modeling/setting examples, inspiring through shared vision, enabling



work through collaborative spirited teams to keep hope and determination alive, and celebrate accomplishments of individuals within organizations” (Santamaria & Jean-Marie, 2014, p. 337).

### **Instructional Leaders and Learning-Centered Leadership**

A more common perspective is the principal as instructional leader of a campus whose focus is centered on teaching and learning (Ovando & Cavazos, 2004; Reardon, 2011). Instructional leaders establish vision, mission, and school cultures that directly impact student learning outcomes (Ovando & Cavazos, 2004). This type of leadership places the principal at the center of ensuring academic achievement of all students (Ovando & Cavazos, 2004). The efforts of these types of leaders focus on teacher behaviors directly related to student academic growth and learning (Ovando & Cavazos, 2004). These efforts may be narrowly exercised such as focusing on what occurs in classroom, or broadly exercised, through the development of campus cultures through vision and goals focused on instructional gains (Ovando & Cavazos, 2004).

Similarly, learning-centered leadership may be considered as instructional leadership that is enhanced by transformational leadership (Reardon, 2011). The focus of this type of leadership remains on instruction but is specifically focused on school improvement (Reardon, 2011). It also requires the leader to focus on the following actions:

- Planning: articulating shared direction and coherent policies, practices, and procedures for realizing high standards of student performance.
- Implementing: putting into practice the activities necessary to realize high standards for student performance.
- Supporting: creating enabling conditions; securing and using financial, political, technological, and human resources necessary to promote academic and social learning.
- Advocating: promoting the diverse needs of students within and beyond the school.
- Communicating: developing, utilizing, and maintaining systems of exchange among members of the school and with its external communities.

- Monitoring: systematically collecting and analyzing data to make judgments that guide decisions and actions for continuous improvement. (Murphy et al., 2007, pp. 14–20, as cited in Reardon, 2011, p. 69)

### **Social Justice Leadership**

The struggle in defining social justice is that there is no short definition for what this term means, particularly within the context of education and leadership. Those who utilize the concept of social justice in their research borrow from various definitions to define the concept within the context of their research and findings. In defining social justice, it is helpful to consider the different elements linked to this concept as it pertains to educational leadership. These different elements help provide a better understanding of the scope of social justice and how it presents in the literature. Furthermore, these elements include notions of inclusion, ability to recognize the inequities and then act to erase such inequities, leaders who embody the role of advocates, ethics, and student academic achievement.

One of those social justice characteristics is the idea of inclusion (Capper & Young, 2014; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011). Inclusion, as it is defined in the literature extends beyond disability and is instead “built on the belief that all students should be valued for their unique abilities (i.e., language, etc.) and included as an essential part of a school community that is purposefully designed to accept and embrace diversity as a strength, not a weakness” (Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011, p. 649). Practicing educational leadership in the context of social justice insists on leaders having the “ability to recognize inequity” along with other issues they must deal within the scope of leading, going beyond the recognition and understanding of inequity, and taking action. (DeMatthews, 2015, p. 145).

The recurring theme that is present in the literature is the need for leadership for social justice to serve as advocates, as champions for students who belong to groups who have been historically marginalized and work toward addressing but more importantly, eliminating marginalization within their schools and communities (Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011). In serving

in the role of advocates, these school leaders “advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States” (Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011, p. 648). This is one of the vital elements of social justice in the context of educational leadership.

Ethics is another characteristic of social justice leadership. “Social justice leadership is a process or manner in which you live in an ethical society” (Turhan, as cited in Kemp-Graham, 2015) and emphasize “equity, ethical values, justice, care and respect in educating of all students regardless of race and class, with a high quality education” (Marshall & Olivia as cited in Kemp-Graham, 2015). “Leaders who employ a social justice frame believe they have moral obligation to address the marginalization of historically disenfranchised groups” (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014, p. 749). This ethical imperative lead social justice leaders to move from subscribing to the theory of social justice leadership, to acting in alignment to the tenets of this type of leadership.

Finally, another characteristic tied to social justice leadership is its connection and commitment to closing the achievement gap between White students and those belonging to marginalized groups (Rivera-McCuthen, 2014; Kemp-Graham, 2015). While this is an important element, the researchers do stress the importance of looking at the achievement gap in the context of the big picture, as well as exploring beyond academic achievement.

While the types of school leadership discussed above do not encompass everything there is in the literature, it provides a good view of the expansive work that has been done in this area. Yet, absent from the existing literature is a focus on school leadership in times of critical incidents, such as school closures. The following section focuses briefly on the construction and development of leadership identity, followed by the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that will structure the data analysis in this study.

## **Leadership and Identity**

This study aims at examining what happens to a principal's leadership and identity in the context of school closures, which in this study is treated as a critical incident. An individual may have multiple identities subjectively constructed which can derive from gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, group or membership association, roles played in personal and professional settings, cultural backgrounds, and policy contexts (Burton & Weiner, 2016; Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017). These identities often intersect with one another and are repeatedly reconstructed over the course of an individual's lifetime and at different moments in time (Burton & Weiner, 2016; Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017). However, for purposes of this study, I am interested in exploring primarily the professional identity of principals as school leaders, which I recognize may intersect and be influenced by the identities held by the participants such as those listed above, at a moment in time framed by the school closures taking place in their communities. For now, the focus of this study remains on the professional identity of principals. As such, the following provides a summary of the literature around school leadership identity development.

Unlike research on teacher identity, there is not an abundance of literature on professional identity development of school principals (Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017; Priest & Seemiller, 2018; Scribner & Crow, 2012). Much of the focus on leadership research and leadership preparation is on what leaders should know and how leadership should be performed (Scribner & Crow, 2012). For example, the Texas Principal Certificate Standards make no mention of identity (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018). The focus is on the technical aspects of school leadership and the requirements reflect what leaders must do (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018). However, the literature does indicate that critical incidents help shape a leader's identity (Priest & Seemiller, 2018). In a study conducted by Priest & Seemiller (2018), they found that past experiences, present beliefs, and future practices are representative of events that contribute to sharing a leader's identity. Similarly, identity is also closely linked to enactment of a role, to the motivation and energy to execute the purpose of a role (e.g. leading turnaround schools), to decision-making, to policy, and to context (Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017; Scribner & Crow,

2012). In thinking about identity in this way, leadership identity begins to strongly correlate to leadership styles, including those listed in the section above.

Crow, Day, & Møller (2017) recommend a collective framework, which synthesizes the research around principal professional identity formation and consists of the following five dimensions:

- the narrative dimension consisting of social and temporally constructed identity and the use of reflexivity;
- the epistemic dimension which looks at identity construction as a cognitive undertaking, that includes “specific kinds of knowledge, modes of thinking, values and norms gained through authorizing to practice as a professional” (p. 273);
- the emotional dimension which considers identity construction as part of a dialogical struggle, places emotions in the wider context and acknowledges the social relationship between power and control;
- the historical and cultural dimensions consists of “national reforms and possible conflicts between managerial accountability and professional beliefs and ethics are rooted in personal engagement, and how the status accorded to the identity of each principal is being negotiated, taken for granted and constrained within culture and context” (p. 273); and,
- the political dimension consisting of both national and local power structures, placing principal identities within the realm of educational administrative field, and is “about how principals understand their position, how others are positioning them and how the individual principal anticipates the game to be played within practice” (pp. 273-274).

Given that the research question in this study is broadly framed to examine principal leadership and identity in the context of school leadership, any of the five dimensions may surface in the data collected through the principal interviews or it may be that the data reveals the presence of one or two of these dimensions.

Ultimately, “[i]dentity is the way we make sense of ourselves to ourselves and the image of ourselves that we present to others ... culturally embedded but subject to change ... [with] an unavoidable interrelationship, also, between the professional and the personal” (Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017, p. 268). For school principals, there is an additional component, which is “the place of emotion as a central feature of principals’ work and professional identity” (Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017, p. 268). Principals may traverse in and out of all these components on a regular basis, leading to a certain level of instability of identity and tensions between these different components (Crow, Day & Møller, 2017). It is important to also note that the instability is not necessarily a negative characteristic of identity, rather it can lead principals to reexamine their leadership practices and how they think about leadership in general (Crow, Day & Møller, 2017). This reflexive element is embedded into identity construction and can serve as a tool for legitimizing leadership. Defining identity in this manner aligns to the purpose of this study because the principals in this context are grappling with school closures and either helping their school community enter a new school or welcoming a new school to their existing campus. The presence of a critical incident establishes instability, is highly emotional for the entire school community, and thus may push principals to reflect and renegotiate their identity.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The following sections discuss the concept of the wounded leader (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002) and sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) which I used to frame this study. The concept of the wounded leader provides a framework to explore the wound created by a critical incident and the examination principals engage in to make sense of the wound, which results in learning and growth, but also in the creation of a certain type of story. Sensemaking is directly linked to storytelling. “Identity is the way we make sense of ourselves to ourselves and the image of ourselves that we present to others” (Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017). The nature of utilizing storytelling to make sense of our experiences, is directly linked to the wounded leader framework. These two theories afford a principal who has experienced a critical incident, an

opportunity to explore the wound and in the process, utilize sensemaking to tell the story of their story. Solely utilizing sensemaking or wounded leader to explore the story would have been one way to frame this study. However, utilizing the dual frameworks recognizes the role sensemaking plays in the stories we tell and presents an opportunity for deeper analysis by exploring the type of story constructed by the principals as reflected through the narratives they share. The act of creating a story offers a window to explore the impact of the wound, created by a critical incident, on their leadership and identity.

### **Critical Incidents and Wounded Leader**

The concept of a critical incident impacting leadership stems from Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski's (2002) work in their book, *The Wounded Leader*, which utilized narrative analysis to investigate school leaders who experienced a critical incident. The critical incidents included events such as losing a job, facing strong opposition from their staff, enforcing desegregation orders against board wishes, and enduring public criticism. School closures are arguably critical incidents in that they are an interruption of what is expected, producing strong emotions, requiring individuals to make sense of the interruption, (Lenarduzzi, 2015).

These critical incidents cause leaders to get wounded. "Wounding is an inevitable part of leadership; it might have to be considered part of the job. It seems virtually impossible to avoid wounding, if one chooses such an approach, then that too is a wound." (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 10). Tension is a necessary element in a wound. "When the essential part of oneself is misunderstood, misrepresented, and maligned" also creates wounding (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 17). Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) also offer that "[f]acing a crisis can be a time to focus sharply on what it means to be a leader" (p. 12) "The wound thus can serve as a call to examine the foundation of one's leadership. Like illness, a leadership wound brings not only difficulty and danger but also awareness and opportunity" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 13).

## **Restitution, Chaos, and Quest**

When principals recounted their experiences with critical incidents, three types of stories emerged: story of restitution, story of chaos, and story of quest (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002).

The storytellers chose a restitution story of how the problem was fixed and echoed the myth of principal as hero; a chaos story of near disaster that was notable by what was absent, that is a distressed telling without order or coherence and an uncertain future; or a story of quest, one that leads to a new or evolved story (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 97).

It is important to note that these three types of stories are not mutually exclusive and all three or two may be found in one larger narrative, presenting themselves at different points in the larger story. Given the evolving nature of storytelling, it is also possible to see a story change from one of restitution to chaos, or chaos to restitution, and with time, develop into stories of quest. The power of the type of story is its use as an interpretation tool to discover its meaning.

Optimism is embedded in the resolution of restitution stories because while acknowledging the presence of the crisis that is causing an interruption into normal life, there is a simultaneous presence of an expectation that the crisis will end and the status quo will be restored (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). In the narratives that reflect restitution, the leaders fail to describe how the critical incident changes them as leaders and as individuals. The wound is present, but it is isolated from their identity and role as a leader. It is also possible that the leader themselves did not solve the crisis, did not become the hero, but what is important is that the problem was in fact fixed and life can go on. The underlying assumption in the restitution story is that all problems have solution, focusing the leader's attention on the outcome of the crisis, keeping them away from the actual source of the crisis, diminishing the opportunity to reflect, learn and grow from the experience. This story is also the preferred narrative.

The chaos stories are the most difficult to solicit and to hear because it is a narrative of possible failure, loss of voice, risk of abandonment, lost predictability, and lack of control



(Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). Storytellers recount these stories without any coherent order and the events surrounding the crisis appear to be out of the storytellers' control. It is as if any future certainty is ripped away from the storytellers' experience. Not all is lost in the chaos story. The storyteller can turn the chaos into an opportunity for change.

Quests stories result in the storytellers' greatest opportunity to channel the meaning of wounding experience for the greatest positive transformation of the self, achieved through maximized personal and professional growth (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). It is as if the new self that emerges post-critical incident can never return to the self that existed pre-critical incident. These storytellers use the wounding experience to courageously embark into the unknown and in doing so, discover a path of change, a rediscovery of their authentic selves.

The emotions these school leaders felt as a result of the critical incidents was also an important element of the wounded leader concept (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002) include feelings of "loss of control, powerlessness" (p. xiii), "loss of essential spirit" (p. 19), and "endemic and chronic tension" (p. 16). More importantly, they point out an absence of "simple language or vocabulary in the workplace to speak of feelings of leadership isolation, fear, vulnerability and loss" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 85).

### **Sensemaking**

At its core, sensemaking is the exercise of turning stories into explanations (Weick, 1995). Through sensemaking, these stories move away from being abstract to illuminating patterns within the story that result in an explanation of what is happening by generating "ideologies, paradigms, and traditions" (Weick, 1995, p. 131). "[S]ensemaking is, importantly, an issue of language, talk, and communication. Situations, organizations and environment are talked into existence" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). "Sensemaking is generally understood to be the cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine

actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals” (Evans, 2007, p. 161). The focus of sensemaking is the interpretation (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking begins with uncertainty. “When people face an unsettling difference, that difference often translates into questions such as who we are, what are we doing, what matters, and why does it matter?” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 416). The construction of the who, the what, and the why are the central questions (Weick, 1995). “[T]o understand sensemaking is also to understand how people cope with interruptions” (Weick, 1995, p. 5). School leaders as sensemakers become even more important when “sociopolitical and sociocultural issues play out in schools” (Anderson, 1996; Giroux, 1992; McLaren, 2003, as cited in Evans, 2007, p. 160). Weick’s (1995) seven properties of the sensemaking process are that it is:

- grounded in identity construction
- retrospective
- enactive of sensible environments
- social
- ongoing
- focused on and by extracted cues
- driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (p. 17)

When change and crisis occur, leaders will engage in sensemaking. Sensemaking is tied to identity construction (Weick, 1995). For school leaders, the use of storytelling is a sense-making tool through which they assign meaning to the experience by reflection and interpretation (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). Within the context of this study, school closures have created a change or crisis for the closing campuses and for the campuses receiving students from these closed schools. In this study, I analyzed the data through this framework, coupled with the wounded leader concept, to better understand what happens to school leaders in the context of school closures.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter introduces the research methodology for this qualitative study focused on examining the impact of school closures on leadership and leadership identity. Utilizing a phenomenological approach and semi-structured interviews, allowed for a deeper understanding of the participant experiences with school closures and provided them an opportunity to share their stories, revealing the wound and the impact of the wounding on their leadership and leadership identity. The sections that follow discuss the key elements of this study: 1) purpose of the study and research question; 2) research methodology; 3) role of the researcher; 4) study participants; 4) data collection procedures; 5) ethical considerations; 6) data analysis; 7) delimitations and limitations; and, 8) summary.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

In this qualitative study, I sought to examine the impact of school closures, which I labeled as a critical incident, on the experiences of principals and their leadership. The context for these experiences centered around school closures by a larger urban school district located in Texas. Specifically, this study explored what happens to a principal's leadership and their perception of their leadership identity as they experienced school closures, as either principals whose campuses were on a list of potential school closures and either closed or remained opened, or as principals whose campuses received students from a closing campus. I framed this study utilizing the concept of the wounded leader (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002) and sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). As such, this study was guided by one central question: What is the impact of school closures on principal leadership and leadership identity?

The aim of this study was not to explore school closures in theoretical terms, but to delve deeper and examine the experience of principal leadership when schools are shuttered. School closures are complex. As such, the purpose of the study was not meant to be a comprehensive study of school closures nor of school leadership. Rather, the intent of this study was to reveal the complexity of principal leadership in the context of school closures and how principals

experience these events is more nuanced and does not fit neatly into current leadership frameworks. I also want to be clear that the purpose of this study was not to place blame on one party or the other, to pass judgment on district action or inaction, or judge a principal's leadership ability and capacity through the information they share about their behaviors and decision-making through this process. The intent in conducting this study and framing it through the wounded leader concept (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002) and sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), was to better understand school leadership and create an opportunity to think about how to best support principals through such critical times.

### **Research Methodology**

Through this study, I sought to examine the impact of school closures on principal leadership and leadership identity. As such, I utilized qualitative research and data analysis approaches because I was trying to better understand the impact of school closures on principal leadership, which is descriptive in nature, rather than an attempt to explain why the school closures happened or why this critical incident produced a certain impact (Lester, 1999). The aim of qualitative research is to understand the participants' experiences and the meaning which they give to this experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research allows the researcher to examine lived experiences, and the ways in which research participants interpret and assign meaning to these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). School leadership at its core, consists of deeply personal actions and beliefs that are reflected in the practice of leading. Examining this research question through a qualitative study aligned the methodology to this study's purpose.

More specifically, this is a phenomenological study that explored leading school closures as the common "experiential, lived event" (Creswell, 2013, p.70). The phenomenon at the core of this study is school closures. School closures were explored with a "group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon," which in this case, are the principals of the schools that were slated to be closed, closed, or schools that received students and staff from a closing school (Creswell, 2013, pg. 78). I included principals from schools that are receiving students and staff

from a closing campus because the new influx of a large number of students and staff that are all coming from a closed campus is an interruption into what is expected to occur in schools and is an incident that produces strong emotions from all parties involved, increasing criticism of the decision, leaving principals at the receiving schools to make sense of what is occurring. The environment this context produced, created an opportunity for the receiving principals to reflect on their leadership and leadership identities.

Another characteristic of phenomenology that lends itself to this study is this idea that “the researcher brackets himself or herself out of the study by discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). Given my own personal experience with school closures as an employee of the school district during the time school closures were being considered, by bracketing these experiences, I attempted to “take a fresh perspective” toward school closures through the principals’ responses (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). Conducting a phenomenological study enabled me to account for my own personal experience and knowledge of school closures while honoring what the data revealed through the participants’ accounts. While a perfect state of *epoche* may never be fully achieved (Moustakas as cited in Creswell, 2013), in the next section, I have included my own experiences with school closures.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative studies, the researcher acts as an intermediary between the data collection and the data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological studies require the researcher to bracket their experiences to analyze the data as if the phenomenon were being experienced for the first time (Creswell, 2013). During the time I was developing the idea for this study, I was employed by the district where the school closures were occurring and had an insight into the decision-process from a central office perspective. As such, I was aware of complexity of these decisions, as well as the multiple sources of tension encompassing this process. The close proximity, both physically and functionally to the decision-makers may have been perceived by

the participants as threatening and may have caused them to feel uncomfortable participating in this study and if they did participate, being forthright in their responses.

While I had limited contact and in some cases no contact at all with the principals impacted by the school closures, the fact that I worked for the district at the central office level may have impacted the honesty of the responses from the participants and more importantly, my own approach to this study from the development of the research question, through the data collection process, and finally to the data analysis process and final write-up of this dissertation. To mitigate the negative outcome of such perceptions, at the outset of the request to an interview and at the beginning of each interview, I explained to the participants my “motives and intentions, and the inquiry’s purpose” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 127), clarified any concerns they raised, reiterated how I would protect their identities, communicated that participation in this study was completely voluntary, and finally, that they could opt-out at any time prior to the completion of this dissertation. It is important to note that by the time data collection process began, specifically as I was initiating contact and inquiring whether these principals would be interested in participating in the study, I was no longer employed by the district but was teaching at the university level, specifically in a principal preparation program.

These experiences may have not only influenced the participation of the principals in this study, but they also created certain biases, assumptions, and expectations in my role as a researcher. Throughout the study, I straddled the emic (insider)/etic (outsider) position of a researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My experiences, as described above, gave me an emic (insider) perspective because I knew some of the facts and details around the school closure process at the district level. At the same time, I had an etic (outsider) perspective because I was not a principal at a school that was impacted by school closures and therefore did not experience the phenomenon of this study. These insider/outsider positions produced a double-edged sword and I had to make sure that as I was interviewing, I was leaving my own assumptions out of the process.

As a product of public schooling, I have a certain set of expectations of K-12 systems and believe that schools belong to the communities in which they operate. I also believe that every community deserves a school and that schools have the potential to be the nerve center for a thriving community and critical spaces for students, teachers, principals and community to feel rooted in a sense of place and time within their community. In the decision-making process of schools, I believe in including the voice of the community and trying to achieve a compromise when tension is present around decisions being made. In the absence of public schools, I believe that my own educational and professional journey would have not been possible. From school leaders, I believe their role is to serve as advocates for the communities they serve and expect as much. These series of beliefs influence how I see things, the questions I ask, the lens through which I see the world, and reflect biases that could have seeped into my data analysis.

My hope in interviewing the principals was to uncover stories of complete transformations in how they approached leadership and the professional role they defined for themselves. I also assumed that the stories would be emotionally charged, having witnessed a similar response from parents during this time, and even assumed there would be harrowing stories of grief and loss. Through the interviews, I hoped to reveal untold stories of courage reflecting social justice leadership tenets and examples of advocates championing and raising the voices of those they served.

In the process of both collecting and analyzing the data, I practiced ongoing reflexivity about my own understanding and experience of school closures and my expectations of these school leaders. Bracketing my own experiences was a constant effort as I tried to honor what the data was revealing, rather than what I wanted it to reveal or believed it should reveal. After all, it was their stories I wanted to tell, not my own.

### **Study Participants**

The participants for this study consisted of principals who were employed in a leadership capacity at campuses impacted by school closures in Lone Star ISD. The criteria for the sample

of group included participants who are currently employed or were employed by Lone Star ISD during the time the school closures occurred, and are or were school administrators in schools that: 1) were slated to close, or 2) were closed, or 3) received students and staff from a campus that closed. Given the specific parameters of this criteria, I used a nonprobability criterion-based or purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposeful sampling ensured the selection of participants who held the type of knowledge required for this study and who could share personal experiences around school closures in Lone Star ISD, the phenomenon of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The focus of this study was to explore the impact of school closures on leadership and leadership identity. To gather data regarding this experience, participants were required to meet the above criteria.

For a phenomenological study, the size of the group of individuals which experienced the phenomenon being studied from which the data is collected can range from 3 to 15 participants (Creswell, 2013). A focus on the size of the group and a desire to have a large participation pool stems from characteristics of quantitative research (Lester, 1999). For phenomenological studies, a key consideration is for the participants to have actually experienced the same phenomenon in question to allow for a common understanding to emerge (Creswell, 2013). Finding such participants is often difficult and the validity of studies with a single participant or a small group of participants is often questioned (Creswell, 2013; Lester, 1999). However, unlike other types of methodologies, phenomenology is focused on describing what and how all participants experienced a common phenomenon, and reveal the universal essence (Creswell, 2013).

In this study, the pool of participants who met the criteria above was small, and the number of participants who agreed to be interviewed was even smaller. The pool of potential participants who met the above criteria included 14 participants. Out of this pool, 3 were no longer working at Lone Star ISD and I was not able to locate them and had no way of contacting them. From the remaining 9, a total of 3 participants willingly agreed to be interviewed for this study.



All three participants were female and only one had management and leadership experience outside of education. Table 3.1 lists the interviewed participants and some demographic information for each participant. Table 3.2 lists the name of the school campus (pseudonym), the outcome of the school closure based on the decision of the Lone Star ISD school board, and the name of the principal (pseudonym) serving the campus during this time. A more detailed description of each participant is provided in Chapter 4 Findings and Data Analysis.

Table 3.1 Description of Participants

<b>Administrator Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number of Years in Leadership Role</b>	<b>Number of Years Taught</b>	<b>Professional Development Attended in Past 3-5 Years</b>
Eva	Female	Hispanic/Asian	11 years	7 years	SEL, RTI, School Culture
Jane	Female	White	16 years, 7 months	7 years	Coaching Training, District Protocols, Operations
Olivia	Female	Hispanic	5 years, 6 months	13 years	Coaching, Principals' Meetings

Table 3.2 School Campus, Outcomes, Administrators

<b>School Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Outcome of School Closure Decision</b>	<b>Administrator (Pseudonym)</b>
Magnolia Elementary	received students from closed campus	Eva
Jackson Elementary	closed	Jane (transferred post-decision) Eva (oversaw closure)
Rose Tree Elementary	taken off closure list and remained open	Olivia

### Data Collection Procedures

Prior to beginning any data collection, the University of Texas at El Paso's (UTEP's) Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted (see Appendix A). Permission to conduct the study was also sought from Lone Star ISD<sup>7</sup>. Once permission from Lone Star ISD

<sup>7</sup> The letter from Lone Star ISD granting me permission to conduct this study was not included as an appendix in this dissertation to prevent revealing the actual name of the district and possibly compromise the anonymity of the participants.

was granted and my IRB application was approved, an initial email was sent to all individuals who met the criteria. The email explained the purpose of the study, the anticipated time commitment required to participate in the study, how anonymity would be ensured, and the voluntary nature of participating in the study (see Appendix B). Two follow-up emails were sent reiterating the above information, along with the contribution their participation in the study could make to existing research and leadership practices to those principals who did not answer the first email. The first follow-up email was sent about two to three weeks from the date of the initial email. The second follow-up email was sent two to three weeks from the date of the first follow-up email. After the first initial email, one principal responded in the affirmative. After the first follow-up email, one principal responded in the negative. After the second follow-up email, two principals responded in the affirmative. I was able to schedule and conduct an interview with one of these principals, but despite scheduling the interview with the second principal, was unable to conduct the interview due to the school closures that unexpectedly took place due to COVID-19<sup>8</sup>.

In between the first follow-up and the second follow-up, I also reached out to the principals by telephone, but was unable to speak to any of them directly. I did see a principal at an unrelated event where I introduced myself and inquired about my email request at that time. She mentioned she had failed to respond to the email due to time constraints but indicated her willingness to participate. Eventually, I was able to schedule and conduct the interview with this principal.

Data for this study was collected via semi-structured interviews (See Appendix D: Individual Interview Sample Protocol). Semi-structured interviews were utilized in this study, which allowed for the participants to explore the topics through a list of interview questions that

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<sup>8</sup> Shortly following the announced school closures due to COVID-19, I received an email from Lone Star ISD indicating that all previously approved research projects had been postponed. The email requested that I refrain from contacting district employees regarding my study due to the change in the district's day-to-day operations and the focus of district employees on meeting the virtual and remote learning needs of students and preparing other related operational plans due to the COVID-19 closures. At the time this dissertation was completed, the school closures for Lone Star ISD were still in place, which limited my ability to schedule the fourth interview, contact principals for any initial interviews and/or ask any follow-up questions.

maintained some level of flexibility and sought to explore the topics rather than the responses to the specific questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The semi-structured interview presented me the opportunity to inquire further as I observed participant responses, both visual and verbal, to the questions being asked. The interview questions were written using “familiar language” to increase the quality of the responses from participants, and thus the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 117). The questions in the interview protocol are written in a way that will allow the participant to share their experiences yielding descriptive data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The interviews took place over the course of approximately 2 1/2 months, beginning in mid-January 2020. The interviews were scheduled on a date and time to best accommodate the participants’ schedules and were conducted in locations selected by the participants. Giving participants the opportunity to select the date and time for the interviews was important because it minimized any disruption with their day-to-day activities. Participants selecting the location of the interviews was important because it ensured they felt the space they selected was conducive to interviewing, to maintaining a certain level of privacy they felt was necessary to respond to the interview questions, and made them feel generally comfortable.

Prior to beginning the interview, participants signed consent forms and filled out a questionnaire (see Appendix D) containing non-identifiable demographic information, including questions regarding number of years of leadership experience, types of professional development they participated in, and preferred pseudonym. The purpose of the demographic questionnaire focused on establishing characteristics of the participants, creating an opportunity to contextualize the participants experience. The completion of the questionnaire by each participant took approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

Excluding the time it took participants to complete the demographic questionnaire, the length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes. The opportunity to ask any follow-up questions after the initial interview or have the participants read the transcripts of their interviews was limited due to the COVID-19 school closures (see footnote 8). All

interviews were audio recorded facilitating the accurate transcription of the information collected. The voice memo app on a password protected iPhone was used to record the interviews minimizing the intrusiveness and potential impact to the participants' responses (Siedman, 2013). These files were transferred to a password protected computer and later transcribed for data analysis purposes.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In conducting this study, I followed the specific research guidelines set forth by the Office of Research and Sponsored Projects at UTEP. First, I submitted the application and supporting documentation to the UTEP IRB. At the same time, I submitted a request with Lone Star ISD for permission to conduct the study with their principals. Once Lone Star ISD granted me permission, I submitted the letter to the UTEP IRB. Upon securing approval from the UTEP IRB, I reached out to the principals who met the criteria for this study, explaining the nature of study, stating that their participation was voluntary, the efforts that would be taken to protect their anonymity, and that no negative consequences would result if they choose not to participate. Follow-up emails included this similar disclosure. Throughout the process, participants were not made vulnerable to any coercion or undue influence, which could have tainted the truthfulness and thus reliability of the data collected. When a potential participant outright declined to participate, I did not attempt to persuade them to change their mind. Participants were also not compensated, nor did they receive any incentive to participate in this study. Prior to beginning the interviews, the willing participants reviewed and signed a consent form previously approved through the UTEP IRB review process. At this time, participants also had the opportunity to select a pseudonym and if they did not select one, I assigned them a pseudonym to keep their identities confidential.

As I began the interview process through the actual writing of this dissertation, at the forefront of my mind were Siedman's (2013) words:

In collecting, organizing, analyzing interpreting, and sharing the words of an interview, doing good work “well and rightly” would mean, among other important steps, to remember our commitment to not making the participant vulnerable through our use of their words. (p. 142)

In writing Chapter 4 of this dissertation, I made a diligent effort to align with Siedman’s words, while at the same time, recognizing that in my own humanity, I may have come up short of these ethical considerations.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study was grounded on phenomenological data analysis process which requires the researcher to:

go through the data (e.g. interview transcripts) and highlight “significant statements,” sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experience the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) call this step horizontalization. Next, the researcher develops clusters of meaning from these significant statements into themes. These significant statements and themes are then used to write a description of what the participants experienced (textural description). They are also used to write a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon, called imaginative variation or structural description. ... From the structural and textural descriptions, the researcher then writes a composite description that presents the “essence” of the phenomenon, called the essential, invariant structure (or essence). (Creswell, 2013, p. 82)

In utilizing this process, my hope is the reader gains a better understanding of what it was like for the principals in this study to experience school closures.

The sole source of data in this study came from the interviews with the three participating principals. The interviews were transcribed, dis-identified, and analyzed using a variety of coding approaches aligned with the phenomenological data analysis. Data analysis took place

simultaneously with the data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, I listened to the audio recording of the transcripts in their entirety and as I did, I wrote a list of thoughts that I felt were biases and assumptions I was injecting into the content as I listened. Second, I printed the interview transcripts, which allowed me to conduct the data analysis on hard copies of transcripts, enabling me to physically move the data around as themes began to emerge, and literally spread out the papers on a table to look for themes across the data.

Given that three interviews comprised the data in this study and in an effort to limit the distance between my role as the researcher and the data itself, the data was reviewed and coded manually, utilizing analysis techniques that included both content and thematic analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). I reviewed the interview transcriptions and “highlight[ed] ‘significant statements’ sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” or school closures (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). During this first step, I also annotated on the margins of the transcripts. At this moment in the data analysis process, the coding was inductive, moving to a more deductive coding at a later stage of the process. Then clusters of meaning were developed from these statements, followed by descriptors and finally, a full description of the essence of the impact of school closures on principal leadership and identity (Creswell, 2013).

After identifying the broader themes, I went back to review the data and conducted an analysis referencing back to the context of the wounded leader (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002) and sensemaking (Weick, 1995) in general. I specifically analyzed the data looking for: 1) themes around the three stories that emerged in the original wounded leaders study which are stories of restitution, chaos, and quest; and, 2) evidence of emotions principals are experiencing such as tension, a sense of powerlessness, losing control, fear, isolation, and vulnerability (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). As I coded, I also looked for the explanations the principals were sharing that helped explain how they coped with school closures, the ways in which they described the story and turned it into an explanation of what happened, and the patterns that emerged, aligning my analysis to the sensemaking theory. Utilizing these two

theoretical and conceptual frameworks to analysis the data moved me from inductive to deductive to coding.

Finally, in my descriptions of the data analysis, I attempted to capture both how (structural description) and what (textural description) the principals experienced through the school closure process, uncovering the meaning they placed on their experiences as it related to leadership and leadership identity (Creswell, 2013). In so doing, the intent was for the reader to be able to feel like they understood how principals experience school closures, and more broadly, a critical incident. While not employing a traditional narrative analysis of the data, I utilized a “rich, thick description” in my writing of the findings for purposes of transferability of the finding to a different context or setting and to address the issue of validity (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). The context for this study is school closures, but the critical incident can take many different forms. What is revealed in the data analysis in this study I believe has relevance, even in the absence of generalization, in the context of other critical incidents in K-12 settings.

### **Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

The delimitations of this study included the narrow sample group criteria, the timing of the research, and the type of research design, including the research question. The first potential limitation of this study stems from the narrow selection group criteria which for this study was small and purposeful to identify participants who had experienced school closures specifically in Lone Star ISD. Only a few participants fit the criteria to participate in the study and not everyone who was eligible chose to participate. As such, I may not be able to use the findings to generalize about other principals in similar situations across other districts in the state, much less the country. This study took place over the course of 2 ½ months that came to an end due to the COVID-19 pandemic which represents both a delimitation and limitation. I also chose to answer a very specific research question and defined the critical incident as school closures, and selected to conduct a phenomenological study, utilizing a very specific theoretical and conceptual framework. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks, wounded leader (Ackerman & Maslin-

Ostrowki, 2002) and sensemaking (Weick, 1993), used to analyze the data, are only two lenses from which this topic could be studied. Analyzing the data using other theoretical frameworks could result in different findings than revealed in this study.

This study also presents several limitations. I conducted this study using semi-structured interviews which presents the possibility that participants, through their responses will “craft an unrealistic self-portrait” (Mullen, English, & Kealy, 2014, p. 2). In selecting to research leadership identity through the semi-structured interviews which in essence provides the participants an opportunity to create their own narratives, the stories the participants will chose to share “will be positioned and presented from the perspective of someone with certain intentions at a specific moment in historical time” (Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017, p. 271), and will be “situated in expectations about who could be in the audience” (Crow, Day, & Møller, 2017, p. 271), or in this case, who could be the reader of this dissertation. This limitation is further compounded by the fact that the data collected from the participants will be limited to the principals’ recollection of events, their behavior, and their personal reflections.

As I discussed in the Role of the Researcher section, at the time that I was developing the idea for this study, I was employed by Lone Star ISD. While I had limited contact and in some cases no contact at all with the principals impacted by the school closures, the fact that I worked for the district, specifically in an office with both physical and functional proximity to the superintendent’s area may have been perceived by the participants as threatening and may have caused them not to feel comfortable being forthright in their responses. This may have impacted the honesty of the responses from the participants. In sharing my intentions for this study with participants and providing the safeguards listed above, my hope is that the principals felt comfortable to share honest responses, rather than crafting an unrealistic narrative, but this nevertheless represents a limitation of this study. To mitigate the negative outcome of such perceptions, at the outset of each interview, I will explain to the participants my “motives and intentions, and the inquiry’s purpose” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 127) clarifying any concerns



they may have and ensure that I communicate that this study is not related to their employment with the district.

### **Summary**

This chapter included a description of qualitative research, specifically phenomenological study conducted. The section included the research approach, purpose of the study and researcher questions, a description of the study participants, the data collection procedures, ethical consideration, data analysis process, and finally, the delimitation and limitations of this study. In the next chapter, the focus will be on presenting the findings and data analysis.

## **Chapter 4: Findings and Data Analysis**

### **Introduction and Principal Profiles**

This phenomenological study seeks to examine the impact of school closures on the experiences of principals and their perception of their leadership identity as they navigate school closures at their district – in the capacity of either a principal whose campus closed, was slated to close, or as principals whose campuses received students from a closing campus. Utilizing semi-structured interviews, I sought to capture the lived experiences of these principals against the backdrop of school closures and to reach a better understanding of the meaning and knowledge they created in the process. This study was guided by one central question: What is the impact of school closures on principal leadership and identity?

Utilizing the theoretical framework of the wounded leader, the stories collected via the participant interviews allowed for the reconstruction of the lived experiences – school closures – providing participants with the opportunity to reflect and thus give meaning to the experience (Seidman, 2013). As Figure 4.1 depicts, the presence of a critical incident creates a wound, which then opens a path for the individual to examine what it means to be a leader (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowki, 2002).

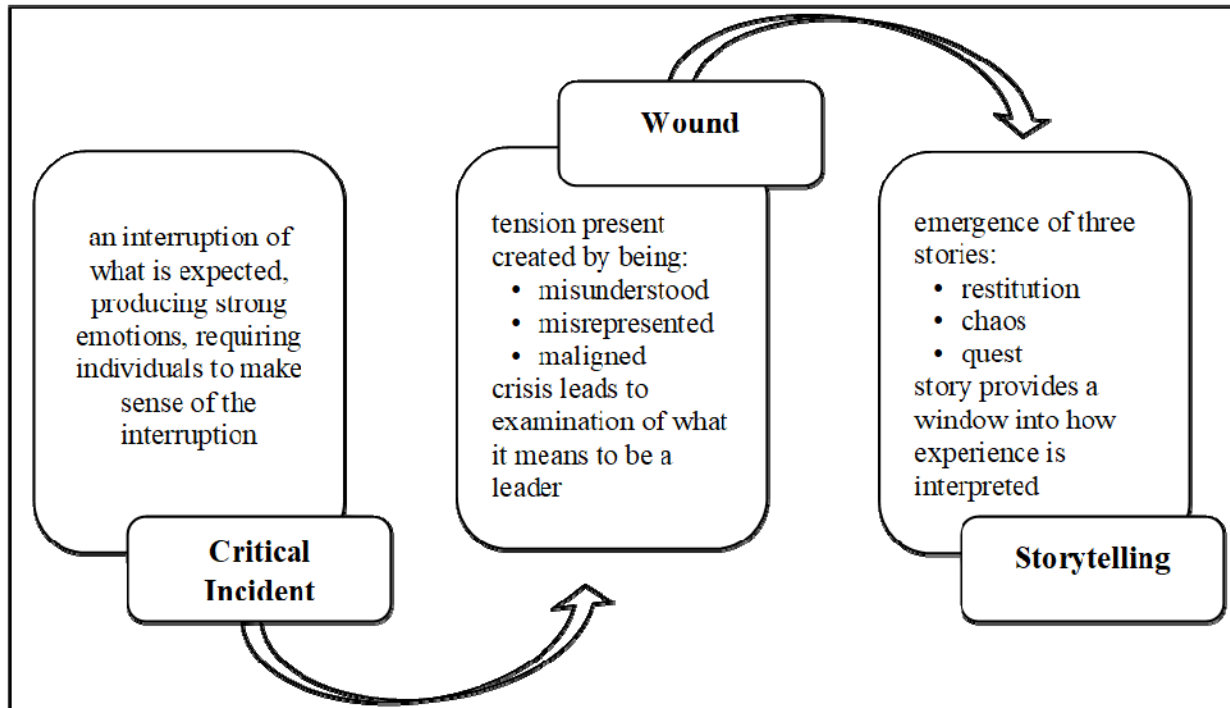


Figure 4.1: Wounded Leader Storytelling Framework  
(Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowki, 2002)

The examination is conducted via the retelling of the experience and in so doing, three types of stories emerge: restitution story, chaos story, and a quest story. These stories provide an opportunity for leaders to change their definitions of self and how they define and engage in leadership. In the retelling of the stories, three themes emerged and interconnect with the story the participants are creating for their experience. These themes will be explored below.

A total of three participants agreed to be interviewed for this study. Each participant was intimately involved with school closures. Before delving into the analysis of what stories emerged from each participant's interview, I begin with a profile of each participant. These profiles will aid in presenting each participant's story, help reveal how they made sense of the impact school closures had on their leadership and identity, and more importantly, will provide the reader with an opportunity to witness each participant's experience (Seidman, 2013). While each of these participants have an individual experience that is very much their own and worthy of being heard, their experiences are also part of a collective experience, school closures at a specific time and place. Together, they have over 60 years of educational experience.

## **Eva**

Eva began her career in education over 18 years ago. At a time when she was serving as an instruction coach at a campus, Eva was encouraged to seek her principal certification by her administrator at the time, who told her “I really think you would be good at being admin. You do a great job in trying to guide the teachers.” Prior to her then administrator’s suggestion, Eva had not considered seeking the principalship, but she described her administrator as someone who was interested in growing people. This moment marked the first step in her journey to the principalship.

Through the school closure process, Eva experienced this phenomenon both as a principal of a school – Magnolia Elementary – that received students from a closing school and as principal of a school – Jackson Elementary – that closed. For a short period of time, approximately 6 months, Eva served as principal of both schools simultaneously. She oversaw the day-to-day activities of both schools for about 3 months before the school year ended, while overseeing the closure of Jackson Elementary, and ensuring that Magnolia Elementary had everything in place to welcome both students and staff for the new academic year through the summer.

In describing Magnolia Elementary, Eva mentioned that despite being “located in a very nice neighborhood,” the demographics of the school include “a high number of low socioeconomic students and families,” including students who are bussed from a nearby public housing unit. In selecting three words to describe Magnolia Elementary, she chose family, creating opportunities, and loving community, sharing that:

I really strive for all of us to take in all the students as our own children and for us to be a family. Two as, I guess, creating opportunities because I also tell my staff that we have to really create opportunities for our students that they would otherwise not have and if they can’t have them at home then we need to provide those for them. And three, I think we're a very loving community because I think we all come together always to ensure that our

students get the best of not only academic instruction but also their socioemotional development.

Eva stressed working with her staff to build an environment where students have opportunities and love going to school.

In describing Jackson Elementary, Eva first recognized the short amount of time she spent working with that campus, but noted that despite both schools being located in the same geographic area, Jackson Elementary “did have a different culture, different expectations” from Magnolia Elementary. Describing the campus climate as “a little bit more defensive” and the teachers as “demoralized”, Eva stated:

[A] lot of the staff was upset because of the fact that [the campus] was going to close and because of the fact that they took away their administration and because of the fact that all these changes were happening without ... them having a say.

She also shared that the misunderstanding that positions were not assured resulted in the staff leaving including clerks, the librarian, nurses, and teachers. Subsequently, these positions were not filled, forcing the remaining employees “to put on many different hats to fill in those positions that were missing.”

Through this process, “the expectation of running the school plus the expectation of doing closing procedures, the budget, the materials, instructional materials, evaluations, facilities, and maintenance” and not letting students down by allowing them to witness the shutting down of their school was present in Eva’s mind as led the closing campus. She credits the support from the district, that included providing a handbook on school closures, regular meetings with central office staff from all departments including “facilities ... transportation ... budget and external funds” for being able to “get everything done.” Eva also described her absence from the closing campus due to running two schools, to the numerous meetings she had to attend related to school closure, and the typical requirements of running the school necessitated creating a similar support system at her campus. She shared:

[T]rying to build a culture and trying to do an inventory of all instructional materials and technology materials and employee records and attendance and I mean everything ... it took all of us ... it couldn't just be me. It was the entire staff working together to ensure that the closure was correct, that parents had the appropriate communication, and that all ARDs or ELL meetings, things like that took place ... there's no way that an administrator could do it by themselves. We really had to rely on our team to support both at the closing school and also at our school because when we were not here, the responsibility was with them.

Dealing with parents during this process proved to be the most challenging thing because “they were so used to doing things a certain way that no matter how much we communicate ... via the handbook, via call-outs, via flyers, via social media, etc.” there was a pushback and a holding on to this idea of “we didn’t do it like that, like this over there.” Despite this challenge, Eva reflected that “children are resilient” and shared that the students were not having any issues finding their place at the new campus. They were excited to attend the new school and once they arrived, they acclimated to the new campus culture.

In terms of the successes experienced during this time, Eva described that the addition of the teachers from Jackson Elementary to the staff at Magnolia Elementary created a more fruitful environment for the teacher’s professional growth.

[W]ith a bigger population, we have more sections, so teachers are able to share with more colleagues, because before it was like two teachers per grade level, and now we have four teachers per grade level. So now there's more ideas, there's more conversations that we can have. We're able to grow more because we have those opportunities [to ask each other] ... what did you do before or ... let's look at our data and see how can we better serve our students? ... [H]aving a bigger population and a bigger staff helps us grow because we see other points of view. And we see other ... ideas and we learn from one another[.] ... I think that that's really helping us build that culture or grow as a team.

In viewing the school process success through the lens of both student and teacher growth, Eva continued her efforts of helping guide teachers, as she had as an instructional coach before she was recommended for leadership.

## **Jane**

Jane began her career in education almost 24 years ago. Her journey to the principalship was also at the recommendation of her administrator who asked, “Hey, have you ever thought about [administration]?” At that time, she was beginning to think about it and this push by her administrator led her to pursue the master’s degree and principal certification. However, Jane shared that:

For a while I didn't use the new degree. I was a coach [and] I was enjoying it. Then when the right school came along it was, "Okay, let's go ahead and apply for that" and then I was assistant principal for 13 years. [I was] enjoying that and then I realized that my first graders were graduating high school and maybe it was another again really good principal that said, "Hey, you know what, I think you're ready, why don't you go apply? Why don't you take that next step?"

This is what eventually led Jane to serve as the principal of Jackson Elementary, a campus that the Lone Star ISD board voted to close.

The campus would be moving its students and staff to Magnolia Elementary. As a result, Jane experienced school closure as a principal of a school that closed. She also described her involvement with school closures as spanning over the course of 2 years and included being present at community meetings where another school community was being told their school was closing.

In describing Jackson Elementary, Jane described the neighborhood as an older community, both in terms of the age of the homes and its residents. She recalled the following:

I remember we had the homecoming parade for the high school and as we were watching everybody who came out to see the parade they were all like senior citizens, they were all

grandmas ... you kind of got this feeling like the area had aged. So, they weren't selling their homes, they weren't leaving them to children ... [A] lot of our neighbors were senior citizens and they always had their opinion of our school and our school zone. But no children in our school.

The three words that Jane felt described Jackson Elementary was a “wonderful little campus.” In describing the Magnolia Elementary, Jane noted: “The new campus ... is very similar. It was within half a mile of [Jackson Elementary] ... we probably had more homeowners in the new campus, but I think the neighborhoods were pretty similar to each other.”

In sharing her experience through the school closure process, Jane shared her main concern was taking care of people within the internal and external school community.

I think as far as the school closure process, there's a lot of not only following the plan of having community meetings and all that, but being able to answer questions, being able to reassure people that life is going to be ok ... through the whole thing, I want to take care of people. Intellectually you can look at numbers. You can look at data. You can listen to the presentation, and you know it's the right thing [school closure] ... as a leader, I want people to feel taken care of. I want them to feel like, ok somebody has got their back.

At the same time, Jane recognized that the decision to close Jackson Elementary was outside of her control, but that throughout the entire process, she “felt very supported by the school board and by the [central office] leadership ... if there was a question or if there was a concern, it was very easy to find an answer.” Jane stressed that the support “helped a lot.” She shared that the many members of her staff were asking:

What’s going to happen to me? What’s going happen? That kind of thing. So, getting human resources to come out [to the campus] and make sure they answered all their questions, even a couple times, [to] answer all your questions, that was number one. When students would bring it up, reassuring them that they're going to like their new



school. They're going to have teachers they know there. They're going to have friends there.

The support Jane described she had from central office administration helped her navigate the closure process at her campus.

Despite the support, there were challenges she faced with the school closure. In moving to the new school, Jane reflected that the biggest challenge would be for staff to find their “role in the new space.” She listed a series of questions to make her point, stating that teachers, students, and parents would be asking themselves: “How [do] you fit in? ...[H]ow can you make a difference in your new space? How can you impact it? Help build that new community?” As for the success of the school closure process, Jane shared that she “[r]uns into people [and] everyone seems happy in their new space and successful ...[t]hey’re alright at the end ... [t]hey lived through it.” Having the school community survive the process and being ok at the end was important for Jane.

## **Olivia**

Olivia began her educational career almost 19 years ago. In sharing her journey to the principalship, Olivia shared the following: “I had no intention of being a principal, at all. I loved the classroom and I loved learning how to get the student outcomes ... I always wanted to learn how to better serve my students.” This led Olivia to pursue a master’s degree with a concentration in reading, which enabled her to become an instructional coach, a role that allowed her to learn more about instruction and working with teachers, but also budgets. It was during this time that her administrators encouraged her to become an administrator, citing to her “knowledge and experience” as things that would serve her well in a leadership role. Even after receiving her principal certification, Olivia shared that she did not want to pursue the principalship and had put off applying for administrative positions. It was again, at the urging of her colleagues that she applied. Eventually, she became the principal of Rose Tree Elementary, a

campus that was on a list of schools the Lone Star ISD school board was considering closing, but eventually was allowed to remain open.

In describing Rose Tree Elementary, Olivia shared that the campus was predominantly Hispanic and a Title I campus, where all students received free lunch. The community was made up of “working families” and Olivia described the neighborhood as low-socioeconomic, with many families living in rental homes and apartments. There were a handful of more affluent families, but majority of the campus was made up of students living in poverty. She also described a culture where when the bell rang, the staff was quick to encourage the student to go home immediately. Olivia stated:

I didn't agree with that mentality because it's [the students'] community school. Things should be happening on this campus. If parents work until 5:00[pm], what can we do? We didn't have the [daycare]because it's a small campus ... we didn't have enough students who needed that afterschool care but we had to have other programs or things for them to be involved in on top of, it is our civic responsibility to help them become active members of a community.

In selecting three words to describe her community, Olivia chose: political, passionate and growth-mindset. In explaining why, she shared:

Political at this point [post-closure decisions]. Passionate. I mean, the teachers have been there forever, and they love their little school ... [t]hey're just passionate ... And I would say for the majority ... have a growth mindset. [T]hey want to learn more once you're that passion part, once you're on board with them, they're ready to change and grow. They do have a growth mindset if you have that relationship with them.

In describing her experience with the school closure process, Olivia described how she and other principals whose campuses were on the list of possible school closures were called in to a meeting at central office. The notice for the meeting was given the same day the meeting was held for and when they were invited to the meeting, the principals were not told what this meeting was going to be about. Olivia shared that when she arrived at the meeting,

you went in, and kind of sat there, and then in came your Associate Superintendents. And they had a PowerPoint. And they were explaining that at the end of the year, these were the closures. They didn't explain why. Of course, one of the biggest things we all knew was enrollment. And it was our job now to return to the campus and inform teachers and staff. Like right from this meeting, you were to go over there. And then to what do I do? How do I tell them? Like I don't even know. You're being considered for consolidation.

There were no talking points or instructions provided to the principals on how to tell their campus. She also shared that the only thing they were told to say was that this was an issue over low enrollment numbers and that there would be community meetings scheduled where questions could be asked. In letting teachers know, Olivia shared it was difficult to not get emotional, and that as she told them, she cried and in hindsight, she felt that this probably did not help the staff maintain “an open mind” about what was happening.

In detailing the biggest challenge, Olivia shared that it was understanding her role:

Again, the job description, it says works well under pressure [laughter]. Right, Okay. That's no big deal. But I think today, to read that statement, do you understand what that means? You almost died yourself, right? Like, don't show them you're hurting. Don't show [the staff, the community] you're sad. Don't show them you're disappointed. Because you represent a district ... I represent and I'm delivering messages to them in that regard. Because I have to work well under pressure.

In considering the success, Olivia shared that while being taken off the school closure list was a success for both her and the campus, at the end, she and the campus “were better for it”. On a more personal level, Olivia reflected:

I think I learned something about the principal's role, and that responsibility, I think, I am a stronger and better leader for having lived something like that. And in the day and age of charters and school choice. You understood that component of public education now, open enrollment and you study quick and you learned what it's going to take and ...

although you could do your job, anywhere, you wear your campus name with pride and you're always selling your school.

### **Findings Related to Leadership, Identity and School Closures**

Having each arrived at the principalship through the encouragement of someone else, as reflected in the profiles above, each of these participant's stories reflect additional similarities across their experiences with the school closure process. These similarities include a deep concern for the individuals they led and how this process would affect them. For the staff, the profiles above reflect a concern across the board on ensuring continued employment and a sense of belonging through this change. For the students, all three had concerns over safeguarding the educational continuity for students and their overall well-being through this process. Each of them discussed about making campus level decisions with the best interest of the students in mind. They also reflected on school closures being like a loss or death related type of trauma but stopped short of revealing more about this categorization of school closures and the impact they felt as a result. These similarities are based on just a cursory, descriptive summary of the data.

Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowki (2002) offer that to try to understand a wound, you must look at where it hurts. In looking at the data with this backdrop in mind, the following are the findings related to the general themes of leadership, leadership identity and school closures that address the research question of this study: what is the impact of school closures on principal leadership and identity?

### **Schools Are Closing, What Now?**

Each of the participants experienced school closures in different leadership contexts driven by what was happening at their campuses during this time. Two of the participants, Jane and Olivia, were principals at campuses that were on the list of potential closures when Lone Star ISD made the public announcement that its school board was considering school closures. One of these two campuses, Jackson Elementary, was closed because of the school board's unanimous vote. The second campus, Rose Tree Elementary remained opened. The third

participant, Eva, was leading Magnolia Elementary, a campus that received staff and students from Jackson Elementary. Shortly after the Lone Star ISD school board voted to close Jackson Elementary, the district assigned Eva as principal of both Magnolia Elementary and Jackson Elementary, leaving her to serve dual roles for a few months as principal of two campuses. It is important to note that these two campuses because of the school board decision were facing different outcomes and its communities faced different challenges and needs. Despite these different contexts, the school closure impacted all three participants in their ability to carry out their work and in terms of the authority they felt they had in this process.

In the case of all three participants, none of them were part of the decision-making process leading up to Lone Star ISD's public announcement that its board would be considering school closures. The decision to consider closings at that particular moment in time came as a surprise to all three. In the profile above, Olivia described how notice of the school closures was given to the principals, with little to no guidance as to how to notify their staff, leaving her to ponder as to the next steps she would take. She also expressed a desire for the district to explain why the decision was made and delineate expectations they had for her as a principal:

[E]ven when [school closure] is up for consideration ... help us to understand how these decisions were made. Like there's a lot happening there. But after you finish gathering your data, you finish doing your studies, ... and these are your summations and my conclusions. Okay, well back track me to ... we've been conducting studies for five years of growth rates ... whether that campus principal is capable of understanding the statistics or not, at least give me the benefit of the doubt [to] all of us that this is affecting. Here's where we're at. And I do think that those people that make those decisions need to sit with an administrator and [share] these are the things you're going to go and deliver ... walk us through the information process of telling a campus on top of explaining to us, "And our expectation from you is XYZ."

The absence of clear direction and an explanation as to why the district was taking these actions made it difficult for Olivia to carry out her responsibilities as the school leader. "[The

district] didn't explain why," and yet, she had to return to her campus to deliver the message that the school was on the list of potential school closures. Her lack of knowing the why or rationale for the district's actions created a situation where she could not answer questions from her own staff and community. In reflecting what she learned from the experience, she shared that she now knew to:

be well prepared because the parents and the teachers are going to ask these things, so be prepared, at least at a minimum say, let me write that question down and I'll have somebody reach out you or if you have note cards, here, go ahead and write your questions here with your contact information. I will get those to the appropriate people because at the principal's level, we don't know all the time why decisions are made or the depth of the study or research that went into why is this the best decision to make so let me at least have something to let them know I hear you. I don't know ... that's out of my decision-making realm but go ahead and write them down and I hope to get somebody to answer the question.

Despite this reality, the school community's expectations would remain that Olivia, as the principal of the campus, would hold all the answers. Yet, based on her lived experience, her formal authority during this time as it related to school closures was hollow. She did not have answers to the school community's questions.

While Olivia expressed these sentiments regarding the immediate next steps that needed to be taken following the district giving her notice that her campus might close, Eva expressed similar sentiments in reflecting about the school closure process: "If we didn't have that guidance, it would have been, you wouldn't have been able to do it. I wouldn't have been able to do it without that guidance." In the absence of guidance from the district, Eva expressed that it would have been difficult to carry out her responsibility of closing a campus, moving the staff and students to the new campus, while keeping her campus operational. For these participants, being able to figure out the next steps after the closure announcements was challenging. Despite being the school leader, the ability to carry out those responsibilities and answering the question

of what's next was at the forefront of these principals' minds. While externally, the school leader will be looked upon by the staff and community to answer questions, these leaders were faced with answering these questions for themselves and were unable to definitively do so.

As principals, the authority to run the school, the power to do the work needed was called into question because of the school closures. This situation created a tension between the role principals are expected to play and the powerlessness which they experienced through the school closure process. As Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowki (2002) posit,

Leadership lives are, for the most part, determined by role expectations. These roles often do not fit with the deeper personal needs of a leader. In times of crisis, questions of identity and role are usually heightened and move to the forefront. (p. 8)

The announcement of the school closures given to the principals was the moment of impact where the initial wounding occurred. Post-announcement, these principals experienced an uncertainty as to what to do next in their role as school leaders and how to usher the closure for their school community. This experience caused uncertainty in the principals' authority – both formal and informal - and power and as the next section explores further, divested the principal of decision-making authority.

### **Co-opting the Principalship**

The participant's interviews also reveal that whether by design or by accident, Lone Star ISD central office leadership co-opted the principalship through this process. This finding is tied to the loss of authority discussed above, but this is also more nuanced and is filled with tension around how the participants experienced this phenomenon. On the one hand, the divestment of their leadership role was welcomed as the participants expressed gratitude towards central office behaviors. At the same time, there was evidence of reconciliation or attempts to reconcile this divestment through shifting the reflection toward rational arguments for school closure and explaining that it was the best decision for students. This cognitive strategy served as a mask for the participants to hide any emotional byproduct of the district's abrogation of their leadership.

For example, Jane offered the following in describing how she experienced school closures.

[I]n general ... through the whole thing I want to take care of people. Intellectually you can look at numbers. You can look at data. You can listen to the presentation, and you know it's the right thing. So, I guess as a leader, I want people to feel taken care of. I want them to feel like ok somebody has got their back. But at the same time, this is, there are some things outside of you control ... I felt very supported by the school board and by the leadership. So that helped a lot. Where if there was a question or if there was a concern, it was very easy to find an answer. And so, I think that helped a lot. But I think I was very focused on taking care of others.

On the one hand, Jane expressed gratitude for the support she was receiving by the central office leadership and acknowledged not having control of some things and then reconciled this with focusing on taking care of the community. She also shared that, “decisions are made, it's not going make everybody happy, but I can ... we focus on the kids.” It was as if the trade-off for the district assuming some of principal’s authority was the participant’s ability to focus on the students.

Similarly, Olivia struggled with this same issue. During her interview, she shared that after she made the decision to advocate for her campus at a school board meeting, the district, “called [me] in and told me that’s not my place. That I am an employee of the district. I am not an employee [of the campus].” This was one example of how central office co-opted the role of the principal and in her interview, Olivia was bothered by this occurrence. She also described the following about the school closure decisions.

Those decisions are beyond me and my job is just to be obedient to whatever those decisions are. They had community meetings, but people came on the campus I think one time to speak to any parents that had questions, but I didn’t say anything at that meeting. But professionally, I just continued to trust the leadership on top.



She further described her role in answering questions from the community as lacking because she was not

in a position to have some influence or participate in those decisions to answer their questions ... [t]he bottom line is [as a campus administrator] you get told, you deliver a message, and you serve a district. I don't serve a campus.

At the same time, she reconciled these feelings as evidenced when she shared the success of the school closures by pointing out that at the end of the process, “everybody had a job. No administrator was left jobless. There [weren’t] demotions. Everybody stayed in the same position. So, you have to trust the system when they say, ‘We're going to take care of our people.’” Olivia opted to use the mask of rationality to hide behind from rather than to put her feelings out front and center.

Certain responsibilities, authority, and power resides with central office leadership and the same can be said of campus leadership. Between both, a shared responsibility to the community also exists. In this case, Olivia being admonished for her advocacy, her choice of words like “obedient” and “I didn’t say anything” to describe her experience reflect that absence of this relationship between the district and the campus and instead points to how the central office co-opted her leadership. There is no doubt that principals operate within a larger system made up of districts. Certain roles and responsibilities are relegated to district leadership and others to campus principals. There is a power dynamic constantly at play, but it should be a symbiotic relationship. What the data reflected in the experiences of these principals was the district co-opted the role of the principal. In so doing, divested these participants of their identity of the school leader, even if only momentarily. The impact of which is perhaps yet to be seen.

### **Absence of Emotions**

A third finding that resulted from this study was the absence of their own personal emotions in the retelling of their stories as they reflected on their experiences with school closure. When asked about the impact the school closures had on their leadership, the

participants responded with rational responses. All three participants referred to how their communities were processing school closures and couched these descriptions in emotions. While the participants did mention emotions when talking about the impact of the school closure process on their staff and family, speaking about the experience as a loss, and sharing that this experience was very hard, they stopped short of examining their own emotions as leaders. The exception was Olivia, who displayed more of a willingness to at minimum name how she was feeling. As they turned inward to reflect on their own emotions, Jane and Eva did not stray from maintaining a neutral emotional stance, while Olivia did express her personal emotions through this process.

Jane expressed that her school community was “shocked” at the news of the school closure. She focused her attention on reassuring staff they were going to be taken care of and that students would “like their new school,” messaging to the students that “[they were] going to have teachers they know there” and “they were] going to have friends.” When asked how this impacted her both personally and in a professional context, Jane shared that professionally, “I follow the rules. I think professionally, things have to progress. Things have to move ... I do think more about systems and organizations, and I guess I see a lot more bigger-picture things.” She shared that while she had knowledge about instruction, but through this process she learned about central office operations and its impact on the campus. In terms of the personal impact, she shared “I’ve been able to keep a little bit of a contact with some of the students and some of the faculty and things like that ... they’re alright at the end ... they lived through it.”

For Eva, she found that the staff at Jackson Elementary was “upset because of the fact that [the school] was going to close and because of the fact that they took away their administration and because of the fact that all these changes were happening without ...them having a say.” They were “defensive[,]” “demoralized[,]” and living in fear of losing their jobs. She also described that while the work related to administer the logistical aspects of the school closure was hard and “a lot of work ... it’s a lot more difficult when you’re talking to the parents because there’s feelings involved.” Some of the staff had been at the campus for 20 years or

more and Eva said the closing of the campus made the teachers feel like “losing your family member.” In reflecting on how this experience impacted her, Eva reflected that this was a stressful time, that is added to the stress she already felt. She also shared that “[she] grew a lot and ... learned a lot” through this process, specifically learning how to delegate.

Both Jane and Eva shared that they learned the importance of working as a team and describe the impact of the closures on them in rational terms. Olivia deviated from this and spoke to how the closure made her feel. It is important to note that Olivia also had a daughter at the campus at the time the closure was announced. She referenced several times throughout the interview that this dual role – that of the principal and of a parent – may have influenced how she processed the news of the school closure. The district leadership told Olivia “Don’t ever put your parent hat on when you walk in that building. You are the administrator ... don’t mix those two roles.” Olivia shared that her staff at first reciprocated the emotional state she was in which she described as feeling “devasted.”

I was a mess. I could not deliver the message without crying and feeling like it was the end of the world ... It was heartbreaking ... At the time, it was like a death. Like if [the school] dies, we die ... But then [the staff] came together. The staff was lit. They were ready to fight. They were, “No. Now what are we going to do” and, “We’re coming together,” and “This isn’t going to happen to us.” And you could feel that tension.

As a result of this experience, she felt “emotionally stronger” and “like, there's a time and a place, ... there are safe places” where emotions can be expressed. Once you do, you “go out there and lead your people with confidence. And it's okay to have a disheartening message, but still lead them strong through that.” In addition to growing emotionally, she also shared that she learned the “hierarchy” of leadership and to ask district leadership “how would you like me to proceed?” and by opening “those lines of communication” she was able to “better understand what this particular district was expecting in [the principal] role.” Olivia courageously removed her administrator mask and, in the interview, spoke about the emotional impact school closures had on her both as a person and as the administrator.

## Findings Related to Wounded Leader Framework

At the outset of this study, I proposed using the conceptual framework of the wounded leader and the three stories that result from the wounding experience - restitution, chaos, and quest – to analyze the interviews and locate the participants’ story in one of these three typologies. In classifying the participant’s experiences, it helps to illuminate how the principals were making sense of the wound and its impact on their leadership and identity. It is also important to note that the journey of wounded leader is not static and as such, the storytelling can be revisited multiple times and the story that emerges can differ each time as well (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). Within the storytelling itself, there will be one dominant story, but the story can weave in and out of all three types of stories during the retelling of the wounding experience is also possible (Ackerman & Maslin- Ostrowski, 2002). There can also be a rewounding that takes place. Figure 4.1: Wounded Leader Storytelling Framework is a visual depiction of how this framework operates and the fluidity present in the process of the act of recounting the story.

The three findings discussed above are related to the storytelling framework in that they both help identify the wound itself and shed light into the story that emerges for each participant. Within that story, there are lessons to be learned about leadership and identity. By telling a certain type of story, these school leaders are also telling their narrative truths as oppose to telling the truth of the story (Ackerman, & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). The act of storytelling is also a tool used for sensemaking (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002).

Table 4.1 visually provides a quick summary of the story each of the participants told about their experience with school closures. Two of the participants, Eva and Jane, shared stories of restitution in retelling their experience with school closures. One participant, Olivia, shared a chaos story as she shared her experience and in the process of sharing this story, she ultimately returned to the restitution narrative. In her retelling, there are moments where she veers into possibly moving in the direction of telling a quest story but reverts to a restitution story.

Table 4.1 Participants Current Story in the Narrative Framework

<b>Administrator</b>	<b>Restitution Story</b>	<b>Chaos Story</b>	<b>Quest Story</b>
Eva	X		
Jane	X		
Olivia		X	X

### **Restitution Story**

The restitution story is one where the storyteller acknowledges there is a crisis but anticipates a return to normal (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). Embedded in the restitution story is optimism (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Lenarduzzi, 2015). Restitution stories recount the critical incident and describe how this crisis is handled, but the wound is covered and protected by the leader and at that point of their journey, is segregated from their identity as leaders (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002).

All three participants acknowledged the school closure as a wounding experience for themselves and their school community and shared that it was a traumatic experience. The focus of their stories, however, was on carrying out the closure process. Eva and Jane maintained a positive disposition in their retelling of the story. They praised the district support they received and were focused on getting the job done. At the end, both made reference to everyone being okay and shared the positive growth they experienced as a result of the closure. Jane’s lens of leadership expanded to include operational duties and she now looks at leadership from an operational view and thinks about system. Eva learned the importance of delegating and saw the instructional benefits of the staff and students from Jackson Elementary join her community at Magnolia Elementary:

So we're going to continue to grow so this is just one step but I feel that as long as we have that sense of family as long as we have that sense of, "We're here and the students are our utmost priority and all the decisions that are made are to better them, their

academics, their social-emotional development to really know and live our mission and vision, we will continue to grow," We'll continue to grow regardless of the obstacles.

Eva's sentiment depicted the optimism common to the restitution story, as well as the focus on the outcome, which is another characteristic of the restitution story (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002).

The themes that surfaced from the data also align to the restitution story. In the absence of emotions in their storytelling, Eva and Jane sheltered their wound and kept it away from their sense of self. By having the district co-opt their leadership and rationalizing this decision by turning their focus to how this was the best decision for students, they remained optimistic and anticipated an ending. This also placed the focus on their role as fixers, even though the decision-making of the school closure process was held by the district level. In the restitution story, leaders will see themselves as fixers, even if they themselves are not the ones who are doing the fixing (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002).

### **Chaos Story to Quest Story**

The chaos story, as opposed to the restitution story, assumes that the situation will end in failure (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). A leader who finds themselves in a chaos story, sees themselves as voiceless and does not have the capacity to reflect (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). These types of stories are often equally difficult to share and hear (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). The quest story allows the storyteller to capitalize on the wound, fully feeling the suffering, and finds meaning in the experience (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). Unlike the restitution story, leaders who tell a quest story do not expect a return to the reality that existed prior to the wounding (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). The wound instead is transformed into learning and growth and result in changing the leader. Chaos stories can become restitution stories, restitution stories can birth chaos stories, and sometimes the narratives become quest stories (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). This was the case with Olivia.

Olivia began her story as one of chaos. She was the only participant to share the emotional impact school closures had on her as a person and as a leader. As described herself as being “a mess” and spoke to not being able to keep herself from crying as she told her staff Rose Tree Elementary may close. She and the staff were devastated, heartbroken, and she equated possibility of closure with death. At different moments in this experience, Olivia asked herself questions such as: “What now?”; “How could I turn my back on [school] at this time?”; “Should you always fight [school closure]?” Olivia vacillated between doing what she felt was right for the school community and what the district was asking her to do instead. At these moments, she was situating her experience in a chaos story. As she reflected, she said “I had to learn ... that you are true to yourself and your leadership style in spite of a campus.” In reconciling the tension principals often feel between district allegiance and campus loyalty (Lenarduzzi, 2015), Olivia aligned to the district and reconciled this by speaking to the growth, the transformation which she experienced in her own leadership.

You're there to do a job and you're there to do a job under this plan for kids or this. And you can do it anywhere. Really, you can build systems anywhere ... understanding that about yourself and kids and you can build those relationships but it was like, if there's no [Rose Tree Elementary] ... all of the good things about personally myself or those individuals were gone. Very narrow-minded that we could only do that in this building. But I did believe that at that time. ... You have to know the things that are you, in spite of location.

She continued:

These are my core values. I believe in PLCs. I believe in data-driven decisions. I believe in looking at the whole child outside of STAAR testing ... These are the things we believe in. That's always there, and we've learned how to better advocate for ourselves in regard to student enrollment, in regard to how do we make our campus a great place to be physically. We were learning how to meet those needs and resources. Always fighting

that possibility but I guess too personally, in hindsight should you fight that? You fight it for the community and the people. But should you always fight it?

Olivia also shared that she is stronger and now understands what the district expects from her. Moving forward, she also spoke about how she would perform as a leader with better alignments to these expectations. Remaining true to the spirit of storytelling, Olivia, despite her growth, continues to ask the difficult questions and while she has experienced a quest journey, by continuing to engage in reflexivity, she has the potential to continue to learn and transform herself through this wounding experience. The same can be said of Jane and Eva.

### **Summary**

This chapter contains the results of the analysis of the data collected in this study. A total of 3 participants were interviewed for this phenomenological study. The interview questions were structured to gain an understanding of the impact of school closures on principal leadership and identity. The data analysis revealed three general themes around leadership, identity, and school closure. First, upon the notification their campuses would be closing, the principals were left wondering what now? They experienced a lack of authority and powerlessness as they attempted to navigate through this experience. Second, the principals experienced the central office administration co-opting their leadership, which on the one hand they were thankful for particularly given the challenges of navigating through the school closure process. At the same time, there was some evidence of rationalizing this experience by couching the decision to close as the best thing for students. Finally, the data revealed that in the retelling of their experiences, two of the three principals stayed away from their own emotional experience through this process, briefly sharing instead the loss felt by their students, staff, and community. Through the data analysis, the type of story the principals constructed in telling their stories was also uncovered. Two of the principals shared restitution stories. The third principal shared two types of stories. At the beginning of the interview, she recounted a chaos story. As the interview



continued, the data revealed a switch from the chaos story to a quest story that described the transformation she underwent through the wounding experience.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings and Implications**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the impact school closure has on principal leadership and leadership identity. This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings as related to the wounded leader framework and literature on school leadership and identity. The chapter concludes with a discussion around the implications for practice, potential areas for future research, and a general conclusion.

### **Summary of the Results**

Principal leadership and leadership identity were impacted by school closures in the following ways. At the outset of the closure announcement, the participants in this study had to figure out the next steps, and in doing so, experienced a lack of authority in their roles and powerlessness as they attempted to navigate through this experience. The participants also experienced the divestment of the principalship as central office administration co-opted their leadership role by controlling what was said and how things were handled. In response to this, the participants were grateful but also turned to rationalizing the experience by speaking to how the decision was best for students and how at the end, no one was harmed. Finally, the data revealed that in the retelling of their experiences, there was an absence of their own emotional experiences, except in the case of one of the three principals.

The data analysis also surfaced the three types of stories being told by the participants. For two of the principals, they shared a story of restitution, describing the school closure experience as culminating in a return to normal, where any issues that surfaced throughout the process were resolved. One of the principals began by telling a chaos story, where she described the experience of the school closures as a situation mired with uncertainty and the potential for complete failure. Mid-way through interview her narrative changed reflecting a story of quest, where she transformed into a new type of leader. In the section that follows, I interpret the findings focused on what these three themes and the types of stories the participants shared

revealed about the impact of school closures on the leadership and leadership identity of this study's participants.

## **Interpretations of Findings**

### **Theme 1: Schools Are Closing, What Now?**

I labeled the first theme with the question that captured what these principals asked themselves when the school closures were announced: schools are closing, what now? Across the board, all three participants spoke about needing to figure out the next steps, whether it was what to do immediately after the school closures were announced, or what to do to facilitate the closure of the campus. The question these participants were left asking was very much centered on identifying actions that needed to be taken. As the literature around leadership demonstrates, regardless of the type of leadership, figuring out what to do or how to accomplish a goal is part of what school leaders are expected to do (citation). The Texas Principal Certificate Standards listed in Table 1.1 also point to the expectation that principals know how to carry out actions in and around a series of performance categories: school culture; leading learning; human capital; executive leadership; strategic operations; and, ethics, equity and diversity (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018). These standards are replete with action verbs (e.g., facilitates, models, develops, creates, analyzes, promotes, coaches, etc.) pointing to the expectation placed upon principals to know both what to do and how to lead school communities. Yet, the experience of school closures left the participants in this study at a loss when deciding what to do next, rendering them powerless and unable to perform the expected role of a principal, at least momentarily and before the district stepped in to help them through the process. This state of loss created the wounding for the principals. According to Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (2002), because leadership lives are largely impacted by role expectation, which is often not aligned to the leader's personal needs, an opportunity is created by the crisis for leaders to question their identities and roles. In Chapter 4, there is evidence that these three participants found themselves grappling with questions related to their leadership identity and the

expectations the community had of them as principals during this school closure process. This questioning centered again around action that is expected from school leadership.

There is a tension that exists among those who rally behind public schools and those who support the charter school movement and privatization of public education that is present in the academic arena, among practitioners, and in the community-at-large (Meier & Gasoi, 2017). Similarly, there is a tension present between a district's directive, e.g. the closing of a school campus, and the desires of a community, namely keeping the campus open, as was the case with the school closures at Lone Star ISD. While these propositions in the real world may not be as black and white as they are presented here, the complexities in these opposing positions and how a principal navigates such situations are often elements that are not perceived by the public, particularly if there is strong opposition to the closures. For the three principals in this study, as they engaged in leading the school closures, we see the tension of these two opposing sides reflected in the nuances as the principals negotiated their positions between the district's decisions and the community's wishes. Adding complexity to this process, was the fact that the principals had internal knowledge that they did not know how to navigate the school closures, and yet they had to display an external persona reflecting that their authority, their leadership remained intact. While not expressly stated in the interviews, the questioning of their professional identity is intertwined with their questioning of "What now?" and with the uncertainty they faced around their authority and power. In many ways, this expression of "What now?" served as the figurative mask the principals hid behind so that they could operate their formal roles as principals for the school community and be seen as legitimate to the outer community, despite having internally surrendered their power.

## **Theme 2: Co-opting the Principalship**

The second theme that emerged from the data analysis was a co-optation of the principalship by the school district and the reconciliation of this act through rationalizing why it occurred and stressing how this was the best decision for students and pointing to the fact that no

one was harmed in the process and as a result. The co-optation entailed central office administration taking over the school leader's role and how they carried out that leadership as it related to school closures. While the district and campus leaders both participated in the school closures process, for example through the community meetings held, the principals were removed from any decision-making process. This removal was exemplified in Olivia's expression of frustration in not receiving an explanation on why decisions around school closures had been made, her description of principals not being part of that decision-making power, and even her frustration of this lack of participation in that decision-making process.

While not overtly stated by the participants in the study, a possible explanation for why the principals reconciled the district co-opting their campus leadership with gratitude for the support, going as far as to state that in the absence of this support, the school closures would have not been possible, is the idea that principals are in a constant state of straddling their allegiance to the campus and their allegiance to the district. In a context where school closure occurs in the presence of strong opposition from the teachers and the communities being affected, the allegiance to the campus and the district is a dichotomous relationship that exists in a state of constant tension. In this study, all three participants described the presence of such tension. Research suggests that while school closures may present an ethical dilemma for principals, legally, principals are bound to fulfill their obligations to the district, not the school community or community at large (Strike as cited in Lenarduzzi, 2015). Through their telling of stories of restitution, Eva and Jane arguably understood the dual roles and understood the need to carry out the district's goals and objectives. Olivia, on the other hand, learned of this obligation by being admonished by central office administration for speaking publicly at a school board meeting on behalf of her school community. She was directly told that in the role of the principal, the lens she had as a parent, and the needs of the campus came second; she was employed by the district and it was district first.

In the Texas Principal Certificate Standards, principals are charged with the performance standards of executive leadership and strategic operations (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018).

In each of these broad categories, we find the following language with regard to what the principals should be able to do, respectively: 1) “frames, analyzes, and creatively resolves campus problems using effective problem-solving techniques to make timely, high-quality decisions” (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018); and, “collaborates with district staff to implement district policies and advocates for the needs of district students and staff” (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018). The impact of school closures on these principals resulted in the district co-opting their leadership, and perhaps inadvertently leaving them unable to display their ability to meet all the standards, and in particular the standards listed here. This finding left me wondering if school closures are the type of critical incident where principals can be exempted from carrying out the duties enumerated in the principal standards. Arguably, rendering principals unable to carry out the standards set for their profession is not a practice we should aspire to engage in. While principals are bound to the contractual obligations of carrying out the district’s mandates, are they to expect reciprocity in this legally binding relationship?

This idea of no harm done, is something that all three principals expressed. For Eva and Jane, this was a critical component of the restitution stories they shared which were shrouded in optimism and an ending that presented a solution to the crisis faced (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002). For Olivia, this optimistic no harm done perspective was also present as she mentioned that at the end, no one lost their jobs. What surprised me the most about this perspective was that all three participants also spoke about the emotional response the school community had to school closures. There were comparisons to this experience being like a death. Yet, the reconciliation of the co-optation of their principalship, for each of these participants was a transformation of stories of loss and mourning to stories of gratitude and acceptance to some extent, because the decision, as interpreted by them, was for the best interest of the student. This notion of the best interest of the student can be considered yet another mask school leaders wear to ease the pain felt on the inside as a result of these critical incidents. Masking enables principals to present themselves as the leader the outside world expects.

### **Theme 3: Absence of Emotions**

The absence of emotions in the stories of the school closure process shared by 2 of the 3 principals was surprising and based on existing research, may also be the most meaningful finding. At its core, leadership is about human relationships. It is impossible to subtract the emotional component from human relationships. Yet, research on school leadership shows “emotional honesty [is] a “luxury” that most leaders ... simply cannot afford, not even with themselves” (Beatty, 2007, p. 57). Principals are “keenly aware of the professional imperative to remain emotionally hidden, calm, and rational at all times” (Beatty, 2007, p. 57). School closures, by their very nature are highly emotional experiences. When we couch school closures as critical incidents, we know from the literature that as a result of the wounding experience, school leaders can feel fear, helplessness, isolation, loneliness, powerlessness, sense of losing control, and vulnerability (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004). Crises in general can “exacerbate specific, different types of fears that characterize leadership experiences: fear of failure, fear of change or stagnation, fear of being criticized, fear of being dismissed, and fear of losing one’s professional identity” (Berkovich, & Eyal, 2015, p. 137).

Yet, except for one of the principals, the participants in this study did not delve into their emotional experience as a result of school closures. At best, they cursorily mentioned how the school closure felt like a loss and a death. These references to emotional responses were located more within the principals’ descriptions of the school community’s response rather than in their experience as the principal. Olivia, on the other hand, through sharing a chaos story, did share the emotional response which was very much aligned with the research. She even advocated for her campus and in doing so displayed attributes of a social justice leader (Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011, p. 648). Eventually though, in her storytelling, she questioned whether the fight for her school was worth it and concluded that if she had to do it again, she would know what the district expected from her and would lead accordingly. This was her story of quest, of how her leadership transformed, but it did not align with the research around the emotional responses

resulting from a wounding experience. It does however align to the research around keeping emotions at bay in the profession of leadership.

While I cannot say indefinitely why there was an absence of emotion, I can surmise that it may have been as a result of the highly contentious nature of the Lone Star ISD school closures, which may have left the principals feeling uncomfortable speaking about their own emotional response with me, a removed third party. It may also have to do with how leaders are indoctrinated into a district's culture and the culture of school leadership in general. If I am being optimistic, I can also imagine a case where these principals were still processing the school closures and found themselves at a loss to name the emotions they felt as a result of this experience. Regardless of why there was an absence of emotions, it is the impact to schools and students that makes this a critical finding.

As we see in the Texas Principal Certificate Standards (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018), there is a strong emphasis on school leaders serving as instructional leaders. There is an entire performance standard dedicated to “leading learning” (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018). Elements seen in the performance standard of school culture also contains components of instructional leadership. As of September 1, 2019, Texas also began requiring principal candidates to take a new examination called the Performance Assessment for School Leaders (PASL) which focused on assessing the candidates' ability to serve as an instructional leader (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b). The Texas Principal Evaluation and Supports System (T-PESS) is the fairly new principal evaluation system for Texas principals that is focused on improving a principal's ability to serve as an instructional leader as well (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-c).

Instructional leaders are focused on teaching and learning, and on improving student learning outcomes (Ovando & Cavazos, 2004; Reardon, 2011). Ensuring academic achievement of all students is also at the center of this type of leadership (Ovando & Cavazos, 2004). To serve as instructional leaders, principals need to understand how to facilitate the work of collaborative teams at their campuses to engage in collaborative inquiry in and around teaching and learning.



Research shows that “by re-culturing for conditions of social and emotion safety, schools can encourage creativity, bold self-critique, rigorous practices and genuine collaborative inquiry” (Beatty, 2007, p. 48). An environment that is founded on these conditions also enables teachers to better serve students in the classroom. “The professional domain of the classroom is emotionally sensitive territory for teachers. Understandably, sensitivity to these emotion matters is foundational to effective instructionally focused leadership” (Beatty, 2007, p. 50). Creating environments where teachers are safe to express emotion requires the presence and cultivation of trust.

The principal is the deciding factor in the cultures of schools. Teacher openness to new learning and creativity in the classroom are connected to the sense of social emotional and professional safety that engenders the willingness to trust. Understanding trust involves an appreciation of emotional risk. (Beatty, 2007, p. 47)

The implication of the absence of emotions in describing the school closure process is that the principals in this study were afraid to take an emotional risk. If this fear of showing emotions spills into how they enact their leadership, the potential harm to students is far beyond learning and experiencing academic achievement.

When school experiences teach children that adults do not trust each other, and they find that they fell vulnerable to mistreatment, they can become hardened and resigned to the inevitability of abuses of power, and more likely to abuse power themselves. This inadvertently saps the whole social system of hope for renewal and sustainability. (Beatty, 2007, p. 45)

The deep impact and long-term consequences of student witnessing the lack of emotions in principals and as an extension, the lack of trust between principals and staff, is detrimental not only to their experience in K-12 systems, but to how they will navigate the world. This also shows that leadership matters but more importantly that “[e]motion matters in educational leadership because leaders, teachers and learners understand and enact their roles of subordination and domination significantly through learned emotional expressions and silences”

Zorn & Boler, 2007, p.148). In this respect, the absence of emotions is a critical finding in this study that deserves further examination.

### **Storytelling: Restitution Story and Chaos to Quest Story**

The findings around the types of stories these school leaders told about their experience with school closures aligns to the work of Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski (2002). In experiencing wounding through a critical incident, leaders are presented an opportunity to engage in self-reflection, reexamine their leadership, and potentially redefine their leadership identity. This process can be revisited over time, providing an opportunity for the story to evolve, resulting in a new cycle of growth for the principal. The critical component is the self-reflection piece.

In school leadership, “emotional silence is regularly taken to be synonymous with professionalism” (Beatty, 2007, p. 51). “Creating opportunities for teachers and leaders to take us into their inner worlds” is one strategy to “break the silence” (Beatty, 2007, p. 51). To do this we need opportunities for principals to engage in self-reflection. The Texas Principal Certificate Standards make one reference to reflection under the performance category of executive leadership stating that the principal “reflects on his or her practice, seeks and acts on feedback, and strives to continually improve, learn, and grow” (19 Tex. Admin. Code §241.15, 2018). There is no further guidance as to how this reflection is achieved or the necessary components needed to create the space to conduct the self-reflection. While the importance of self-reflection is recognized in the standards, research also shows the following:

‘[S]elf-reflection’ involves externalities and actions as opposed to any deep probing of one’s inner essence for, as John Gardner (1965) once observed, ‘More often than not we don’t want to know ourselves, don’t want to depend on ourselves, don’t want to live with ourselves. By middle life most of us are accomplished fugitives from ourselves’ (p.13). (Lumby & English, 2009, p. 110)

Yet, “[t]he capacity for connection with others depends heavily on the quality of connection one has with oneself” (Beatty, 2007, p. 59). This produces a conundrum between the identity work, emotions, self-reflection, and the production of storytelling. The willingness to engage in self-reflection, to access the emotions, and to tell a story that produces possibility for growth and transformation requires holding up a mirror to oneself and engaging in honest dialogue but some research indicates that this process is often rejected. By continually providing principals the spaces to engage in storytelling around critical incidents, such as school closures, we can diminish the possibility of rejecting authentic self-reflection, counteract the rejection emotions in leadership, and provide opportunities for principals to continue to learn and grow.

While the principals’ stories in this study match the typology presented in the work of Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski (2002), it is important to also remember that the lives and the leadership of Eva, Jane, and Olivia continued. This study captured a snapshot, a moment in time of their leadership, reflecting how at that moment, they perceived the impact of school closures on their leadership and leadership identity. These participants are not frozen in time and as such, are continuing to evolve as leaders and whether they knowingly and purposefully are engaging in reflexivity, they are being impacted by other experiences resulting some type of growth, such that if they were to reflect back on the school closures, we could see a shift in their stories or they may be inclined to tell completely different stories.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study raise practical implications at several different levels related to school leadership: policy makers, principal preparation programs, school districts, and school leaders. All these levels are interconnected and as such, these levels should also reflect alignment in their approach to school leadership.

### **Implications for Policy**

Practical implication exists for policy makers, who are responsible for establishing the standards, assessments, and evaluation tools for principals in Texas. As such, they need to be

aware of how school leaders are impacted by school closures and critical incidents. Texas Principal Certificate Standards are codified in the Texas Administrative Code §241.15. During the 82<sup>nd</sup> legislative session, Senate Bill 1382 was passed, directing the Texas Education Agency to develop a new appraisal system for school principals and corresponding standards. (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-c). What emerged was an appraisal system focused on instructional leadership, coupled with a new required performance assessment aligned to creating instructional leaders. Since the standards and assessments for principals in Texas are created by the legislature, it is important for these policy makers to be aware of the impact school closures and critical incidents have on school leaders. This would provide them an opportunity to incorporate a self-reflection piece into the standards and evaluation system, resulting in leadership who are better prepared to deal with critical incidents.

Policy is not developed in a vacuum. The implications of these findings for districts as an entity and school leaders alike are to become more engaged in the policy-making process. This can be accomplished by joining professional organizations that do the work of informing policy makers or through individual advocacy by talking to local legislators and/or by testifying at the legislative committees when legislation that impacts school leadership is being considered.

More broadly, this study has the potential to inform future state and local policies intended to guide school closures. Ultimately, the opportunity to better prepare principals and create policies that address critical incidents such as school closures will allow campuses to better serve students and communities.

### **Implications for Principal Preparation Programs**

A better understanding of the needs of principals in this context provides opportunities for principal preparation programs to produce school leaders who are better prepared to lead school communities through school closures and critical incidents in general. It also enables programs to prepare future leaders to identify the emotions in leadership, utilize emotions to better address the needs of those they lead, and to work through the emotions to experience

professional growth. “School Leadership preparation program designs need to address this social/emotional territory in order to develop healthy resilient leaders who will not only survive but also thrive in the role” (Beatty, 2007, p. 49). Adding components of this emotions work to the curriculum used in principal preparation programs to provide future leaders with the skills necessary to do this work would result in school leaders better equipped to handle critical incidents. Principal preparation programs should also consider incorporating coursework around critical incidents and more specifically, school closures. While the participants in this study felt that nothing could prepare leaders for school closures, exposing future principal candidates to what the research says about school closures and critical incidents would at a minimum provide them with a reference point when they encounter critical incidents in the future.

One way to provide candidates in a principal preparation program an opportunity to reflect on what they would do when faced with a critical incident would be incorporating the use of case studies. These case studies could simulate conditions faced in critical incidents such as school closures. Case studies reflecting the tension present in these contexts and the ethical dilemmas, would provide future principal candidates an opportunity to think through their responses and examine the consequences of the decisions they anticipate they would make. Incorporating role playing conversations principal candidates would have with students, staff, and community around critical incidents would also provide an opportunity to build a set of skills such as communication and advocacy for these future leaders to continue to grow through their leadership careers. Within this context, providing students an opportunity to share and examine the emotions raised by such case studies and role playing would also allow principal candidates to engage in reflexivity. The Texas Principal Certification Standards provide an entry point to the skills principal preparation programs should ensure principal candidates acquire, but as the findings of this study suggest, there is a need to go beyond these standards.

## **Implications for Districts**

Similarly, school districts need to take a proactive approach in training current school leaders in dealing with critical incidents, and specifically school closures. “Realizing that school closures generate controversy, districts need to be cognizant of the principal’s circumstances” (Lenarduzzi, 2015, p. 255). While it may seem easier to co-opt the principalship, districts would benefit from engaging school leadership through the school closure decision-making process and collaboratively walk through the experience together, providing touchpoints for reflection. Providing these opportunities would require districts to develop systems around decision-making processes, have clear and well-defined role expectations for central office administrators, and define the role principals play in their district. Districts would also need to have a vision, mission, and goals that they can anchor to as they conduct the business of operating a school system and that are communicated and understood by everyone in the organization. This would help create district cultures that are conducive to the adults in the organization learning and growing and create spaces where district and campus leaders are willing to take risks and engage in the organization as whole human beings. In many ways, this work replicates what we expect and ask principals to do for school campuses.

Creating targeted professional development around critical incidents and school closures is another implication of the findings of this study for school districts. Investing in quality and meaningful professional development opportunities outside of the required training sessions would create a cadre of school leaders ready to face any challenge. This would benefit the school community, but also the districts. To be able to provide these types of professional development opportunities, districts must be perceptive about the needs of their principals. Just as principals impact teacher emotional well-being, the actions of the district can impact principal emotional health. By providing professional development around these issues, districts can manage conflict and mitigate adverse effects on the personal well-being and professional ability of administrators, and of contentious decisions such as school closures.

Exploring the impact of the supervisory relationship between central office administrators and principals and better defining the expectations and goals of those relationships is important. While it is important to provide support to principals during school closures, it is equally important to ensure principals feel ready to tackle such critical incidents on their own. A preemptive approach from districts would yield better outcomes. Principals should be supported through critical incidents but not at the cost of surrendering their leadership roles.

### **Implications for School Leaders**

In the principal role, school leaders will undoubtedly encounter critical incidents, possibly in the form of school closures, and as a result experience wounding. The findings of this study suggest that tapping into the emotional response caused by the wounding is a necessary component of professional growth. The most critical implication for principals is that regardless of whether they were prepared to handle the wounding in their principal preparation programs or by their districts, principals need to find the courage and face the emotions that result from the wounding head on. Emotions are a part of human nature and principals do not shed their humanness upon the arrival of the principal role. This implication is not intended to dismiss the complexity of school leadership and the multitude of factors that influence how leadership is enacted, but rather the findings of this study are an invitation for principals to engage in self-reflection, share their stories of wounding, and to remain open to the evolutionary nature of leadership.

Principals have been characterized as both manager and leaders.

Management is described as being an orientation for action and is based on a "how to" philosophy which takes the form of a science of administration. Thus, management has become associated with positivistic administration theory. Leadership, in contrast, is described as being a reflective and ethical practice in that it is perceived to focus on the people within the organization and the culture created by the actors involved. Its foundations reside in administration as a reflective art. (Duffie, 1991, p. 5)

Thinking about leadership as an ethical and reflective art requires principals to commit to engaging in long-life learning. Even with the time constraints, seeking opportunities to learn and grow their leadership craft is important. Seeking out mentors who can hold them accountable as they help them grow is also another way to introduce opportunities to engage in reflexivity. At the core of critical incidents are often ethical challenges. Principals must be committed to personifying leadership.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study on the implication of school closures on principal leadership and leadership identity resulted in what I believe are early but valuable findings. My initial recommendation for this study would be to return to the participants for further reflection on the school closure process and to cast a wider net on participants by expanding the participation criteria to include additional districts. The inclusion of other parties involved, such as teachers, parents, students, central office administration in school closures would also be important and meaningful work. These additional perspectives on the school closure experience would help tell a complete story and there would be opportunities to see how decisions and actions made by one group impact the rest of the groups. Branching off from this study, I can also see posing a different set of research questions that focus on the emotional impact of school closures.

The results of this study suggest that additional research is needed on the intersection of school leadership and identity formation both in general and in the context of critical incidents, including school closures. There is a need to further examine how principals think about and form their leadership practices and the tools they use to create their professional identities and how they relate and interact with the school community through an intersectional lens. There is a shift that occurs in moving from a teacher role to an administrator role that extends beyond the professional realm. Examining the development and creation of principals' personal identities and the role personal identity plays in leadership practices, when facing critical incidents is also needed. Given the increasing wounding opportunity that exists in today's schools that includes



not only school closures, but accountability, school improvement, and most recently teaching and learning through a pandemic, that will result in wounding, additional research on the emotions involved in leadership is needed.

Another recommendation for future research is the use of alternative theoretical frameworks. Exploring how principals are conceptualizing their experiences in the context of school closures could also be examined using critical theories. There is a power dynamic at play in the findings of this study that were not explored in depth. Utilizing critical theory would be one approach that could result in informing researchers and practitioners about the impact critical incidents have on leadership, and the power dynamic between principals and the school community, and principals and central office.

Exploring whether gender influences how school closures and critical incidents impact principals is another area of potential research. The participants in this study were all women, but this aspect of their leadership was not examined. However, work that examines the role gender plays in wounding experiences and the use of emotions in leadership could provide important insights to the field of educational leadership. Utilizing a critical feminist perspective would potentially yield some interesting findings as well.

Research that focuses on the impact of ethnicity in school closures and leadership is also critical. While not explored in this study, in this context, the school district did serve a predominantly Hispanic student population and two of the three participants were Hispanic. The impact of these characteristics also needs to be explored. “Like an electrical current running through water, race has a way of filling space even as it remains invisible” (Ewing, 2018, p. 10). Research that unveils the presence and impact of race in critical incidents could move the field of leadership to meet the needs of a changing demographic in our K-12 systems.

Given the participants’ absence of emotions in their storytelling, I would also recommend advocacy and participatory frameworks that would invite the participants into the research. Similarly, utilizing a case study method might also uncover those emotions crucial to school leadership and leadership identity formation. By spending more time with study participants and

cultivating deeper relationships, the willingness to be more forthcoming about the emotions endured during critical incidents and the aftermath of the wounding may increase, leading to a richer data set.

Finally, future research could also focus on the district as an organization. Research shows that highly bureaucratic organizations can become iron cages, where there is a deep depersonalization, effectively excluding emotions from the “execution of official tasks” (Max Weber as cited in Beatty, 2007, p. 49-50). This wider lens could provide a way to examine leadership at all levels within a school district and provide an understanding as to the absence of emotions, the way which critical incidents are handled at different levels, and the wounding that is experienced by both the individuals within the organization and the organization itself. With many questions left unanswered around the impact of school closures and critical incidents on leadership and leadership identity, researching this issue from an organizational level might produce some answers that point to the interconnectedness of school systems.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to examine the impact of school closures on school leadership and leadership identity. Specifically, this study focused on one research question: What is the impact of school closures on school leadership and leadership identity? The school closure was treated as a critical incident that resulted in wounding the principal. The findings revealed three themes that answered how these principals were impacted by school closures: 1) schools are closing, now what?; 2) co-opting the principalship; and, 3) absence of emotions. The principals, through their storytelling, framed their experiences by sharing stories of restitution and a narrative that included both a chaos and quest story. The impact on these findings is not only relevant to school leadership and identity, but has repercussions for staff, students, and districts alike.

As a novice researcher and a long-time K-12 practitioner, the opportunity to add to the existing research on school leadership through the stories these three principals shared and to

utilize the findings to improve school systems is a key component of why I chose to engage in this work. My hope for this study is that it contributes to better preparing and supporting principals and as an extension, impacts student outcomes, paving the way for lives to be transformed and communities elevated. Capitalizing on the wounding experience and allowing emotions to surface is the final call to action of this study.

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## Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

### Institutional Review Board

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Office of the Vice President for Research and Sponsored  
Projects The University of Texas at El Paso IRB  
FWA No: 00001224  
El Paso, Texas 79968-0587  
P: 915-747-7693 E: irb.orsp@utep.edu



Date: November 13, 2019

To: Isela Pena

From: University of Texas at El Paso IRB

Study Title: [1495205-1] Impact of School Closures on Principal Leadership and Identity IRB

Reference #: College of Education - Educational Leadership & Foundations

Submission Type: New Project

Action: APPROVED

Review Type: Limited Review

Approval Date: November 13, 2019

Expiration Date: November 12, 2021

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The University of Texas at El Paso IRB has approved your submission. This approval is based on the appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This study has received Limited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Based on the risks, this project requires Continuing Review by this office on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure. The renewal request application must be submitted, reviewed and approved, before the expiration date.

This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required. Other institutional clearances and approvals may be required. Accordingly, the project should not begin until all required approvals have been obtained.

Please note that you must conduct your study exactly as it was approved by the IRB. Any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject.

All serious and unexpected adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

- 1 - Generated on IRBNet

Please report all Non-Compliance issues or Complaints regarding this study to this office.

Remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Upon completion of the research study, a Closure Report must be submitted the IRB office.

You should retain a copy of this letter and any associated approved study documents for your records. All research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after termination of the project.

The IRB may review or audit your project at random or for cause. In accordance with federal regulation (45CFR46.113), the board may suspend or terminate your project if your project has not been conducted as approved or if other difficulties are detected.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at [irb.orsp@utep.edu](mailto:irb.orsp@utep.edu) or Christina Ramirez at (915) 747-7693 or by email at [cramirez22@utep.edu](mailto:cramirez22@utep.edu). Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,



Dr. Lorraine Torres, Ed.D,  
MT(ASCP) IRB Chair



- 2 - Generated on IRBNet

## **Appendix B: Sample Email Script**

Dear Mr./Ms. :

I am a graduate student in the Educational Leadership and Administration Ed.D. program at UTEP and I am conducting a qualitative research study for my dissertation. I am looking for individuals who are currently serving as principals in schools that are being impacted by school closures to participate in an individual interview. The purpose of the study is to understand how school closures impact principal leadership and leader identity.

Participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form and complete a short questionnaire. Individual interviews will take approximately 90 minutes. Names of participants will not be used in the study but rather participants will have an opportunity to select a pseudonym to protect their identity. All information gathered from the interviews will be kept confidential and secure. A date, time, and location for the individual interviews will be determined in collaboration with the participant. Every effort will be made to best accommodate the participant.

Your consideration of this request is greatly appreciated. However, please note that there will be no ill-feelings or negative repercussions if you choose not to participate.

If you have questions and are interested in participating in an individual interview, please contact the Principal Investigator, Isela Peña at [ipena3@miners.utep.edu](mailto:ipena3@miners.utep.edu) or (XXX) XXX-XXXX.

## Appendix C: Questionnaire

1. What is your educational background, including colleges and/or universities attended?
2. How do you identify yourself in terms of race/ethnicity?
3. Please select your age range:  
20-29                      30-39                      40-49                      50-59                      60-70
4. How long have you been employed by the district?
5. Prior to serving as principal:
  - a. how many years did you teach?
  - b. how many years did you serve as assistant principal?
  - c. did you hold a position at central office? If so, please describe.
6. Prior to this year:
  - a. how long have you served as principal at this campus?
  - b. how long did you serve as principal at other campus/es?
7. Do you have any management/leadership experience outside of education? If so, briefly describe.
8. Describe:
  - a. any professional development you have attended in the past 3 to 5 years related to your role of principal
  - b. any groups or professional organizations you belong to that relates to your role as a principal?
9. What pseudonym would you like to be assigned for this study?

## **Appendix D: Individual Interview Sample Protocol**

1. Talk to me about your journey to the principalship. (What lead you to pursue this path and why?)
2. Describe the neighborhood where your (initial) campus is/was located
  - a. If you could choose three words to describe your campus, what would they be?
3. Describe the neighborhood of your new campus.
  - a. If you could choose three words to describe the new campus, what would they be?
4. Talk to me about your involvement or relationship with the school closure process.
  - a. What have you experienced as a result of school closures?
  - b. What professional or personal contexts or situations have influenced or affected your experiences?
  - c. What are the biggest challenges and successes in your current work as a leader impacted by the school closures?
5. In what ways has your professional and personal outlook as a school leader been altered as a result of experiencing school closures?
6. Can you share a specific story of an instance that you feel best exemplifies your overall experience as a school leader in the midst of a school closure (one thing that sticks out to you or that has happened to you during this time that sums up your experience)?
7. Which practices or stages in the school closure process were more significant to you as a school leader? (for example, informing the community, the staff, making decisions on what and how to move)
8. How did the district support you during this time?
  - a. Did this support/impact your leadership at the campus?
  - b. Do you believe anything could have been done differently?
  - c. Was there any specific information or support that was offered that was most helpful to you? (Or that if offered, would have been most helpful to you)?

9. What do you believe may help inform future professional development of school leaders who are facing similar circumstances?
10. Would you describe your dreams for the school community?
11. Would you describe what you would like the closed school to become (physically).
12. If you were the board of trustees, do you think you would have made the decision to close the schools? Why or why not?



## **Vita**

Isela Peña holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Texas at El Paso, a Master of Education in Educational Leadership from Sul Ross State University and a Juris Doctor from Columbia Law School. Her journey to attaining the Doctoral of Education degree in Educational Leadership and Administration at The University of Texas at El Paso began the summer of 2016. During this time, she had the distinct honor to serve as a University Council for Educational Administration Barbara L. Jackson Scholar from 2017-2019. This experience has cultivated her research interests in issues of access and equity, education policy, P-20 student voice and engagement, K-12 leadership, and organizational change.

She is currently serving as program coordinator and instructor in the Educational Leadership Program at Sul Ross State University. With over a decade of experience in K-12 and higher education systems, she has worked in large urban school districts and the Education Service Center -Region 19 focusing generally on the implementation and alignment of the organizational strategic priorities, operational problem solving, quality management planning, and has conducted numerous leadership and school board trainings.

This dissertation was typed by Isela Peña.