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From Teacher to Campus Leader: An Autoethnographic Study of an Assistant Principal at a New Mexico Elementary Campus Post COVID-19

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FROM TEACHER TO CAMPUS LEADER:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF AN ASSISTANT
PRINCIPAL AT A NEW MEXICO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL POST-COVID-19

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By

Mona Plaza

2023

FROM TEACHER TO CAMPUS LEADER:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF AN ASSISTANT
PRINCIPAL AT A NEW MEXICO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL POST-COVID-19

by

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Abstract

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began its effect on public school education. With online classes, students without remote access, and teachers with little to no experience in technology-based instruction, students, parents, and teachers were navigating the unknown. We have returned to campus, and routines are back in place, but education will never be the same. This autoethnography explores the first year of a teacher transitioning to an assistant principal on a small New Mexico elementary school campus as the education system recovers from the fallout of the pandemic. The purpose of this study is to use research as a reflective practitioner to examine my experiences, perceptions, and inferences as a new assistant principal working to close achievement gaps, build social-emotional bridges, and inspire the growth of a positive campus culture in a school navigating covid aftereffects. My experiences and perceptions reflect my growth and transition as a school leader, collected from journals, pre-pandemic coursework, and personal accounts of my first year. As a former classroom teacher, now assistant principal, and servant leader, I aim to help others first and then lead, applying this framework to self-reflections on how to bridge gaps, build culture, and ensure the success of teachers, staff, and students.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

On January 20, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 in the United States changed the world as we knew it forever, and by September 1, 2020, 778,000,000 or 44 percent of all learners were impacted by full or partial school closures because of COVID-19 (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). The pandemic would invade every aspect of our lives, including the convention of education. When it began, I was a middle school Science teacher who, on Friday, March 13, 2020, went home for Spring Break and then never physically returned to school for the rest of the 2020-2021 school year. Like other educators, nationally and globally, we were forced to teach virtually and were expected to be effective, yet, as reality set in, it was more about survival in a seemingly impossible and flawed educational environment. When schools closed in 2020, and we were sequestered in our makeshift classrooms at home, the social impact of the lockdown increased anxiety, slowed learning, and diminished social interaction (Thomas & Rogers, 2020). By May 2021, teachers, administrators, and students had experienced 65 school days without close contact with each other leading to unfinished learning, deficits in physical health, loss of social emotional well-being, and increased emotional and physical abuse (Levinson & Markovits, 2021). Pandemic issues exacerbated loneliness and isolation, and both students and parents dealt with not only instructional issues but mental health challenges (Thomas & Rogers, 2020).

Locally, teachers were forced to keep pace with required lesson plans, grading, and instruction, all while trying to navigate software and website platforms for which they were not prepared. Many students and families simply gave up, and students did not attend online classes, or their attendance was inconsistent at best. We are still dealing with the repercussions of the

pandemic on our campuses for both our students and teachers. As the virus continues with variants, we are also dealing with vaccination debates and a lack of resources for recovery. School districts continue to struggle with helping students as we realize the impact of the pandemic on student growth (Shaw et al., 2021).

My own experiences prior to and during the pandemic shutdown inspired me to look for leadership positions to serve a community not only visibly affected by COVID-19 but also one whose culture was further damaged by remote and hybrid teaching. This decision led me to apply to a small district in New Mexico, where I began my education career some twenty-seven years earlier. The population of the area is low in socioeconomic status, with few college graduates and many parents who are either incarcerated or on probation. During the interview for the assistant principal position, I was asked how I could contribute to the rebuilding of the elementary school campus and what I could bring to reactivate parent involvement and student engagement. All were challenging questions, but my answers centered around servant leadership characteristics: listening, awareness, motivation, and empathy (Stein, 2020) and the asset of my experiences in similar communities.

After being hired, I realized my perspective had been altered: I was a classroom teacher for many years, and now I am an assistant principal. The role of leaders is more important than ever. “COVID-19 presents an opportunity to rethink and reimagine the role educational leaders play and how they are trained” (Rincones et al., 2021, p. 4). My perceptions of instructional learning gaps and chasms of inconsistent interventional supports as a teacher now come from a different viewpoint as a campus leader. Ideally, reflectively, I need to remember and embrace what it was to be a classroom teacher as I transition to leading an elementary school in a small New Mexico community. I need to know whom I am leading, and through self-reflection, I can

use my own experiences as well as the experiences of those I lead to build a positive culture as a servant leader.

Campus context

For anonymity purposes, I will rename my campus: New Mexico Elementary (NME). Understanding the population of NME is one of the parameters needed to aid in the recovery process. The population of NME is 354 enrolled students, 100% are socio-economically disadvantaged, 99.3% are Hispanic/Latino, and 99.3% are English Language Learners (ELLs) (NM District Website, 2022). Each student is provided a Chrome Book laptop and a hot spot for Wi-Fi to engage remotely in case of further shutdowns, student illness, or weather emergencies. There are sixteen elementary schools within the district with similar comparable demographics. The population of the district has been declining for a few years. Those who have been in the area for a longer period of time attribute the decline to migrant farmworkers in and out of the area and the pandemic's toll on health and families.

NME has thirty-five certified teachers. Ninety-three percent of teachers have three or more years of experience, and a majority have spent most of their career at NME. I am the only Assistant Principal on staff, and there is one counselor, an instructional coach, and two interventionists (math and reading). The academic year 2021-2022 was the first year my principal and I were leading the campus.

These data are important for my transition to campus leader, as the school's demographic makeup is included in my reflective practice. Navigating learning a new position, a new campus, and a new state (I was previously in Texas) bears significantly on my practice. I am focused on identifying gaps that were exacerbated by the pandemic by using the lens of a teacher to keep practices and strategies current while carrying out the responsibilities of an administrator. The

utilization of over twenty-seven years of experience in various education positions will help me to shape how I lead at NME.

Positionality

This dissertation is based on my lived experiences of transitioning from teacher to campus leader at a New Mexico Elementary campus. I am using the “insider dialectic” as a researcher (Holmes, 2020, p. 5). “An insider’s view of reality is situated within a cultural perspective, recognizing behavior and actions as being relative to the person’s culture and the context in which that behavior or action is both rational and meaningful within that culture” (Holmes, 2020, p. 5). The lens of my research is an experienced classroom teacher who taught during COVID-19 and then transitioned to an assistant principal. My influences include the COVID-19 recovery and my previous experience (also as an insider) as an assistant principal at a different school during an earlier time in my career.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to use research as a reflective practitioner to examine how my experiences, perceptions, and inferences can help me in my transition to close achievement gaps, build social-emotional bridges, and inspire the growth of a positive campus culture post-pandemic. This autoethnography is a study of the process of leadership as I interact and engage with staff and students in the era of a pandemic as a servant leader. Studying myself in relation to working with teachers, staff, and students on social-emotional learning and instructional needs is an acknowledgment of the demands of education. I am interested in how these experiences influence my leadership identity and actions (Starr, 2014). The research question guiding my study is the following: What are my experiences transitioning from a classroom teacher to an assistant principal on a New Mexico Elementary campus navigating the effects of COVID-19?

Approach of the study

Given that the purpose of my study involves self-reflection, I selected an autoethnographic methodology. “Autoethnography is a methodology that allows an educational leader to critically analyze beliefs, values, and ideas in ways that generate understanding of self in relation to others but also as a means to inform decisions in dealing with a multitude of dilemmas” (Starr, 2014, p. 75). The reason for using this methodology is that it is an exploratory approach with no expectations or preconceived ideas about the outcomes or results. I will focus on self-observations of my transition from classroom leader to campus leader amid a pandemic and during its aftermath.

I selected a layered approach to my autoethnography which blends both evocative and analytical approaches (Rogers-Shaw, 2020). I will blend personal narratives and self-reflection with references to research literature to make meaning from my observations. The literature review, data collection, and data analysis chapters will combine personal and cultural background information to establish “a solid orientation for the author’s personal story describing her quest” (Cooper & Lilyea, 2020, p. 206). My approach to data analysis involves thematically analyzing data in an autobiographical format using a timeline, journal entries, observations, and reflections to align my personal story with the broader cultural context (Cooper & Lilyea, 2020) of transitioning to a campus leader amid the aftereffects of COVID-19. I will use a deductive coding approach to thematic coding (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019), drawing on my theoretical framework and the topics linked to the purpose of my study.

Significance of the study

In addition to reflecting on my leadership transition, the significance of this study is that it sheds light on the gap between the poor and rich in relation to the educational success of

students, specifically Hispanic/Latino students. “The pandemic widened preexisting opportunity and achievement gaps, hitting historically disadvantaged students hardest” (Dorn et al., 2021, p. 2). The gaps for students at NME represent a microcosm of the national educational system. In my research, I will reflect on the gaps that the pandemic has magnified and how to address these as I grow as a campus leader. Being a reflective, effective leader with a teacher-practitioner lens should include the attributes of shared decision-making, intuition and flexibility, creative and lateral thinking, tenacity and optimism, and procedural, intuitive, and creative intelligence (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021). Also, this dissertation can inform others transitioning into campus leadership as schools navigate post-COVID effects. As the recovery from the pandemic in schools continues, my reflections, observations, and research may help other leaders to navigate the road to the educational system’s new normal and contribute to research literature on transitioning into the assistant principal role in the post-COVID era.

In the next chapter, I will elaborate on leadership characteristics, leadership during COVID-19, social emotional learning, and learning gaps. In Chapter 3, I will describe the layered approach to my autoethnography for collecting and sharing data on my transition to a campus leadership role amid COVID. In Chapter 4, I will present data including journal entries, a timeline, culture grams, pre-transition coursework, and personal accounts of my first year. Chapter 5 consists of my data analysis and conclusions.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, consistent with a layered approach to autoethnography, I will join research with personal reflections as a way of advancing my understanding of my transition. The literature review for this autoethnography will focus on several areas that are meaningful for my transition to campus leader. These areas of research connect to how I aim to lead, the unique role of an assistant principal, the challenges of leadership in the era of a pandemic, and issues I aim to prioritize as a campus leader, including social emotional learning and learning gaps. First, I will introduce my theoretical framework, Servant Leadership, which refers to aspiring to lead others first and then making a conscious choice to lead (Shaw & Newton, 2012). Then, I will review research on transitioning as a campus leader, crisis leadership, social emotional learning for students and adults, and the exposition of the learning gaps widened by COVID-19. I view learning gaps as a vital piece of understanding the whole student. Also, I have observed that many times, students' frustrations with learning are tied to their social emotional issues.

Theoretical framework

Servant and leader are typically not two descriptors that complement each other. "The paradoxical term servant leadership is inclusive of personal service to society regardless of position" (Crippen, 2004, p. 2). In an education setting, servant leader (first termed by Robert Greenleaf in 1970) calls for leaders to put the welfare of their followers first and try their best to help each follower achieve a common vision. Whereas previous ideals of leadership were more hierarchal, servant leadership is equality for all and values the characteristics others exhibit as necessary skills. The servant leader acknowledges that humans are the most valuable part of the organization, so if they are led to perform to the best of their abilities, the organization (school)

is successful. “School leaders need to embrace their vulnerability to create cultures where honest conversations can take place, and constructive feedback can be given and received” (Rincones et al., 2021, p. 4). According to Les Stein (2020), a servant leader “seeks to improve the skills of others, helping them to become more autonomous in their work settings” (p. 8). There are ten characteristics of servant leaders: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Stein, 2020).

Servant Leadership is relevant in the context of my autoethnography during COVID-19 recovery. There is a strong connection between social emotional learning and servant leadership which impacts the activities of the school and school environment (Hammond, 2018). “Servant leadership is built on the idea that a leader should subordinate his or her self-interest for a higher purpose” (Shaw & Newton, 2012, p. 102). In the context of my study, servant leadership is instrumental to the recovery of NME socially, emotionally, and academically. I will apply the servant leadership framework as I reflect on and analyze my autoethnographic data.

Transition to assistant principal

Typically, assistant principals have tended to be ignored in the literature and take a back seat to principals in leading school reform (Barnett et al., 2012, p. 123). There are articles on the transition from classroom leader to campus leader as an assistant or vice principal, but none that I could locate on the assistant principal transition during the COVID-19 crisis. Armstrong (2004) noted there is limited research about how vice principals construct ethical pathways and what does exist “suggests that the transition from teaching to administration is neither smooth, nor linear, and it requires substantial personal and professional adjustments in order to cope with the demands” (p. 2).

Research on the vice principalship (Armstrong, 2010) argues that vice principals learn and adapt to their roles in a manner comparable to socialization through rituals and tactics. Similar to being new in other working environments, there are socialization practices that communicate information about approved or unacceptable behaviors and values, which reinforce organizational cultures, roles, and structures (Armstrong, 2010). This resonates with my experiences. I have had to understand the job itself and the culture of the district and campus I was hired to lead. “Analyses of the new administrators’ socialization experiences identify four broad periods—anticipation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilization—that occur as new administrators learn about and adapt to organizational roles and locate themselves within their school and district culture” (Armstrong, 2010, p. 688). While I am learning the nuts and bolts of the requirements of the position, I am also learning to navigate the culture and socialization practices of the human capital I serve.

The transition requires me to be introspective and interrogate myself as a leader. Work by Morris & Brooks-Young (2010) on professional development for school administrators identifies a series of questions that effective school leaders should ask: “What outcomes do you want to accomplish in the classroom? What available tools and resources can and will support teachers in helping their students meet these outcomes? What preparation do we need to ensure teachers and students appropriately utilize tools and resources? How will we measure the effectiveness of the tools to gauge how well they support and improve teaching and learning?” (para. 2). These are broad yet critical questions I have posed to myself as a new campus leader, and while these questions are not the focus of my autoethnography, they illustrate some of my administrative concerns as I assume the role of an assistant principal. Next, I will consider the added factor of the pandemic to my leadership transition.

Crisis leadership and COVID-19

Recent literature in the area of crisis leadership focuses on COVID-19. One example by O’Connell and Clarke (2020) is a reflexive article that describes leading through a crisis from a school leader/principal’s perspective. O’Connell and Clarke (2020) note there are “intertwined approaches” to leading through a crisis: “stay calm, identify and solve the pressing problems, seek advice, think strategically, be authentic, be open, act decisively, communicate clearly, strengthen the existing community, demonstrate empathy, and envisage the long-term” (p. 4). These approaches are similar to those outlined for the characteristics of a servant leader described in the theoretical framework. Crisis management consists of developing strategies to prepare organizations for crises in advance and then handling them when they happen in order to “minimize their damage to the organization and its stakeholders” (Gainey, 2009, as cited in Grissom & Condon, 2021, p. 315). Dare and Saleem (2022) describe principal leadership in response to the pandemic in terms of school processes and climate: “School leadership refers to a process that determines the educational climate” (p. 6). The crisis of the pandemic has impacted my leadership during the recovery process by having to readjust to meet unexpected needs or reconsider traditional teaching practices that do not match the post-pandemic preferences for technology-infused learning. Although recovery from a crisis means “a return to a routine for the organization and its community members” (Grissom & Condon, 2021, p. 317), my observation is that there is nothing routine about leading a school after a crisis and through recovery. As Okilwa & Barnett (2021) noted, school leadership is now a different kind of leadership that has evolved from a crisis and which presents a unique set of challenges questioning the perceptions of what is normal in schools.

Due to the timing of my transition to campus leadership, I needed to consider how to show leadership during and as a result of a pandemic. I considered crisis leadership alongside my previous teaching experiences during the pandemic. Seven leadership skill sets needed during a crisis are: “understanding the context, setting direction, developing people, influencing others, improving teaching and learning, leading self, and developing the organization” (Gurr & Drysdale, as cited in Okilwa & Barnett, 2021, p. 63). According to Okilwa and Barnett’s (2021) study of strategies and practices for leading schools during COVID-19, campus leaders have become more conscious of resource inequities and the social-emotional toll on staff, students, families, and communities. Additionally, the pandemic revealed to campus leaders the problem of teachers’ self-efficacy when having to deliver instruction using new instructional activities and e-learning (Okilwa and Barnett, 2021). A survey of K-12 educators indicated that they struggled to find high-quality tools, locate digital tools effectively, communicate with students for engagement and persistence, and adapt teaching material to the conditions and needs of particular students (Jalongo, 2021). From 1994 until 2020, I, too, used traditional instructional strategies intermingled with software platforms dependent on network capabilities. The pandemic forced education to depend on technology, and as we began to emerge from the shutdown, we learned how to incorporate different media platforms to ignite teaching and learning. Teachers serve “as curators for vital learning environments, which children can explore together with classmates to solve problems” (Thomas & Rogers, 2020, p. 89). It is important for me to know what our teachers need to engage students post-pandemic. “The role of school leader is continuously molded and adjusted to the present sociocultural and economic conditions, including times of a crisis” (Dare & Saleem, 2022, p. 3).

When I was teaching during the pandemic, I became more aware of how important communication is every day. Communication is important for informing and interacting with campus stakeholders, and this was exemplified by COVID. During the shutdown, districts and schools learned to communicate with families through “alternate platforms such as radio and television, messaging apps with translating capability, and video conferencing” (Huck & Zhang, 2021, p. 69). As educators and leaders, we became more creative in our interactions with the community, such as developing drive-by celebrations and Zoom graduations. More of us are better with software platforms such as email, school messenger, text, Zoom, social media, and digital newsletters. The lines for communication have been expanded, especially technologically (Huck & Zhang, 2021), by our necessity to be in touch with school constituents. As a campus leader, one of my goals is to communicate proactively with teachers, staff, district administration, and parents. Communication is a key factor in any relationship, which was made more apparent by the pandemic; thus, teachers and principals must stay in constant communication with each other and the families and communities whom they serve (Rieg & Marcoline, 2008).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

The need and practice of social emotional learning or SEL began before the pandemic but never has it been so critical. It was originally targeted at students to ensure they were engaged, interested, and excited to be at school (CASEL Briefs, 2007). SEL is a process for helping teachers and students develop fundamental skills for life effectiveness. The skills include: recognizing and managing our emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically (CASEL Briefs, 2007). The skills correspond to five core

competency areas for SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Rosenbalm, 2021). While SEL was originally intended for students, the pandemic has magnified the need for SEL to be part of a positive school culture to include educational professionals, staff and faculty, and parents. Research suggests that SEL programs have measurable effects on real-world outcomes for students into adulthood: “a six percent increase in high school graduation rates, a ten percent increase in college attendance and graduation, a six percent reduction in criminal justice involvement, and significant effects on income and job stability” (Rosenbalm, 2021, p. 3). SEL has always had a positive impact in pre-pandemic times, but now it is more important given the stress and uncertainty of today’s society. Before COVID-19, SEL programs focused on students, but now and in the future, SEL in schools must focus on adults as well.

The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Collaborative for Social Emotional and Academic Learning (CASEL) conducted a survey to “unpack” the emotional lives of teachers during the COVID-19 crisis (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). The five most-mentioned feelings among all teachers when asked what emotions they felt each day were: anxious, fearful, worried, overwhelmed, and sad (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020). In the study (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020), 85 percent of educators reported that work and life imbalance affected their ability to teach, and 30 percent left the profession within the first five years of teaching. A similar study by Jabbar et al. (2021) at the University of Texas at Austin investigated how educators experienced stress during the pandemic. Teachers experienced stress due to instructional challenges, student engagement and attendance struggles, insufficient time, low morale and high anxiety, strained relationships with other teachers, relationships with students and families, and commitment to the profession (Jabbar et al., 2021). School administrators attributed stress during the pandemic

to managing logistics and strained relationships with teachers. Educators' emotions matter in order to build a positive campus community because these emotions promote engagement, influence decision-making, collegial relationships, health, and well-being, and enable them to be role models and build relationships with their students (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020).

Emotions affect leaders in four different ways, according to Berkovich and Eyal (2015): “emotional experiences and their displays express leaders’ reactions to the surrounding social reality and how that reality relates to their goals; leaders’ behaviors affect the emotions of the teachers; leaders’ affective abilities are precursors of their emotions and behaviors and desired work outcomes; and, educational leaders’ emotions can be influenced by macro factors” (p. 130-131). The research on educators’ emotions implies that for my campus to grow and move forward, we must prioritize positive relationships and constant attention to close relationships. The stress and trauma of the pandemic demonstrate that investing in relationships in a preventative way is critical (Zalaznick & Burt, 2021). The best leaders build environments of trust, respect, professionalism, caring, compassion, collaboration, teaming, advising, caring, and nurturing (Rieg & Marcoline, 2008). The beginning of building healthy relationships is to understand the importance of SEL for teachers. Leadership behaviors linked to positive emotions, such as lending support, exhibiting moral integrity, providing safety, fostering collaboration, and offering intellectual stimulation, generate the energy needed to change and transform school culture (Beatty, 2000).

Learning gaps

Pre-pandemic discrepancies for English Language Learners (ELL) were already affecting students who were learning English while learning curriculum content. “Well before the pandemic, many students of color experienced disparities in their academic opportunities: less

experienced teachers, tracking into less rigorous courses and programs, and lower expectations for their educational achievement” (Office for Civil Rights, 2021, p. 7). Challenges specific to English Language Learners include supply deficiencies such as a lack of or substandard instructional materials, social stigma, and limited use of the home language (Office for Civil Rights, 2021). During the COVID-19 shutdown, the two years of inconsistency in a scaffolding curriculum took its toll on general students’ learning but was especially fateful for English Language Learners. Preliminary data suggest that “the pandemic’s effects have amplified disparities in learning outcomes for English Learners” (Office for Civil Rights, 2021, p. 21). The U.S. Department of Education noted in their study (Office for Civil Rights, 2021):

Evidence is already mounting that English Learners have been among the students hardest hit by COVID-19’s disruptions to in-person learning. In many cases, virtual learning effectively foreclosed opportunities for English Learners to engage in English language conversation with adults and peers, receive intensive language instruction at frequent intervals, and encounter conversational and formal language in a range of social and academic contexts. (p. 20)

The pandemic widened gaps and magnified the deficiencies of support, intervention, and content for those students labeled as English Language Learners (ELLs).

According to research by McKinsey and Company (Dorn et al., 2021, p. 21), the impact of the pandemic on K-12 learning left students an average of five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the 2020-2021 school year. When school began in 2020-2021, students were learning at a slower pace which resulted in five months of unfinished learning by the end of the year. In Spring 2021, students in math fell behind the most, learning almost no new math content (Dorn et al., 2021). In reading, students slowly progressed

during the shutdown; reading had less severe consequences than math (Dorn et al., 2021). This data is somewhat optimistic since the assessments were interim spring assessments and may not include those students who stayed remote given the opportunity or necessity to stay online (Dorn et al., 2021, p. 8).

At the local level, a study by Istations (Patarapichayathan et al., 2021), an educational software company, assessed students monthly at NME and at all schools in the district. Researchers concluded that learning losses were greater in math than in reading, learning losses varied by grade, and learning loss varied by poverty status at school (Patarapichayathan et al., 2021). In the school year 2021-2022, the State of New Mexico administered two assessments specifically targeting ELLs: ACCESS and AVANT. The ACCESS test is similar to the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System or TELPAS in that it tests the English proficiency of students identified through the Home Language Survey. ELL students are required to take subtests in Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing and are given a composite score to identify their level of proficiency in English. The AVANT is a new assessment required by the New Mexico Public Education Department for ELL students to assess their proficiency in Spanish with the same subtests as ACCESS. These tests are administered based on the years that students have been living in the United States and attending school. Most ELL students do not have access to the English language at home because their families are usually monolingual Spanish speakers. When the pandemic required a shutdown and online school, many of NME's population were only exposed to English by way of their computer if they were fortunate enough to have internet access or a hot spot.

Students are still behind in reading and math, and the gaps which were once surmountable are now larger and more daunting. This is especially true for Hispanic students

who experienced greater losses due to historical inequities (Dorn et al., 2021). Considering the above reports on the pandemic's effects on student learning, I was especially surprised by the data showing a four-to-five-month delay in learning and a slow pace in attaining knowledge to close these gaps. Previously, I had not quantified the amount of learning lost due to the pandemic, but I initially thought it would not be this impactful. In analyzing assessment data for the school year, it is necessary as a school leader to consider how to address instructional improvements to promote student learning.

To accomplish the work of closing gaps, it is helpful to return to the ideas discussed earlier regarding relationships with teachers and servant leadership. Research by Jimmy Shaw and Jodie Newton (2012) shows strong associations between perceived servant leadership levels, job satisfaction levels, and teacher retention rates. The quasi-experimental research study (Shaw & Newton, 2012) examined three variables of interest: teachers' perceptions of the principal's servant leadership characteristics, teachers' levels of job satisfaction, and the intended retention rate in those schools. The results showed positive correlations between teachers' perceptions of their principal's level of servant leadership, job satisfaction, and teachers' intended retention (Shaw & Newton, 2012). These correlations tying together teacher-principal relationships, working to close gaps, and building a positive school culture, inform my work as a servant leader.

Chapter 3

Methodology

My dissertation focuses on self-reflecting on my transition from classroom leader to campus leader at NME during the aftereffects of COVID-19. The purpose of this study is to use research as a reflective practitioner to examine how my experiences, perceptions, and inferences can help me in my transition to work toward closing student achievement gaps, building social-emotional bridges, and inspiring the growth of a positive campus culture post-pandemic. My research question is the following: What are my experiences transitioning from a classroom teacher to an assistant principal on a New Mexico Elementary campus navigating the effects of COVID-19? I selected an autoethnographic approach for the methodology of this study. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnographic text features concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness. Autoethnography is “the project of telling a life, is a response to the human problem of authorship, the desire to make sense and preserve coherence over the course of our lives” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 746). This autoethnography is a study of the process of leadership as I interact and engage with staff and students in the era of a pandemic as a servant leader. I should note here that while I have had previous experience transitioning from classroom teacher to assistant principal years ago (as mentioned in Chapter 1), the focus of my study is my recent transition as an administrator viewed through the lens of COVID recovery at NME and does not concern the supervisory requirements of the position, although it incorporates the administrative issues I seek to prioritize in my transition.

Methodological approach

I selected to use a layered approach to my autoethnography that combines evocative and analytical techniques (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). A layered approach allows me to frame my transition through both evocative and analytical lenses: “Analytic ethnographers focus on developing theoretical explanations of broader social phenomena, where evocative autoethnographers focus on narrative presentations that open up conversations and evoke emotional responses” (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 445). By layering the evocative and analytical techniques to write this autoethnography, I can find meaning in my reflections and examine meanings (Rogers-Shaw, 2022). I can join storytelling with analytic research in a fluid way to convey my experiences and advance understanding of my transition. Rogers-Shaw (2022, p. 190) writes that scholars choose to write layered accounts for a multitude of reasons which include exploring their own identity within a particular cultural context (in my case, the transition).

The stories in this autoethnographic dissertation communicate relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure, and culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I used my own journals and other self-reflective data as a lens into the transitions from teacher to administrator. Within my data is how personal and interactive relationships highlight my transitional experience as part of my passage from the walls of a classroom to the enclosure of a campus. This layered ethnography blending narratives of reflections and experiences with research literature will enable me to move forward and grow through reflective practice.

The inspiration for this autoethnography came from my personal journal, which I started when I became an assistant principal at NME, prior to beginning this dissertation. My journal entries allowed me to describe and record events in real-time which enabled my self-discovery: “...the researcher collects data from naturally occurring environments while participating in the

activities” (Chang, 2008, p. 89). Reflectively, these events demonstrate the importance of the situation, conversation, or experience at the time and how they impacted future similar experiences. The benefits of autoethnography are that it enhances cultural understanding of self and others, and it has the potential to transform the self and others to motivate them to work toward cross-cultural coalition building (Chang, 2008). Chang (2008) writes that self-reflection can be intentionally and purposefully guided by the research process.

The two types of data I used were self-reflective and chronological (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021). My self-reflective data are self-observations and notes on experiences for the purpose of perceptions of experience (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021). The chronological data identifies events and experiences about my transition, including both pre-transition data and data from the first year in my position. Pre-transition data includes a pre-transition culture gram (diagram illustrating cultural identity; Chang, 2008), my doctoral coursework, and a timeline. My doctoral coursework consists of excerpts from research and reflection papers from different courses that I composed as a beginning doctoral student. This pre-transition data is important for understanding my perceptions about leadership before the transition to assistant principal. My first-year data includes weekly journal entries from my personal journal I started in my current position, a post-transition culture gram from the end of my first year, NME assessment data, anecdotal experiences, and interactions with adults and students that provide a basis for my reflections and a benchmark for my growth.

These multiple sources of data reflect different perspectives within my experience of transitioning from classroom to campus leader. “Multiple sources of data can provide bases for triangulation that will help enhance the content accuracy and validity of the autoethnographic writing” (Chang, 2008, p. 55). By using “triangulation of internal thoughts and external

behaviors, current memories with past notes or artifacts, descriptive facts with visceral emotions,” I have the ability to observe myself through contrasts and comparisons (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021, p. 202). In the following section, I identify the autoethnographic data I present in Chapter 4.

Data

Autobiographical timeline

The timeline lists events and experiences included in this study in chronological order. It starts with the period at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 when I was a classroom teacher and lists my experiences from being hired as an assistant principal in July 2021 to the end of my first year as an assistant principal in July 2022. It refers to milestones specific to this study, including the context of COVID-19.

Doctoral course papers

When I began my doctoral journey in August of 2019, many of the courses required reflection papers in response to readings or class discussions. These papers were from my organizational theory and development class as well as leadership classes. At the time of these classes and writing assignments, I was still in the process of shaping my dissertation. It was important for my growth to re-read my previous perceptions of what it meant to be a school leader to measure my growth. I wrote about wanting to be a servant leader, and COVID-19 has affirmed this quality as necessary for my own transition from classroom teacher to assistant principal. This data prior to my transition are valuable autoethnographic data: “they preserve thoughts, emotions, and perspectives at the time of the recording, untainted by your present research agenda” (Chang, 2008, p. 107). The course papers allow for a comparison of before and after the transition on my perception of being a campus leader.

Pre/Post-Culture Grams

Culture grams are diagrams that illustrate cultural identities (Chang, 2008). I developed “pre” and “post” culture grams to map out my identities before and after I became an assistant principal. The culture grams enable me to see myself “before” and “after” the transition from multiple perspectives in terms of social identity, goals, and criteria with which I judge myself (Chang, 2008). The grams were created as a measurement of my growth and reflection on my goals pre- and post-transition.

Journal entries

My journal entries are my reflections on being a new administrator, recorded in a personal journal I started after I was hired at NME as an assistant principal. This is my primary self-reflective data and was used to record my personal experiences, thoughts, and reflections from interactions with teachers, students, staff, the principal, and district personnel. My journal entries were key to the research process of recording my transition and were important for my reflections on growth. As I moved through the year, journaling enabled me to communicate with myself and draw conclusions. While no two situations are the same, I was able to find patterns and similarities to address.

Daily schedule

By outlining my daily schedule, I was able to evaluate a “typical” day and understand why, because of unknown occurrences or experiences, each day was not routine. This is important for the evolution of my goals as a campus leader, taking into consideration the demands of the job. Recording my schedule was a reflective exercise that helped to prioritize my responsibilities and learn how to manage my time better.

Assessment data

Although not a quantitative study, I included state assessment data from the New Mexico Cognition website, which houses current and historical assessment results. The data is part of my transitional experience as an instructional leader, and I used it to reflect on content area learning gaps before and after COVID-19 as part of the recovery from the pandemic. I accessed formative data from the website to observe student progress during the first year we returned to campus. Throughout my first year, I looked at growth for a closer look into COVID-19 reading and math gaps. While these results are not conclusive as to the terminal effects of COVID-19, they provide me with insights into the instructional deficits which were magnified by school closure and online classrooms. The data affirms the need for me to be cognizant of the instructional needs of the campus.

Data coding and analysis

The analysis of my data was thematic and consisted of reviewing my data for experiences (feelings, reactions, ideas) that corresponded to themes (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021) on my transition from teacher to administrator. I used a deductive coding approach to thematic coding (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Deductive coding is a narrow approach to the coding used when a particular theory is being applied or when there are important issues identified from existing literature (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). It also has the advantage of being a more focused approach to coding for novice qualitative researchers (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). I also preferred to use deductive thematic coding for my autoethnography because I felt most comfortable establishing themes that are meaningful to me. As Cooper & Lilyea (2021) note, there is no “right way” to write autoethnography (p. 204).

The themes I used for deductive thematic coding came from the theory and literature I discussed in the previous chapter: servant leadership, crisis leadership amid COVID-19, social

emotional learning, and learning gaps. The deductive thematic coding of my autoethnography allowed me to examine my transitional experiences across the different sources of data, especially my journal entries and previous doctoral papers. As I read through my doctoral papers on various frameworks and methodologies, I highlighted what I had written and how it was either still part of my leadership style or if, because of my experiences, I had changed, evolved, or grown. For my journal writings, which were not themed when I wrote them, I re-read them to identify growth in my role as a campus leader. I made note of patterns related to social emotional and instructional needs, in line with the deductive approach to the thematic analysis of the data. The entries which stood out most were those I wrote in the heat of a moment, true feelings, without filter and without punctuation (which was added for the dissertation for readability). I also organized my data chronologically to correspond to my experiences just before my transition and following my transition. My data is presented thematically and chronologically in Chapter 4 and again in the analysis in Chapter 5.

The analysis of this data addresses how my experiences have shaped and focused my transition to assistant principal. The intent of my data analysis is to gain a cultural understanding of my transitional year: “Cultural data analysis and interpretation are also quintessential to autoethnography because the process transforms bits of autobiographical data into culturally meaningful and sensible text” (Chang, 2008, p. 126).

Research ethics

Although my research is an autoethnography, my data includes others with whom I interact and who are part of my transitional journey. I received permission from my district to proceed with my research and data collection with the understanding that I would use pseudonyms in order to keep the privacy of others. I submitted my proposal to the university IRB

in October 2021 with the description of my research and analysis, and it was exempted.

Therefore, I do not identify the district I work for nor the “real” name of the campus where I am the assistant principal.

Chapter 4

Research Data

The research question for my study is, “What are my experiences transitioning from a classroom leader to an assistant principal on a rural New Mexico Elementary (NME) campus navigating the effects of COVID-19?” As stated previously, I used a layered approach to this study which combines techniques to examine the meanings of personal narratives as they reflect the sociocultural context of my experience and reflections. Using a layered approach allows me “to balance the pull of both” evocative and analytical data (Rogers-Shaw, 2022, p. 189). The layered and deductive approaches to my study guided me to code and organize data according to the themes informed by my purpose, theoretical framework, and literature review: servant leadership, crisis leadership amid COVID-19, social emotional learning (and emotions specifically), and learning gaps. In coding my data, I identified an additional theme, economic disadvantage. I also included journaling as another area of self-reflection in this chapter. I did not share all my journal entries in this dissertation because some were not relevant to my transition or were not necessarily my own personal thoughts but those of others who were trying to guide me. Truthfully, there were some entries which are too personal, meaning I did not want to share everything about myself. I created boundaries of shareable information without the names or identities of others with whom I work. Therefore, there are likely more analytical layers than evocative layers in my research.

Also, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, I presented two types of data, self-reflective and chronological. These are important because they correspond to my reflective practice, transition, and growth over time, which informs my direction and leadership as a servant leader. By reflecting on my personal data, including journal writings, doctoral course writings, and staff

and student interactions, I am able to grow as a practitioner and move forward past the transition period. I began with my “pre-transition” experiences as a classroom teacher and doctoral student during COVID-19, followed by my transition into my current role of assistant principal.

I present the timeline below as my first piece of data to frame and contextualize my study. The timeline indicates the major events impacting education during COVID-19 (Baker, 2022). The pivotal point of my timeline is July 2021, when I entered my role as assistant principal at NME, which I refer to as “the transition,” and I described my journey “before the transition” and “after the transition.”

Timeline

January 19, 2020	First recorded COVID-19 illness in the United States. I am a middle school Science teacher and a first-year doctoral student.
March 11, 2020	The World Health Organization declares coronavirus a global pandemic.
March 13, 2020	I leave school the Friday before Spring Break, not knowing the toll of the pandemic and that it would be almost a year before I returned to my Science classroom.
April 2020	The rush to distance learning and teachers trying to learn how to use technology and create lessons for virtual instruction.
May 2020	Forty-eight states recommend all schools stay closed for the rest of the academic year.
January 2021	Schools begin to reopen with hybrid classrooms slowly, some students in-person, others remain online for all schools.
March 2021	All students back in person except those with medical exemptions or

	parent option to stay online for all schools.
April 2021	I begin interviewing for school leadership positions to broaden my impact on COVID recovery for education.
July 2021	Hired as assistant principal at NME.
July 2022	Reflections on my first year as NME as an administrator

Before the transition

As a tool for self-reflection on my roles and identities, I used a culture gram: “This self-identifier is a subjective labeling of yourself, based not on precise measurement but on personal perception and desire” (Chang, 2008, p. 98). My Pre-Transition Culture gram allows reflection on my roles and identities before I became an assistant principal at NME. In the next chapter, I will present a second culture gram to illustrate my growth and self-perceptions.

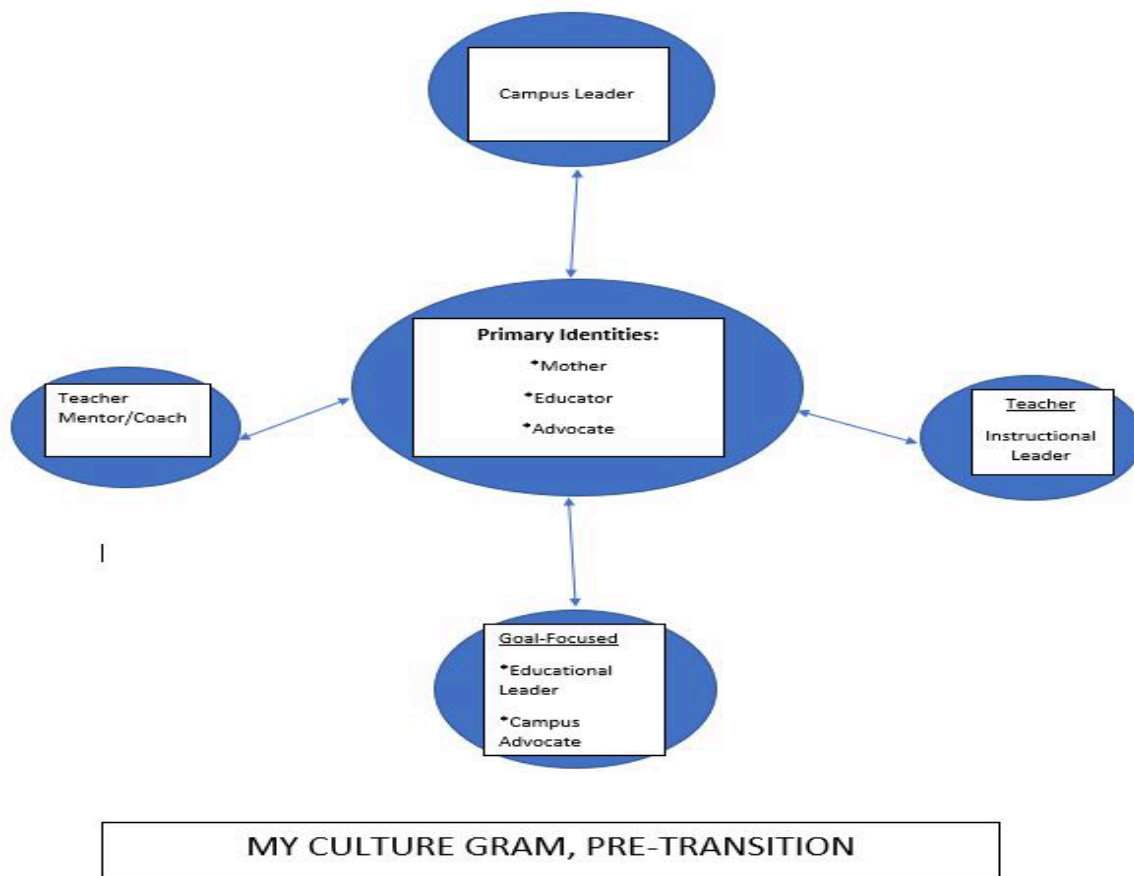


Figure 1

Pre-Transition Culture Gram

Primary Identities: Mother of SPED high school student and college student; educator, advocate for SPED (Special Education Students).

Teacher: Instructional leader; taught seventh and eighth grade Science and Pre-AP Science.

Mentor/Coach: Mentor new or novice teachers; used my experience as a trained problem/project-based learning teacher to coach other teachers on the instructional strategy.

Campus Leader: Lead Science teacher, textbook adoption committee, Gifted and Talented

committee.

Doctoral Student: Began doctoral program in Educational Leadership; advocate for students to be more involved on campus through clubs and programs.

Goal-Focused

Educational Leader: As a classroom teacher, I was also a campus leader. As a teacher/leader, I offered other teachers instructional support and coaching. During the pandemic and after returning to classrooms, this work included more responsibilities under the umbrella of human capital. Challenges to address include effective communication, cross-training of positions, relationships with teachers and students, relationships with parents and community, instructional gaps in math and reading, and the need for social emotional healing.

Campus Advocate: Vision of becoming a campus leader for a broad base of educators.

Pre-Transition Reflections

I began my doctoral journey in August 2019 with the goal of a terminal degree in educational leadership. To supplement my previous professional experiences, I wanted to learn more, research, and become highly specialized in effective leadership. I remembered from my master's degree experiences that my growth was not due only to reading and writing but also due to class discussions and collegial collaborations. I knew I had to pursue my doctorate. I was teaching middle school Science and wanted to have a greater impact on a campus through leadership.

I am passionate about the community I serve, and although not native to this area, I have spent most of my life immersed in the culture, attending public schools, and dedicating my work to the betterment of the community. As an educator, I know first-hand that the stress and

pressure placed upon teachers to have high-achieving students is very real and does influence classroom instructional practice. I recognize that the system of everyone teaching the same way at the same time is not in the best interest of students, no matter the standardized assessment. With limited knowledge of students based only on interactions in my classroom, there is a large chasm in understanding how to best motivate and teach each individual student. I have attended professional development sessions, researched the best instructional methods for diverse learners, and prided myself in having more than a cursory relationship with students. However, I never fully took into account the student's situation before they walked into my classroom until COVID-19 exacerbated the significance of students' social emotional needs.

My experiences as an online teacher during the pandemic sharpened my view of student learning. Like so many of my colleagues, I found the transition from in-person learning to online learning frustrating, stressful, and unfulfilling. Online teaching was exhausting as students were either non-participatory or did not show up for class. We were tasked with finding lessons and activities for instruction in all modalities as well as with calling, texting, and reaching out to students' homes to find out why they were not attending class or why they were not turning in work. In those days of cyber instruction, I did not stop to think about how the online classroom was affecting not only attendance but also learning progression. Educators, including me, were working during a time of crisis. I spent my weekends looking for user-friendly software platforms with standards-aligned curricula to keep students engaged. I spoke to my teacher friends to exchange ideas and stories about what was working and what was not. Before online school, teaching in public school classrooms was stagnant in a traditional setting: I do, we do, you do. Technology was just beginning to invade classrooms, spilling over from state-required testing and supportive platforms such as Kahoot, Schoology, and others. During the pandemic,

the dynamics of learning were transformed to more independent, self-paced learning with the facilitation of the teacher. When educators returned to campus in February 2021, there was no sense of normalcy, either academically or socially. We were facing a mix of hybrid, online, and in-person classrooms with little or no training as to how to be instructionally effective (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). The move from classroom teacher to online teacher was challenging, but it also created the opportunity for rethinking and reinventing preparation, as well as schooling itself (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020). This experience would help me later when I transitioned from classroom leader to campus leader by providing me the opportunity to understand the struggles faced by the teachers I now observe and evaluate. I made the choice to become a campus leader as I felt it was time I shared and explored my own experiences to lead a school and coach teachers, particularly since I have online and hybrid teaching experience.

Opportunity for transition

I began the process of seeking assistant principal positions in April 2021. The interviews this time around were different from the first time I had pursued an administrative position in May 2006. In my first pursuit of an assistant principal position, I was asked questions during the interviews such as: How would you use data as an administrator? How would you deal with a difficult parent? How would you work with a resistant teacher? The interview process for an assistant principal in 2021 had decidedly different questions: How will you incorporate SEL for teachers as well as students? How familiar are you with safety protocols and procedures? How will you bring back the community to the campus? Why do you want to be an assistant principal after a pandemic? These questions were more reflective and personal compared to my first interviewing experience. I had three interviews in El Paso and was never invited for a second round of interviews. My career began in New Mexico, and I decided I would apply to work in

the district that gave me the opportunity to become an educator in 1994. After two interview sessions, I was called and offered a position at NME. At last, I was finally going to be able to use all my years of experience to lead a small elementary campus in Southern New Mexico.

Transitioning to campus leader

In my earlier writings for doctoral classes on educational theory, I wrote about being a transformational leader and stated that I was a constructivist teacher. I read other theories of educational leaders and wrote:

I agree with the criticism of the Leader-Member Exchange Theory which emphasizes the importance of leader-member exchanges, but it does not offer how one can accomplish this and understand that different work environments are not necessarily going to “fit” into the leader-member exchange. (Plaza, 2019)

As a reflection on this statement, I was already beginning to create my own leadership identity as a servant leader for those I would lead. My “leader-member exchange” (Northouse, 2018) was shaped by working with a myriad of populations, primarily those who struggle socio-economically. “Research indicates that children from low-SES households and communities develop academic skills slower than children from higher SES groups” (American Psychological Association, 2017, p. 2). As a teacher leader, I was responsible for student success and cultivated relationships with students to nurture their academic success. As a leader of a campus community with low socio-economic status (SES), it is my responsibility to improve school systems and support or create intervention programs to help reduce low academic achievement. The population needs of NME are the highest priority for me as a servant leader.

Journaling as a leader

Chang (2008) noted that self-observation can be recorded in a narrative format and can assist in immediately recording thoughts and behaviors that have occurred or are presently unfolding. While the only journaling I had ever done was for a class assignment, and did not intend to use journaling to collect dissertation data, I felt the need to write down what I was encountering each day as a new assistant principal at NME. I hoped, by means of reflection, I could grow from my experiences. It was at this point that I began to keep journals of my experiences and interactions for the purpose of growth and reflection. I used an outdated, large teacher lesson planning log because it allowed for the organization of thoughts and observations by day and date. My goal was to write three times a week; however, I was sometimes not that consistent, but I wrote long entries when I did have the time and opportunity to write. I still journal, but not as much as I would like to because of the responsibilities of my position and completing a dissertation. It is a practice I intend to continue because writing things down can prove cathartic in moving on, especially when the experience is not “pleasant.” I want to remember how and why I felt the way I did, reflecting on “did I grow?”

Leadership and crisis management

My educational experience is more extensive in classroom instruction than in campus leadership, so transitioning from one type of leader to another is naturally challenging, but within the parameters of a global pandemic, and its toll on schools, it is especially arduous. My master’s in educational leadership gave me conceptual knowledge, and my previous experience as an assistant principal on a reservation in northern New Mexico gave me procedural knowledge. These experiences were helpful but not specifically applicable to the pandemic-related events of 2020 through the present.

My transition to assistant principal at NME was different from the first time I went from classroom teacher to administrator. The first time was in 2006, right after I graduated with my master's in Administration and Supervision. Not only was it fifteen years since I had transitioned before, but COVID-19 would present additional challenges and obstacles I had not encountered the first time. This experience is one of crisis leadership. Some scholars suggest there is a different kind of leadership needed during times of crisis, such as what we are experiencing today with COVID-19, than during what would be considered "normal" times (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021). Okilwa and Barnett (2021) noted there are five features that define a crisis: a wide variety of stakeholders are involved; time pressures require an urgent response; usually little if any warning to the organization; and a significant threat to an organization's strategic goals. These characteristics of unpredictability and urgency relate to my day-to-day schedule.

My daily schedule is extremely fluid as each day is different and unpredictable. In order to make sure I meet deadlines and obligations, I made a thumbnail version of how my day should look, knowing it could change:

- 6:30 a.m. Check substitute coverage; make adjustments as needed
- 7:15 a.m. Grab radio, head outside to greet students and staff, talk to parents as needed
- 8:10 a.m. Announcements
- 8:15 a.m. Check calendar for teacher observations/walkthroughs, parent meetings, Individual Education Plan meetings, planning for upcoming testing; check school security; review requests for students identified as SPED or GT
- 11:00 a.m. Lunch for students, cafeteria duty
- 12:30 p.m. Continue duties from morning; discipline; committee meetings
- 2:45 p.m. Students dismissed for buses, walking, or pick-up

3:15 p.m Administrator of After-School program

5:15 p.m. Prioritize duties for next day; answer emails

At times, it seems hopeless to have a schedule because my day is anything but predictable. I find it difficult to adhere to any timetable, but having a schedule helps me stay focused on the duties I need to complete as a campus leader.

I became a part of a small cohort of assistant principals in the district. There were four of us placed on different campuses, but I was the only one who came from Texas. I knew I needed more insight into New Mexico systems, so I aligned myself with these colleagues to learn as much as I could, as I noted in my journal entry in September 2021:

I met other new Assistant Principals today and I notice I am the oldest of the group. Despite the fact I worked in this district before, I am behind the others since I just came from Texas. I have a few conversations and most of them are helpful and easy to talk to. “Can I call you if I have questions about how testing works or just support?” (Plaza, 2021)

I did call two of the other new Assistant Principals as the year went on, mostly just to vent our frustrations about how behind students were and share how we are trying to deal with students’ gaps and lack of social skills. Other conversations were about different teachers, either good or bad, and how we could support our principals and move teachers forward.

Leadership and COVID-19: Economic disadvantage

I wrote in my journal after the first week of being an Assistant Principal at NME:

I began my career in this district more than twenty-five years ago; how has poverty increased so much? Yet, the students here are like others, including the fact that none of them has a childhood unaffected by COVID in one way or

another. Adults are also cautious, and I am unable to see their faces because we have to wear masks! Today, I walked into a classroom, and the first-grade students were on the carpet listening to a read-aloud story. “What’s wrong with the people?” one student asked. “What do you mean?” asked the teacher. “Why don’t the people have masks in the story?” Wow. We are at the beginning of a long recovery that reaches places we did not even imagine. (Plaza, August 2021)

The reflection meant I wanted to be a proactive leader who could anticipate the needs of all the campus stakeholders. Understanding we were in crisis mode was but one piece of the leadership puzzle. Schools are more than just a place of learning; they are stable, reliable, and sociable community centers (O’Connell & Clarke, 2020). During a crisis, the school’s community needs to be able to trust that the district and school leadership are making student-based decisions and addressing all challenges.

NME is a campus where one hundred percent of the population is economically disadvantaged and especially vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. The pandemic’s social and emotional toll on students, teachers, administrators, and parents continues to be one of the most devastating aspects of COVID-19. Students lost more than a year of maturation and social experiences, which has affected their learning and knowledge growth. Supporting my observations, research (Jabbar et al., 2021) found that schools were stressed significantly by the pandemic, as routines were upended, relationships strained, and roles and systems were thrown into chaos. The majority of NME students are English Language Learners (ELL), and the effect of school closure disproportionately affected those students, as mirrored in research on ELL students (Goodrich et al., 2022). The challenges for NME’s ELL students, especially during the pandemic, were linked in part to access to resources, which I will consider next.

Another obstacle for NME as an economically poor school and district is the lack of supplies for students. Technology issues for NME students during the pandemic were impacted by their family home's ability to have electricity or if there was an already unstable network connection further weakened by more than one student having to learn online. A local internet company provided hotspots for any families who were either not able to get WiFi or who could not afford it. There was no expectation to return the hotspots, so families were able to connect for online learning during the height of the pandemic and continue after we returned to classrooms to use online learning platforms.

What most of us take for granted as part of the back-to-school yearly routine is a hardship for many families at NME. Basic supplies such as pencils, notebooks, crayons, and glue do not come easily to students, which was even more obvious during the pandemic. Family members lost their jobs, others were ill, and children were impacted by the economic disaster of COVID-19. We received a grant to provide ALL students with basic school supplies and informed teachers not to ask for any other supplies. We had an Open House/Supply night which was largely attended. Not only were students excited about all the new supplies, parents and caregivers were equally relieved and happy their children would have any supplies they needed without their expense. Reflectively, this was one of the most enjoyable evenings at the start of my second year.

Leadership and COVID-19: Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Before COVID-19, one of my first reflective papers for a doctoral course involved stating my educational philosophy. I wrote about Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as a recognized piece of a holistic approach to teaching, which stands in contrast to holding everyone to task for students' performance on state standards and assessments.

All students must master the same state standards, teaching/assignments/assessments can be modified, but outcomes must yield a passing mark, and all students are required to pass the same state test to measure their mastery of content standards for their grade level. If every student has different needs, emotionally and instructionally, why are the outcome expectations standardized? (Plaza, 2019)

This reflective paper foreshadows one of the journal entries I wrote in my new role that emphasizes the emotional impact of the pandemic:

I have a student who is a first-grader. I will refer to him as Jerry. Jerry has anger issues, to the point where he or his class has to be removed from the classroom to prevent anyone from getting hurt on a fairly regular basis. He has been sent to the school counselor, been to my office several times, and has been suspended for his actions. The last time he was in my office because of an outburst, he was huffing and puffing with his arms crossed and swinging his feet from his chair. I gave him some time to work through his breathing in order for me to talk to him about how and why he was feeling so angry. Finally, after several minutes, I was able to elicit some responses from him for yes and no questions. At last, he began crying and said he was angry because his dad was in prison, he did not know where his mom was, and he had to live with his grandmother.

Additionally, the pandemic had an impact as he was unable to interact with peers or teachers and caregivers in person. Jerry was acting on impulse, not sure how to communicate his frustration other than through violence he had witnessed by his father. How could I expect he would be able to go through a school day, complete tasks, and instructionally progress if he had so many emotions weighing him down?

My journal entry reflects my frustration:

I had a student in my office today. At first, I was angry with him for trying to hurt himself or others students in the class. I spoke to him at length and found out his actions were not behaviorally motivated, but he was emotionally incapacitated. How do I help him? What are my next steps? I need advice! (Plaza, 2021)

How do these types of situations affect me and my emotional health? I would be lying if I said it did not. It does, and although when I was in the classroom, the emotional toll was high, I had no idea how much greater it would be as a leader. Instead of a classroom of students I worried and cared about, I now have an entire campus, including the adults. One principal I worked with would always say to leave emotions at work because if you don't, your emotions will be too overwhelming both at work and at home. I am not sure how to do that. I cannot drive out of the parking lot every day and forget about what I experienced the eight hours before.

One of my first experiences at NME was an interaction with a teacher whose father had contracted COVID-19 and was in the hospital on a ventilator. She was a Kindergarten teacher and was finding it difficult to meet the needs of four- and five-year-olds as she constantly worried about her father's health. She asked to see me at the end of the day to talk about her situation. She needed to let me know why she seemed distant or why parents might call regarding her demeanor in the classroom. She tearfully asked to use FMLA (Family Medical Leave Act) to care for her father, who was being sent home later in the week on oxygen and with numerous medications he had to take. I listened, found the necessary paperwork for her to complete for Human Resources, and told her if there was anything I could do to help, please let me know. She was out for three weeks, and yes, her students missed her. But it was more important for her well-being to be with her father, and she did not need the guilt of not wholeheartedly being emotionally present in the classroom. She came back after three weeks, her

father was much better, and so was she. I often asked about her dad when I passed her in the hall or when she arrived in the morning, and her face lit up as she told me he was getting stronger. She said, “Thank you for asking. I can’t believe you always remember.” One of the characteristics of a servant leader is empathy. I lost my parents years ago, but I remember the stress and sadness I too experienced. I wanted her to know, she was not alone.

My year of transition to assistant principal was a year of learning as much as I could about the campus, community, students, faculty, and staff. The culture on campus seemed to be broken prior to my entry and was divisive since the pandemic. My journal entries from January 2022 note this:

I can’t believe I have finished only one semester at NME; it seems like so much longer. Teachers are separated into cliques, with some willing to move forward, some still deciding what to do, and others who are resistant to any kind of change or growth. The holidays seemed strained with superficial joy. There is an underneath feeling of distrust, as if everyone is walking on eggshells so as not to be caught up in any drama. My principal and I have a very long way to go to get this school through recovery and on to success. And, this doesn’t even include the instructional losses. (Plaza, 2022)

Interactions with adults on a daily basis are mostly about social and emotional issues, either having to do with themselves, other adults, or students. Okilwa and Barnett (2021) write about emerging challenges for leaders, particularly socio-emotional fatigue. One of the effects of the pandemic is the pressure for districts and campuses to develop and implement plans to address SEL not only for students but teachers and staff as well (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021). The need for SEL for students and staff alike is reflected in my journal entry:

Today, I visited a Kindergarten classroom. It was the beginning of the day, and students

came into the classroom, stopped at a full-length mirror, and said a positive affirmation about themselves (I am kind; I am smart, etc.) Then they sat down and began their day's work and waited to be addressed by the teacher. Wow, I thought, this is how we should begin each day, with ourselves and our students. We need the constant self-assurance to help our self-confidence and to be our own advocate (Plaza, 2022).

The pandemic has influenced leaders to be more creative to increase morale and a positive school culture. At my campus, a core group of teachers has emerged to suggest ways to uplift staff, show empathy, and validate feelings. With this group of teachers, we celebrate birthdays, award a "Gold Apple" to recognize one staff member each week nominated by their peer, and have brought back faculty celebrations such as Teacher Week, Thanksgiving Lunch, and Secret Santa. Although these reinstated practices may seem superfluous, they have proven to be significant in building back a positive campus culture degraded by the pandemic and online education. "Collegial support may serve as a positive influence upon school culture and student achievement, with the presence of teacher collegiality, mutual respect among stakeholders, and a shared responsibility of meeting the needs of students" (Ohlson, 2009, p. 108).

Leadership and COVID-19: Learning gaps

Unfortunately, social-emotional well-being was not the only part of education affected by COVID-19. Learning was severely impacted, and for any growth which may have occurred prior to March 2020, regression or at least academic stagnation has affected all students. As stated previously, NME was already struggling with instructional success prior to COVID-19, especially in the areas of math and reading. One of the assessment platforms changed from Standards Based Assessment (SBA) in 2019 to Measures of Student Success and Achievement (MSSA) in 2022. The reality of the NME campus is that "proficiency" in math and English

Language Arts (ELA) has always been one of the lowest in the district and state, even before COVID-19 and online school. The summative assessment data in 2018-2019 and 2021-2022 illustrate these learning gaps:

MATH	Proficient	Proficient	Percentage Changed
Grade	2018-2019 SBA Data	2021-2022 MSSA Data	
Third	25%	10%	-15%
Fourth	24%	22%	-2%
Fifth	17%	18%	1%
Sixth	27%	37%	10%
ELA	Proficient	Proficient	Percentage Changed
Grade	2018-2019 SBA Data	2021-2022 MSSA Data	
Third	44%	10%	-34%
Fourth	25%	20%	-5%
Fifth	23%	16%	-7%
Sixth	37%	24%	-7%

Figure 2
NME Comparison Data, 2018-2019, 2021-2022

Although at first look (noting proficiency percentages were already low), the data shows most scores in both ELA and math declined by the end of the first full school year in the classroom following online learning. From the perspective of a classroom teacher, these data points are not surprising as most campuses were already struggling with proficiency in standard-based assessments. The pandemic widened the gap as teachers were not prepared for online instruction, and students were not engaged with their learning for a variety of reasons. “A learning gap is a discrepancy between what a student has learned and what a student was expected to learn by a specific point in their education” (Welcome, 2021, p. 2). While assessment data is not the only method of measuring student learning, it is an essential tool for

understanding the gaps between standards and learning. The assessment data is a source of stress for teachers and campuses because they are published for the public and reflective of the success of teaching and learning. I addressed this in my January 2022 journal entry about connecting with a fellow assistant principal:

Called Ms. P today to see how everything was going on her campus. She said things were good and she too was stressed about the upcoming state testing and how she was going to schedule teachers, times, and classrooms. I totally related! I have lost some sleep over these same issues but it is nice to know I am not the only one. Does misery love company? (Plaza, 2022)

Later in the year, I addressed this stressor in my April 2022 journal entry:

I looked at the assessment results today from the end-of-the-year interim. If I am being honest, there has been little growth from the beginning of the year assessment in August until last week's! The omnipresent "gap" did not only widen, it has taken hold and has not been overcome. Teachers are very discouraged by this data because they have been working hard all year, coming in early, leaving late, working on their time off and weekends, and yet...the needle hasn't moved. And what about me? Haven't I been in classrooms, done observations and walk-throughs, seen instruction? What did I miss?

I am frustrated, and am asking myself, "why did I think I could do this?" (Plaza, 2022)

Spring of 2022 was very discouraging in terms of recovery and moving forward. I realize it will take a long time to recover, but I was hopeful for a little growth, a spark, a glimpse of success.

"The further the organization moves from the triggering event, the more leaders transition from an acute to a sustained response that promotes recovery. Recovery means a return to a routine for the organization and its members" (Grissom & Condon, 2021, p. 317). I am unsure if "routine" is

good enough. I believe it is time to re-evaluate how we taught in the past and use this era of recovery as an opportunity to evolve not only what is taught but how it is taught. Administrators should be involved in all aspects of their campus, most urgently, instruction. Leaders can promote recovery by communicating positive perspectives on a “new normal” as community members recover from the crisis event (Grissom & Condon, 2021). With a new school year ahead comes an opportunity for a new outlook, according to my June 2022 journal entry:

I will continue to monitor student success as we recover from the COVID-19 crisis. Reflectively, I need to be more involved with instruction by attending Professional Learning Community meetings, grade-level planning, data digs, and curriculum alignment meetings. It is difficult to take on all the tasks of an administrator and give each equal value. While the pandemic took its toll emotionally, its toll instructionally through the inevitable measurement of learning has been eye-opening...how do I help the campus surmount this challenge? As a classroom teacher, I erroneously believed I knew all the answers about teaching and instruction. COVID-19 proved I did not. As an educator, whether in the classroom or the front office, I have a lot of work to do to transition not only myself but the campus. (Plaza, 2022)

Chapter 5

Analysis and Conclusions

In the previous chapter, I used a layered and deductive approach to collect, code, and present data that responds to my research question: “What are my experiences transitioning from a classroom leader to an assistant principal on a rural New Mexico Elementary (NME) campus navigating the effects of COVID-19?” As a reminder, the purpose of my study is to use research as a reflective practitioner to examine how my experiences, perceptions, and inferences can help me in my transition to close achievement gaps, build social-emotional bridges, and inspire the growth of a positive campus culture post-pandemic. Based on a deductive thematic approach, I presented data in Chapter 4 according to meaningful themes derived from my purpose, literature review, and observations from my data sources. I return to those themes in this chapter on data analysis: servant leadership, journaling as a leader, crisis leadership, economic disadvantage, social emotional learning (and emotions specifically), and learning gaps.

My approach to data analysis involved analyzing thematically and chronologically my data in an autobiographical format to align my personal story with the broader cultural context (Cooper & Lilyea, 2020) of transitioning to a campus leader amid the aftereffects of COVID-19. The autoethnography is a form of narrative research and allowed me to focus on storytelling, and by analysis, to “honor my own voice and what I am seeking to convey” (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021, p. 202). Using a layered approach, my data analysis unfolds in two ways: 1) analyzing my self-reflections about transitioning and connecting them to research literature for a deeper understanding of my sociocultural context, and 2) sharing more recent personal narratives about events that have occurred after my first year to show how my transition process is still happening. My approach to a layered analysis is supported by Cooper and Lilyea (2020):

“Elements of the story are woven throughout the review of the literature and discussion of the results” (p. 205). This chapter concludes with limitations and future implications of the study and a discussion of my steps moving forward.

To begin my analysis, I constructed a second culture gram. The purpose of my post-transition culture gram is to inspire me to reflect on a year of growth and forge a future path in school leadership. My post-transition culture gram differs in a few ways from my pre-transition culture gram.

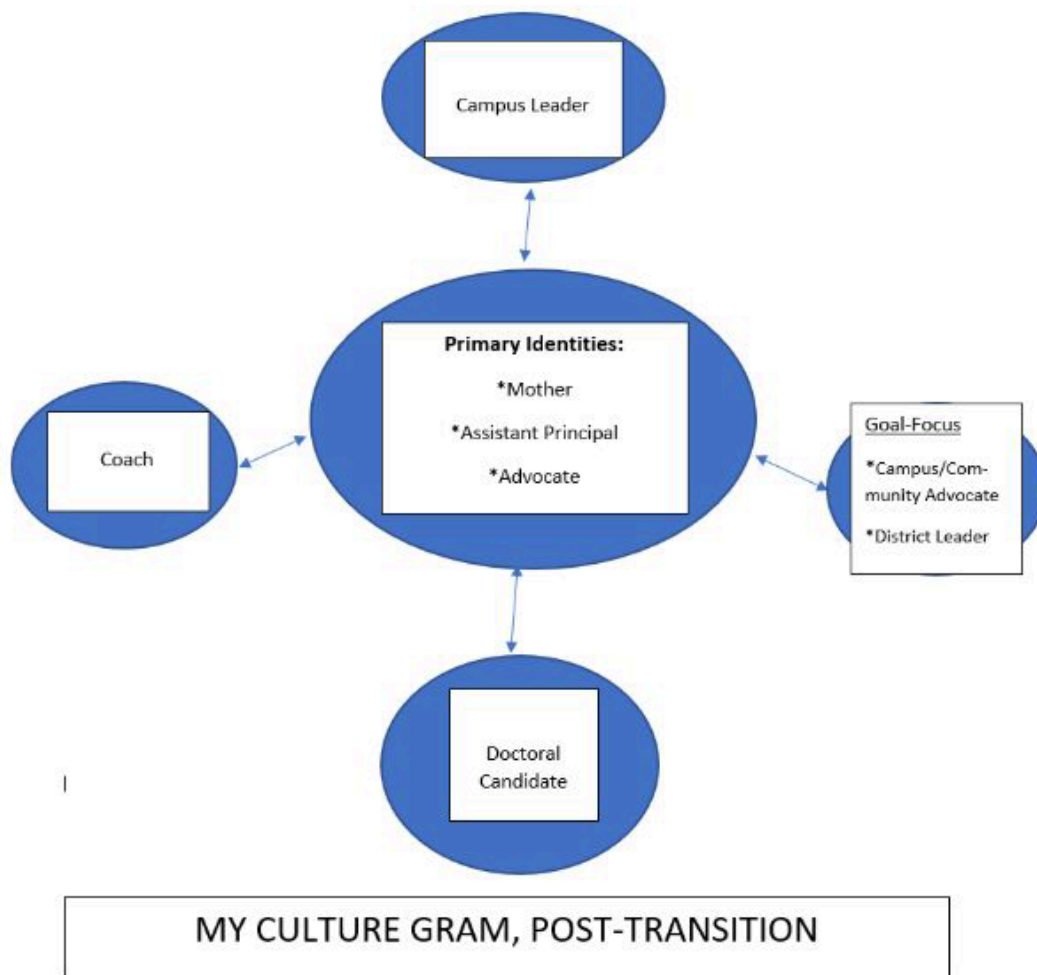


Figure 3

Post Transition Culture Gram

Coach: The term “coach” means enabling others to set goals and providing insight or guidance on how to reach those goals. As a teacher/coach, I mentored teachers who were either new to the profession, new to the department, or new to the campus. As a leader, teachers often ask me for clarification on a new initiative. They ask me how I would implement the initiative in my classroom if I were still a teacher. In my journal, I wrote about exchanges with new teachers, lending my own experiences of successes and failures. Through walk-throughs and observations, I am able to share methods on how to achieve goals and improve instructional quality.

Assistant Principal: In my pre-transition culture gram, one of my central identities was “educator.” In my post culture gram, I replaced it with “Assistant Principal.” Although I am still an educator, now my responsibilities are more than students in my classroom. It was a natural progression as a leader, and I grew as an educator through experiences and tenure. I am comfortable in my position, but I do miss the more intimate relationship with students. Yet, I know I can affect more students in a leadership position which is more satisfying. As an assistant principal, I attend professional development sessions the teachers are required to attend. As I do walk-throughs or observations, I coach teachers’ practices as I observe them in a classroom setting. I, too, am coachable and in need of learning more about instructional strategies especially given the population of students most impacted by COVID-19. What worked twenty years ago to engage students and help them grow does not necessarily apply to today’s students.

Goal Focus: Through my self-reflection and progression as assistant principal, I have considered my long-term professional goals where I can use my expertise from practice and research to be a champion for campuses as the recovery from the pandemic continues. A primary goal is to persevere as a leader supportive of English Language Learner communities intertwined with development as a culturally responsive leader. Being a culturally responsive leader means

supporting inclusive and diverse classrooms and improving learning for students and families. I have been fortunate to attend two training sessions provided by the New Mexico Education Department promoting cultural responsiveness to those we serve. This training provides resources and support through education and professional development, primarily for districts whose populations are over ninety-percent Hispanic and low in socio-economic status. I will continue to attend training to grow as a leader and strengthen my own practices.

Transitioning amid COVID-19: Themes

My layered approach will blend research literature connections and my analysis of self-reflections about my pre- and first-year transition experiences with personal narratives beyond the first year to show how my transition process is still occurring within the post-pandemic NME context. As mentioned previously, my analysis will proceed thematically.

Servant leadership

Reflecting on my leadership identity assists me in creating a culture of improving teaching and learning at NME. My journal entries, both as I wrote them and now as I read them again, maintain the constant of serving others and trying to do what I can to elicit the best outcome depending on the situation. I wrote that I wanted to become a leader with the ability to empower others and the capacity for growth (Plaza, 2019). I called myself a Servant Leader, which is still accurate almost two years later. Empathy is a large piece of my leadership makeup and one which I will continue to nurture. My pre-transition classroom experiences, especially my online classroom experiences during COVID-19, enabled me to directly relate to teachers and staff. Also, my journal entries particularly reinforced my emphasis on servant leadership through evidence of empathy for those I lead, appreciation for the opportunity to be an assistant principal, and caring for my staff and students on our journey through recovery.

I previously mentioned Jerry, who was struggling with trauma. In recent days, I have met with more children whose behavior is unacceptable, but this is because of their home life situations. For example, there is a family of four children who attend our school. Their mother is a migrant worker who works from sunrise to sunset, and their father is not in the picture. They live in an old trailer with no running water or electricity. A social worker has visited the home, and we are supporting the family through government resources and help from our campus. One of the girls has continuous behavior problems. She is consistently referred to the office for being defiant, not doing any work, or just having a poor attitude. We need to be sensitive to the whole child; her home life drives her behavior. However, there should not be low academic expectations. There is a need for additional support from the district and the community.

Journaling as a leader

Although initially, journaling was my way to vent and self-analyze, it became a way to find my way as an assistant principal and a campus leader. My reflections within that moment I wrote in the journal are different from my reflections when revisiting the writing later. Honestly, when reading my journal, I wonder how I made it through. I think about how a situation changed me or modified my viewpoint. I discovered that I sometimes take situations or interactions too personally, and I need to remember the things which often upset me most are not personal. They are usually another's reaction in their need to find a solution or criticize a decision that has already been made. I can relate this to being a classroom teacher and having support from most parents who cooperate with you on the best outcomes for their child. But then, there is the one parent who is never happy, who is convinced that you want their child to fail, and who constantly argues or calls the administration to complain. Why do we focus on the one difficult parent instead of all the others who are happy and understanding? The same is true for a leader. The one

person who constantly criticizes or is defiant, either passively or not, is the one I focused on in my journaling. “What can I do in this situation?” How can we come to a beneficial conclusion?” (Plaza, 2021). My growth is not represented by others’ perceptions but instead by my own conscious effort to lead with compassion, empathy, and empowerment. As a reflective piece of my practice, I want to have strong emotional skills, be less negative and more positive, and constantly be empathetic to the faculty and staff’s needs and issues.

Journaling is a way to obtain self-evidence to process events and experiences (Barnett & O’Mahony, 2006), and I intend to continue journaling in my leadership practice. It allows me to build a whole picture of myself and my leadership. It helps with my memory of events or outcomes and enables me to find patterns in my own feelings or reactions to people or experiences. My reflections are evidence that I am moving forward and growing in my practice.

Leadership and crisis management

In analyzing my data, I found an ongoing struggle for students and our community after COVID-19, the need for the social emotional health of children and adults, and the importance of empowering and guiding teachers in instructional strategies, professional development, and intervention groups. Leading during and after the pandemic is crisis management and has forced school leaders to take fast and decisive actions to ensure teaching and learning are centered (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021). The approach to traditional teaching and learning has changed and is still evolving. Last year, our first-grade students had never set foot in a classroom and only knew of school through technology. Students at other grade levels lost a year of socializing and maturation, and they forgot the procedures and protocols they had learned two years before. As an assistant principal, I have observed that ongoing discipline issues are usually connected to poor social skills and disrupted home life. Our students are in crisis! If not from their own lack of

scaffolded knowledge, then from the effects of the pandemic on their family situation. I have had students in my office who have abhorrent behavior, yet as I speak to them, they tell me they have no parents, one parent, live with grandparents, live in a trailer with no utilities, have an incarcerated parent, have siblings who are raising them, and the list goes on. COVID-19 was not just a health disaster but a catalyst for broken families and traumatized children. Without meeting their basic human needs, how can we expect students to learn, much less be fully present in a classroom setting? The challenges of the pandemic were not just instructional, and NME is trying to give our students stability, safety, and comfort. In a time of crisis, leaders need to be strong and optimistic about the future as a way to navigate through the after-effects (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021). As an illustration of this optimism, this year, with the help of the school team, we have brought back Grandparents Day, Literary Night, Math Night, Fall Festival, Spring Fling, and most recently, a school-wide field trip. Through these activities and self-reflection, NME is moving forward with addressing the social and emotional needs of our students and staff.

Leadership and COVID-19: Economic disadvantage

In Chapter 4, I wrote about how COVID-19 exacerbated the challenges for our economically disadvantaged campus. Economic disadvantage continues to be an ongoing issue at NME, and in fact, in this now second year of my transition, I have noticed challenges that were either not evident in the first year or have just now become perceptible. For example, we have a dress code that requires students to wear a shirt with school colors, jeans that are not torn, and closed shoes. While these are very basic items of clothing, some students do not have shirts or jeans that meet the dress code. We have a clothes closet in one of the classrooms with pants, shirts, new underwear, and new socks that have been donated by the community or passed on from parents whose children have either outgrown the clothes or are leaving for middle school.

The closet is available to any student at any time. We have received phone calls from parents saying their washer/dryer broke and they were unable to dress their child in the school uniform, or a new student may register who does not have clothes to meet the dress code requirements. In cases like these, the closet is available for free “shopping.” The closet is available to assure parents and caregivers that students will have the ability and the means to dress “like everyone else.”

We have Free Dress Fridays when students can bring a dollar if they would like to wear something besides the school uniform. I keep coupons for free dress in my office for students who come in “free dress” but do not have a dollar. An amount so insignificant to most but valuable to others. All funds collected are used to pay for celebrations or recognitions such as perfect attendance, A/B Honor Roll, and end-of-the-year activities. Students are also given the opportunity to earn free dress by achieving a goal or showing responsibility, respect, or kindness. We also have special weeks at school, such as Red Ribbon Week, Cancer Awareness Week, or Halloween, that give students the opportunity to have free dress days.

One of the ways we decided to give the students an out-of-school experience without any expectation of payment was a schoolwide field trip to a place where there was rock wall climbing, trampoline basketball, and ziplines for the students to enjoy. The trip was paid for by a grant, so the students did not have to pay for anything. It was a spectacular success! The entire population of the school, including teachers and staff, went on the field trip to build community and mend our culture. Many of our students had never been to such a place, much less ridden on a charter bus. The fact that we were able to provide an opportunity to experience what they otherwise would not get the chance to do was immeasurable.

Leadership and COVID-19: Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Focusing on social emotional learning was a major part of my transition experience. Upon reflection, I do not believe the damage of COVID-19 on the emotional health of students will be completely realized for a long period of time. NME struggles with chronic attendance problems intertwined with family dynamics. “Research shows that trauma and other mental health issues can influence children’s attendance, their ability to complete schoolwork in and out of class, and even the way they learn” (Grissom & Condon, 2021, p. 11). The effects of the pandemic appear to have long-term impacts on post-COVID-19 students, not limited to academics. “Unaddressed mental-health challenges will likely have a knock-off effect on academics going forward” (Dorn et al., 2021, p. 11). Our students experience meltdowns so frequently that never in my twenty-plus years of education has there been a need for so many calls to the Crisis Prevention Intervention (CPI) team. The CPI team is a trained group of campus staff who are taught how to hold or restrain a child should the child present danger of harming themselves or others. When the CPI team is called, it is because a student is in such personal turmoil that they see no other option than to act out, endangering their safety or the safety of others. Were there such incidents before COVID-19? Yes, but not as many and not as often. I have observed that many of the students who are sent to my office for discipline are there because they do not understand social contexts or appropriate interactions; they never learned, were never exposed, or have forgotten. The pandemic exposed public school inadequacies in academics and the importance of mental well-being for students. It also reinforced how important school is for children’s nutrition, exercise, friendship networks, stable relationships with caring adults, health care, social work, and childcare (Levinson & Markovits, 2021).

My principal and I often have discussions about how we can go forward to mend the culture of our campus which was further broken by COVID-19. Not only do our students need affirmations but our teachers and staff do as well. This is a powerful and impactful piece of the recovery process. We visit classrooms and leave post-it notes for teachers: “Great lesson today,” “I love your enthusiasm,” or “All students were engaged.” Small comments build culture and nurture relationships. Perhaps as a result of this, my relationship with teachers and staff has improved compared to when I first started. I have received gifts and accolades, which last year were few and far between. For example, when my staff knew I was defending my dissertation proposal in October, they gifted me with chocolate and a coffee cup that reads, “You’ve Totally Got This, Ms. Plaza.” A small memento, but the thought and support were touching, so much so that I cried when I received them.

In this analysis, it occurs to me whether I have strengthened my own social emotional well-being or how my own social emotional well-being was affected in the first year of my transition. In my journal entries, I found the word “frustrated” a few times. I am still frustrated but what I learned from the first year of being an administrator, is not to put these feelings aside. Instead, I need to use my emotions to go forward and look for a better way, ask for advice, or just simply vent to someone who is willing to listen. Reflectively, frustration did not mean defeat; it meant that I needed to keep going forward and find a better way to either express myself or complete the task. This year, the state education department allowed me to participate in professional development for leaders. The course required that I meet with a coach once a month to talk about whatever I needed to talk about in confidential conversations. This was probably one of the best experiences this year because I was able to tell an expert administrator how I was feeling or what I was wondering without fear of judgment or repercussion. I have

grown through this experience socially and emotionally, and I have learned from this coaching experience how to empower others to be their best selves. I would suggest to anyone who transitions from classroom teacher to campus leader to find a mentor who can guide them through the hard times and celebrate the good ones.

Leadership and COVID-19: Learning gaps

It is important for me to remember that test scores and learning gaps do not tell the whole story of our students. Many of NME's students are behind grade level expectations, not only due to learning challenges but also trauma. When we returned to classrooms after the pandemic shutdown, and the unknowns were daunting, I heard the phrase, "We are learning to fly the plane while we are in the air." Upon reflection, I believe this is what we were practicing even before the pandemic. Thinking back to my experience as a teacher, every year, we were given new initiatives, programs, and resources to "help" our instruction. The truth is, these new ideas did not help, and if they were promising, were not followed through, and so they fell by the wayside. The answer to the problems and issues exacerbated by COVID-19 is to take the opportunity to reflect and use what works, change what did not, and move forward with our new generation of pandemic students.

Certainly, assessments are a concrete method to determine not only learning gaps but also to evaluate growth and instructional weaknesses. Although NME has not been a campus with high assessment results (yet), teachers who have been at the campus for more than ten years insist that in the past, NME stood out as one of the best in the district. My research found that the year before the pandemic, the campus had been steadily declining in academic success and was already in need of intervention and support. Now that we are in the second year following online learning, our campus is doing better. We started as number sixteen out of sixteen elementary

schools with our first assessments this year, and as of mid-year, we rose to number thirteen. Still a long way to go, but the progress is encouraging. We have been deliberate in addressing learning gaps with data digs and concentrated intervention groups. The data digs have shown our students are still struggling with math and reading two years post-pandemic. In Professional Learning Communities, the instructional coach supports teachers by reviewing the data and strategizing how to meet the needs of their students. We have intervention Wednesdays, which focus specifically on Math (the lowest content area) based on data and specifically targets the needs of students. This is done through targeted small groups with activities to address gaps not only to meet expectations for standard content goals but also to develop students' abilities to think critically and problem-solve through a variety of strategies. Walk-throughs and observations allow me to visit classrooms and meet and reflect with teachers on how to strengthen their instruction and support those students who are moving forward in learning content. It is a perfect time to reset not only how we teach but align our strategies to how students learn. Traditional lectures, notes, and tests are no longer effective. Students need a blended learning model, using technology, instruction, and collaborative learning groups to be successful students. We will have an end-of-the-year assessment to measure not only our Spring growth but also our growth since August 2022. This data will be reviewed to further assess how we can support students and close those gaps COVID-19 exposed.

Analysis across themes

I began this autoethnographic study to tell the story of my transition from classroom teacher to campus leader. In the beginning, as evidenced in my journal entries and doctoral papers, I thought I already knew how to be a leader and exactly what to do to be a great assistant principal. The truth is, I did not know, and I am still learning as I am now approaching the end of

year two. I thought that as a teacher, I knew exactly how to take my own experiences and mold myself into an amazing campus leader because I had just come from the trenches of the classroom. I asserted that I had a distinct perspective for leading an elementary campus because I was a traditional teacher who was forced to become an online teacher and was given the opportunity to be a campus leader with applicable recent classroom and campus experiences. During my first year, I learned that although my experiences and knowledge certainly helped me to some extent as a leader, they in no way prepared me for what administrative life was really like. I did not think about how I would become so emotionally affected by the personal stories on my campus, how not every teacher I supervise is going to teach like me, and how different it would be to be responsible for 354 students instead of only students in my own classroom. I did not know that at least once a month, I would cry on the way home in my car, feeling so overwhelmed and wondering if I had made the right decision to become an assistant principal, and thinking, “Why did I do this?”

Now nearly two years have passed since I began this autoethnographic research, and I would like to say everything is great, and I know exactly what I am doing. That would be a lie. However, I have found that self-reflection is an important tool for transitioning into leadership, especially in the context of recovering from the pandemic's effects. In examining my journal writings, I observed that I did grow because, despite my doubts and challenges, I reinforced that I am a servant leader, I could do this, and I am becoming an effective campus leader.

My recording and reflection on small and big events encouraged me that I am on the right track. I did not realize how far I have come until I read my journal after the 2021-2022 school year. It gave me a sense of persistence, the confidence to trust my judgment and decisions, and an outline of how to improve to become a more effective servant leader. I need to know when to

be courageous and when to step back; model behaviors and professionalism to demonstrate expectations to staff; be a communicator who is proactive rather than reactive; listen; challenge teachers, set and follow the vision; have a sense of humor and compassion; and exhibit my belief we all work together for the betterment of students and culture. The strengthening of relationships is the cornerstone of enhancing the culture of NME.

I still journal, but my entries are not as fearful as they were in the beginning because I know that whatever it is, I can figure it out, I can ask for help, and I can keep going forward. I would say to anyone who is thinking of transitioning to have confidence and know we all started at the beginning, and most of us are still growing. It is the hardest job I have ever done in education, but also, those little flashes of light when a student goes out of their way to give you a high five, or a teacher tells you she is so glad you are there, or your principal tells you she knows she made the right decision to hire you as her second, it is all worth it.

Being an administrator before COVID-19 was no easy task, but the current educational climate has brought challenges unique to the pandemic that require being empathetic, creative, and proactive. If there is an upside to the pandemic besides magnifying what schools were lacking, it has provided us with the opportunity to build more effective instruction, support those students who need interventions, and assess what a student needs beyond academics. There is still a lot of work to do at NME that will most likely continue for several years. This recovery is messy and unpredictable. The most difficult challenges I face are consistency, patience, helping myself and others grow, and teaching others that it is a privilege and honor to serve the campus population by guiding their learning and social emotional well-being.

Yet, it is an exciting time to be an assistant principal. We are at the forefront of redesigning how education works. We need to use the opportunities given to us to build up the

school as a community centerpiece, where everyone is involved in growing our children to become happy and successful adults. As one example of this, in my district, we have received funds from the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) to address the impact of COVID-19. These funds are student-centered and are targeting academic loss, student needs, and response to COVID. To address the social and emotional needs of students, the district is using Capturing Kids Hearts and Restorative Discipline Practices. On our campus, Capturing Kids Hearts has been highly successful. It includes a thirty-minute block of time in the morning to talk and interact with students and can be as simple as asking: “How was your evening? What did you learn yesterday? What would you like to share?” This practice is used with our adults as well. Instead of being punitive, discipline is restorative: “What are you doing? What should you be doing?” We are practicing redirection and mediation instead of detention and suspension. Academically, all schools within the district have been given High Impact Tutoring programs and summer programs to help our students get more individualized support they may need to be successful. Some of the funds will be used to build STEM classrooms and offer TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and Gifted endorsements to teachers.

Writing this dissertation has been cathartic for me as I continue my experience at NME. My continued reflection year after year will enable me to always evolve as a leader and an advocate. Learning from experience is a mantra I continually reflect upon, and I realize my own transition is neither neat nor complete. “Leadership is a difficult and deeply personal task” (Boerema, 2011, p. 2). Even in light of my ongoing work as a leader, I have offered my mentorship and experience to newer assistant principals in the hopes that they can feel supported.

I tell them I am no expert, but I will certainly share experiences and listen if they should need to talk or vent.

My data in Chapter 4 describing different interactions with teachers and students, as recorded in my journal entries, indicates my understanding of cultural experiences contributing to my transition. For example, when I spoke about the teacher whose father was ill, I was listening while embracing empathy (servant leader traits). At that point, I was gaining an understanding that leadership was not simply about me but also the contributions of those I work alongside. Teachers are able to provide perspectives on the culture of the campus, the make-up of the community, and the instructional practices that have been successful or unsuccessful. With this knowledge from teachers, I feel the need to empower teachers and fortify their growth mindset. Within the NME cultural context, there are many teachers who are willing to do whatever it takes to build their capacity to help our students grow. Yet, there are some teachers who refuse to change how they have always done things because new ideas do not mesh with their own comfortable teaching style. Teachers are not always open about their perceptions of school culture, but those who are have helped me to understand why NME culture felt “broken” for so long. The culture was “broken” because the school was in an apathetic loop of low morale, low scores, little or no interaction with the school community, and no motivation to break the cycle. NME was known to be the last school in the district for improvements in assessment data, reflecting instructional needs. The community was shut out from the school, both due to the apathy of previous administrations and, more recently, the COVID pandemic.

Teachers at NME expressed their doubts about whether the administration could do anything to improve the culture. The campus previously had a revolving door for administrators, which caused the staff to be both distrustful of leaders and skeptical about visions and goals.

These doubts compelled me to understand how I could lead at NME to address issues further exacerbated by COVID-19. The gap between where we need to be for a positive culture and where we started was wide. Cultural experiences such as interactions with adults and students who are dealing with trauma, the lack of accountability for teachers for their own growth, and the unfortunate labeling of NME as a “tough” school have contributed to my vision for the direction of the campus: building a positive culture through addressing the social emotional needs of both students and staff, and addressing learning gaps and instructional needs prior to and as a result of the pandemic.

Culture and relationships were conveyed throughout this paper through storytelling and reflecting on my own personal changes through pre- and post-culture grams. “Autoethnographers describe and analyze personal experiences to understand cultural experience” (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022, p. 198). The data describing my encounters with students like Jerry, for example, conveyed the sociocultural context. My interaction with Jerry was one of many more equally as surprising because I did not expect the urgent need for social emotional healing due to the neglect of students’ and teachers’ well-being during the pandemic when we were absent from campus. I needed to use all these interactions with students and adults to build my own capacity as a servant leader. As a teacher during COVID-19 prior to being a campus leader, I gained instructional skills, experience, and intimate knowledge of how a pandemic impacts education, which contributes to my make-up as an assistant principal who prioritizes instruction, empowering and motivating teachers, developing relationships with students and their parents, and building community. I cannot alone achieve the goals of a positive school culture, social emotional health, and closing learning gaps. It is a team effort with teachers, staff, and students. Part of being a servant leader is listening, being authentic, and empowering others. This can be

achieved by making the campus teachers and staff part of the solution, enabling them to be valued for what they can contribute to the school's positive growth.

My data from Chapter 4, including my journals, course papers, and self-reflections, continue to inform my practice amid the aftermath of COVID-19. The narrative data on my interactions with staff and students reinforced my value of servant leadership. Reflecting on the learning gap data has bolstered my ideas about how outdated teaching practices such as lecturing should be replaced with hybrid classrooms. My research on social-emotional learning demonstrated to me that we can contribute to students' overall success by addressing their year of learning loss through administering to their mental health.

I believe my research for this dissertation benefits not only my evolution as an assistant principal but may also benefit any other classroom teacher who desires to be a campus leader. This dissertation contributes to research on the transition from classroom leader to campus leader. There have been articles written about instructional gaps and social emotional learning after COVID-19, but none that I have encountered about transitioning from teacher to leader—specifically, assistant principal—during the pandemic recovery. By reading this dissertation, future leaders may relate to my transitional experiences and similarly apply these findings to their own practice. Are all transition experiences the same? No, because each person brings their own experiences to the position and will find their own leadership style. Many times, assistant principals are characterized as part of the background or second in command. But without us, principals would have a much more difficult job. There needs to be more research about the position, including the difficulties and realities of going from classroom to campus leader in the role of assistant principal. Certainly, principals are THE leaders, but without assistant principals, they could not do their jobs as effectively. My experience is unique because I became an

assistant principal during a crisis and recovery from a pandemic, but future assistant principals will find themselves in their own personal transition contexts.

Future research

My reflections and experiences in this autoethnography did not address how educational leaders will guide continued recovery from COVID-19. That is further research that I hope my dissertation will inspire through conversations about what educators need to do to find our “new normal.” How long will it take to “recover”? How should classroom instruction look? How long will it take students to recover their social acumen? Future studies may examine the effective practices of post-pandemic leaders as we continue to learn from the COVID-19 fallout of learning losses and social stagnation.

Leadership beyond the transition

I am a servant leader who desires to empower others, be compassionate and empathetic, and continually move forward to define my practice. After I graduate, I plan to reach out to the superintendent of my district as Dr. Plaza and offer my services and insights based on this autoethnography and my research. I would like to contribute to the healing of our students and be a part of an improved education process on a larger scale. My goal of being a district leader is the next step for me. I have been considering district-level positions which would enable me to use my expertise as an autoethnographer and post-COVID assistant principal to guide fellow educators in the challenges of pandemic recovery. I would like to serve a much larger population to assist in what students and campus stakeholders need to move forward in a positive direction. Ideally, I would like to serve in a district position that oversees campuses to ensure they have the resources, employees, and support they need to not only recover but to progress successfully in academics and emotional health. I have also considered higher-education positions to work with

beginning teachers in leading classrooms of children who were affected by a worldwide crisis in their growth as successful humans. I would prefer to focus on the population of English Language Learners.

My data has shown growth through self-reflection. The questions posed in job interviews now seem relatively simplistic for what being an assistant principal entails: “How will you incorporate SEL for students as well as teachers? How will you bring back the community to campus? Why do you want to be an assistant principal after a pandemic?” I am thankful I had heartfelt and genuine answers, and I feel that is why I was chosen to be a campus leader. I am still discovering what being a campus leader means and how deeply the trauma of the pandemic goes. The data from this autoethnography has reinforced my goals of being a campus leader and an advocate for New Mexico Elementary.

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Vita

This dissertation was researched and written by Mona E. Plaza, BIS, M.Ed. I began a career in education in 1994 as a Language Arts middle school teacher. I have taught elementary, middle, and high school, from first grade to high school seniors. I have mostly taught Science, although I have also taught Language Arts and Social Studies. I have worked in public schools in three states: Texas, New Mexico, and Hawaii. While the majority of my experience is in the classroom, I have held other positions, including Instructional Specialist, Testing Coordinator, Coach/Mentor of New and Beginning Teachers, and currently Assistant Principal.

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