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A Phenomenological Study of Women Principals Who Resigned During the Pandemic

Abstract

It is well established that principal turnover is of grave concern in the U.S. (Goldring & Taie, 2018; Levin et al., 2020) and may have been exacerbated due to the pandemic (Steiner et al., 2022). This transcendental phenomenological study explored the experience of women principals at P-12 schools in the U.S. who voluntarily left their roles during the pandemic. Data was collected from five participants through two semi-structured interviews and a visual representation of their experience. The essence of this phenomenon was: the pandemic allowed for reflection which intensified the need for women principals to feel in harmony with their workplaces; when they did not have an alignment of values, they moved on. I conclude that, for women principals to stay in their role, they need to feel alignment with their organizations.

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Lolita A. Tabron

Second Advisor

Erin Anderson

Third Advisor

Starla J. Sieveke-Pearson

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A Phenomenological Study of Women Principals Who Resigned During the Pandemic

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A Dissertation in Practice

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

_____

by

Jessica A. Urbaniak

August 2023

Advisor: Dr. Lolita A. Tabron

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Author: Jessica A. Urbaniak
Title: A Phenomenological Study of Women Principals Who Resigned During the Pandemic
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Abstract

It is well established that principal turnover is of grave concern in the U.S. (Goldring & Taie, 2018; Levin et al., 2020) and may have been exacerbated due to the pandemic (Steiner et al., 2022). This transcendental phenomenological study explored the experience of women principals at P-12 schools in the U.S. who voluntarily left their roles during the pandemic. Data was collected from five participants through two semi-structured interviews and a visual representation of their experience. The essence of this phenomenon was: the pandemic allowed for reflection which intensified the need for women principals to feel in harmony with their workplaces; when they did not have an alignment of values, they moved on. I conclude that, for women principals to stay in their role, they need to feel alignment with their organizations.

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To my husband, Andrew, you are the best partner and dad. I love you.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In this study, I explored the shared experiences of women principals who voluntarily resigned from P-12 public schools in the U.S. during the pandemic. I began this chapter with the background to the problem, followed by the statement of the problem. Then, I shared the purpose statement, research question, conceptual framework, and definitions of related terms. This chapter concluded with assumptions, limitations, delimitations, the significance of the study, and a chapter summary.

Background of the Problem

Women principals are at the intersection of two groups prone to turnover because of the stresses of the pandemic: women leaders and school leaders. While the U.S. Department of Labor does not report its statistics by gender, other sources said women and women leaders were major participants in The Great Resignation – a global trend of 47 million workers who voluntarily resigned from their roles in 2021 (Fuller & Kerr, 2022; Klotz, 2021). According to NPR's *Consider This*, women left their jobs at twice the rate of men during the pandemic to switch sectors or provide care for their families (Cornish, 2021). The Women in the Workplace survey by LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company (2022) studied over 40,000 employees in corporate America. The results were enough to sound the alarm for the state of women in leadership; for every woman promoted to a director-level position, two women directors chose to leave the company (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2022). This rate of turnover was not found in

leaders who were men. Research on the causes of The Great Resignation points to workers having a desire jobs that do jobs that they love and align with their personal values (Corbett, 2021; Hyatt Miller & Hyatt, n.d.; Klotz, 2021; Lexington Law, 2021).

On the school leader side, it is well established that principal turnover is of grave concern in the U.S. (Goldring & Taie, 2018; Levin et al., 2020) and may have increased during the pandemic (Steiner et al., 2022). Unless there are changes to the principalship, public schools in the U.S. may continue to endure the negative impacts of principal turnover, including deepening inequities (Béteille et al., 2012; Grissom & DeMatthews, 2020; A. Miller, 2013). The research provided some rationale for principal turnover in pre-pandemic times. Principals experienced a variety of challenges that caused job dissatisfaction, including an overload of work, a lack of autonomy, insufficient compensation and development, and a lack of community and support (De Jong et al., 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2022; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Hansen, 2018; Mahfouz, 2020). While there were not yet hard numbers on principal turnover rates after the pandemic at the time of this study, the hardships endured during that time may have accelerated turnover. Principal job satisfaction among secondary principals was at a new low in 2021, with only 35% reported satisfaction in their role compared to 69% in 2019 (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2021). Data on job satisfaction among elementary principals during the pandemic was not available at the time of this study. In 2022, 27% of principals who planned to stay in their role long-term said their experience during the pandemic changed their plans (Steiner et al., 2022). During the pandemic, principals' stressors were compounded and exacerbated (DeMatthews et al.,

2022; Woo & Steiner, 2022). Principals were asked to take on many more tasks (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2022; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020) while prioritizing the mental health of staff and students over themselves (Hayes, Anderson, et al., 2022; Hayes, Flowers, et al., 2022).

During the pandemic, the conditions were ripe for women leaders and school leaders to consider leaving their positions. Minimal research attention has been directed towards the turnover of the intersection of these two groups: women principals. I could not locate any studies specific to women principal turnover, though some studies compared differences in principal gender with turnover. In 2015-2016, it was estimated that women principals made up 54% of school leaders in the U.S. and were slightly less likely to stay in their role (81.7%) than men principals (82.7%) (Goldring & Taie, 2018). Additionally, women principals are more likely to leave the education system than men principals (Fuller et al., 2007; Gates et al., 2006). Even though the studies are not centered around turnover necessarily, there is data on unique struggles for women in the principalship. Women face barriers to entering the principalship (Eckman, 2004; Shakeshaft et al., 2014). While on the job, women principals reported a struggle to balance professional and personal responsibilities (Loder, 2005; Shabazz-Anderson, 2022), including being disproportionality impacted when they entered parenthood compared to men principals (Eckman, 2004). Women principals of color experience even more challenges because of the intersectionality of their race and gender (Arrieche Yanez, 2022; Haskins, 2020; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Lomotey, 2019; Peters, 2012). The pandemic may have been more stressful for women principals than their men counterparts; one year into the

pandemic, 36% of women principals experienced constant job-related stress compared to 24% of men principals (Steiner et al., 2022). Existing studies on women principals were not explicitly centered on their turnover, leaving much to be desired in recommendations for retaining women principals. While no specific data exists yet on the turnover of women principals in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic, this group was uniquely situated to be vulnerable to resigning from their roles during this unprecedented time.

Some studies have investigated principal turnover generally, but some of the methods are not without critique. Turnover in the principalship has primarily been studied by asking current principals how different factors influence their job satisfaction and their intentions to stay or resign (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018). Few research articles asked principals who had already resigned why they chose to leave. Those that have – studies by Hansen (2018), Maxfield (2022), and Farley-Ripple (2012) – included a combined fifty-seven perspectives from principals who have voluntarily left their roles, less than half of whom were women. Given that about 20% of principals turnover each year in the U.S. (Goldring & Taie, 2018), this exposed a severely understudied aspect of principal turnover that may have been previously overlooked.

I aimed to understand better the conceptions and misconceptions of turnover among women principals in the pandemic through a qualitative approach. There may have been benefits to isolating the experiences of women who have exited the principalship. Practitioners in the field, including those who manage and hire principals, can use the findings and analysis to make the principalship more equitable and sustainable, especially for women. Educational leadership preparation programs may use the findings of this

study to lead systems where school leaders want to stay. Additionally, current women principals may benefit from an opportunity to hear from peers who have exited their roles to find solace and advice if they are contemplating resignation.

Statement of the Problem

Few researchers studied turnover by listening to the women principals who voluntarily left their jobs. There was even less data on this within the context of leading a school through the pandemic. Because of this gap in the research, there may be unexplored reasons why women in the principalship resign. Studying the turnover of women principals from those who have experienced it could add valuable knowledge to the field of educational leadership on the causes of women principal turnover. Data on this topic could elicit new strategies for retaining women principals.

Purpose Statement and Research Question

This transcendental phenomenological study explored the experience of women principals at P-12 public schools in the U.S. who voluntarily left their roles during the pandemic. My central research question was: *what shared meaning did women principals ascribe to their experience leading P-12 public schools in the U.S. through the pandemic and their decision to resign?*

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a visual representation that "explains…the main things to be studied –the key factors, concepts, or variables –and the presumed relationships among them" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 18). It is a "tentative theory of the phenomena" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 39). Maxwell (2013) compared a theory to a closet with

places to “hang” data (p. 49). Using this perspective, I created a conceptual framework, located in Figure 1.

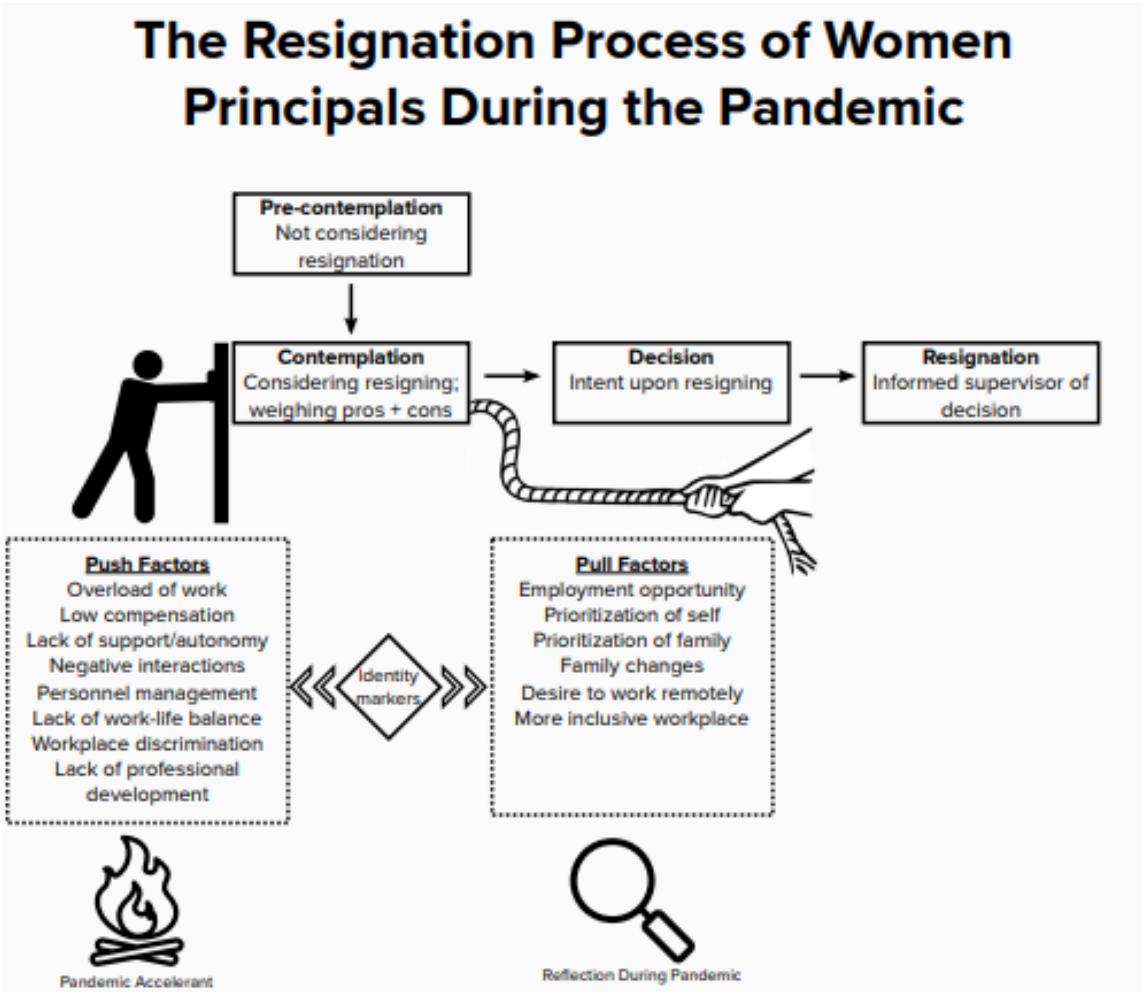

Figure 1: Initial Conceptual Framework

After reading the literature on principal turnover and challenges for women in the principalship, I put together a working theory of the process of voluntary resignations for women principals. I looked up different decision-making theories and utilized some components from Prochaska and DiClemente's (1986) cycle of change used for addiction. This model elicited the terms 'pre-contemplation' and 'contemplation,' which I used for 'not considering resigning' and 'considering resigning,' respectively. I considered these the first two steps of the process of the resignation for women principals. In the contemplation stage, there are push and pull factors when considering

resigning. I modeled this part of the framework after a study by Farley-Ripple et al. (2012) who used the push-pull model in their study on principal turnover. According to the research, there may have been many 'push' factors in women principals' decision to resign. For example, an overload of work and lack of work-life balance were reasons reported for a principal wanting to leave their role (Eckman, 2004; Hayes, Anderson, et al., 2022). The literature also described how the pandemic was an accelerant for making things hard about the job even harder (Bloch, 2021; Brackett et al., 2020). I represented this with a fire underneath the push factors. At the same time, women principals may also have been 'pulled' out of their roles by a new opportunity or a desire for a more inclusive workplace (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2022). The literature showed that many people took time to reflect during the pandemic (Klotz, 2021), thus this aspect was included as a magnifying glass. The identity markers of women principals may have served as mediators of push or pull experiences (Arrieche Yanez, 2022; Eckman, 2004; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Lomotey, 2019) and the framework included that influence. Once a woman principal felt pushed and/or pulled enough, they may have decided to resign which is the third stage of the framework. Finally, they may have gone through with the resignation and informed their supervisor, the final stage.

There were assumptions within this framework. One assumption was that women principals contemplated their decision. This means they weighed the pros and cons of staying and resigning. I could not say with certainty that this happened – it was only my best guess at the process. Another assumption was that the pandemic influenced the

professional and personal lives of women principals – it both exacerbated push factors in their job and caused additional reflection that may have pulled them towards other desires. These were some of the many assumptions baked into the framework.

There were some strengths and limitations to the framework. One strength is that it shows the process or a potential process. Women were shown as active agents in their decisions instead of passive actors with things happening to them. It included factors that were present before the pandemic and recognized the impact the pandemic may have had on their decision to resign. However, there were limitations to the framework. First, it only illustrated the one-way resignation process; most likely, the process was messier than represented with cycles between contemplation and pre-contemplation. Another limitation was that the push/pull factors lists were not exhaustive based on the research, especially in terms of the pandemic (running a remote school, school safety guidelines, losing loved one to COVID, etc). There may have been some alternative explanations such as a school closure or a women may have felt pushed out by their supervisors. The conceptual framework for this study was my best guess at what was happening prior to data collection. I reflected on and modified the conceptual framework after data analysis and included it as part of my discussion in chapter 5. In the next section, I defined some of the terms used in this study.

Definition of Terms

Epoche: the suspension of judgment; when a researcher sets aside, to the extent possible, their own experiences to best understand the perspectives of participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Essence: the goal of a phenomenological study; a brief description of the shared experience of the phenomenon based on the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Intent to Resign: a principal's reported decision to not return to their role after the school year (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018).

Job Satisfaction: a measure of contentment and happiness within a principal's job

Men: in this study, the term 'men' is used instead of male to demonstrate inclusivity. When studies used the word 'male,' I changed it to 'man' for continuity. In quotes from participants, I did not change the term 'male.'

Pandemic: the COVID-19 pandemic had its most significant impact on U.S. schools from 2020-2022. In January 2023, over 6.6 million deaths worldwide were attributed to this strain of the coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2023).

Phenomenology: the type of qualitative study that investigates the lived experiences of those who have experienced a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Principal: in this study, 'principal' will describe the leader of a school in P-12 public school settings in the U.S.

Principal Turnover: when a principal does not return to the same school from one year to the next (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018) or leaves prior to the natural end of the school year.

Women: in this study, the term 'women' is used instead of female to demonstrate inclusivity. When studies used the word 'female,' I changed it to 'woman' for continuity. In quotes from participants, I did not change the term 'female.'

Assumptions

The Pandemic Impacted Personal and Professional Life for Women Principals

An assumption in this study was that the pandemic disrupted the personal and professional lives of women principals (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2022; Levin et al., 2020). The study was centered in the context of living and leading through the pandemic. It was assumed that life was different than usual during the pandemic for all participants.

Women Principals Were Open and Honest About Their Resignations

I put trust in the participants of this study to answer questions openly and honestly. As the researcher, I did my best to establish safety and comfort to allow for an easy, nonjudgmental conversation. I assumed that women principals who wanted to participate in the study shared their reflections as they remembered them without embellishment or minimization their experiences.

Women Principals Recalled Their Experiences Accurately

The study was focused on women who resigned from their positions one to two years ago. There was an assumption that participants accurately recalled their experiences of being a principal and shared their experiences as such.

Limitations

Small Sample & Skewed Representation

This study included five participants. This was a small sample of women principals who voluntarily resigned from P-12 public schools in the U.S. during the pandemic. Additionally, the sample may have been skewed because participants may have been

more qualified, experienced, or older than what may be considered typical for a principal, especially in a turnaround or Title I school. Participants in this study may have been considered over-qualified for the principal role because they had or were pursuing a doctoral degree. All participants presented as though they had agency over their lives and careers, which may not be the case for all women principals. Five of the six participants ultimately landed a job that may be considered a promotion from the principalship. This sample was small and may have been skewed which was a limitation of the study.

Participants Must Have Expressed an Interest

All the participants in the study voluntarily expressed interest by replying to an online post. This meant that all participants wanted to discuss their experiences. There may have been other former women principals who did not wish to share their experiences and whose stories may not be represented in this study.

Nature of Connection Via Zoom

The interviews for this study took place via Zoom. This allowed for convenience for both the participants and the researcher. It allowed for a nation-wide sample. There were occasional interview interruptions due to Wi-Fi connectivity or pressing issues for participants at work or home.

Delimitations

Gender Identity

Participants in this study identified as women. The study was open to cis- and transgender women. This delimitation was to focus the study on the experiences of women. Only cisgender women expressed interest and thus participated in the study.

Principal Position

All participants in this study were principals at P-12 public schools in the U.S. This included principalships at district- and charter-run schools.

Circumstances of Resignation

All participants in the study left their positions voluntarily and unprompted. This included women principals who left their school for a different job opportunity or exited the workforce. This study did not include women who were terminated or forced to resign. While this was not a requirement at the time of the study, the study did not include women who continued in the principalship at another school.

All Participants Worked at Title I Schools

All interested and eligible participants of this study worked in Title I schools. It was not my intention to delimit the sample in this way. Given that all participants worked in schools that serve primarily students from low-income backgrounds, this may have skewed the collected data in some way.

Nearly All Participants Earned or Were Working On a Doctorate Degree

Four of the five participants had earned or were working towards a doctoral degree at the time of the study. When I was interviewing participants, many expressed that they wanted to help other women in the doctoral journey and thus volunteered for my study. Because most of the participants had or were pursuing a terminal degree, this may have impacted the type of data collected.

Period of Resignation

All participants in this study were principals during the pandemic. This meant, at the latest, they began leading their school in the 2019-2020 school year. All participants resigned during or after the 2020-2021 or 2021-2022 school year.

Significance of the Study

Through my study, I aimed to share the shared experience of women principals who resigned while leading schools during the pandemic. Given the inequitable impact of the pandemic on women and the unique hardships school leaders endured between 2020-2022, there was much to be learned by exploring this topic further. From this study, the findings were specific to women principals; however, "a rising tide lifts all boats," and the proposed recommendations may be a benefit all principals. The findings of this study could contribute to scholarly research and practice in the field.

This unique set of data elicited new ideas for scholarly research in the educational leadership field. Only three studies, all with small sample sizes, interviewed principals after they resigned from their positions. To my knowledge, at the time of this research, a study was yet to interview women principals who led through the pandemic and then resigned. This study added additional voices on principal turnover research from this perspective. And, it added a new subsection of research specific to the turnover of women principals.

The study was also significant to the educational leadership field in practice, specifically those who hire and manage principals. The findings could help create job descriptions congruent with what women principals seek in a position. Those who

manage principals may use this research to set up system that support and retain women principals. Having women principals stay in their positions for longer which could allow for more continuity and sustained culture for staff and students within schools. Additionally, women principals and aspiring women principals may find inspiration to advocate for changes to their jobs to best meet their personal and professional needs after hearing from those who have exited the role.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided a foundation for this study's focus on women principals who turned over during the pandemic. I shared the background on this problem, a distilled purpose statement, the research question, my initial conceptual framework, definitions of related terms, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the study. This study included four additional chapters. I reviewed the literature on principal turnover and women principals' unique challenges in chapter two. In chapter three, I detailed my phenomenological approach and methods for my study. In chapter four, I analyzed the data collected in this study. In chapter five, I described my findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review provided an in-depth analysis of research relating to women principals who resigned during the COVID-19 pandemic. I began by reviewing the literature focused on principal turnover. I detailed the prevalence of this problem and impact on schools when principals leave. I explored the challenges in this role that led to job dissatisfaction that could have led to resignations. From this body of research, I found very little data specific to principal turnover in women. This led me to also explore to the experiences of women principals reported in the literature. In the second section, I discussed the challenges women principals face that could lead to their resignation. I aimed to situate the turnover of principals and the experience of women principals within the larger context of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the final section, I discussed The Great Resignation and its impact on women and women leaders. Through this literature review, I learned that more focused research was necessary on the turnover of women principals, specifically within the context of the pandemic.

Methodology of the Literature Review

In reviewing the existing literature, I aimed to understand better the reasons why women principals voluntarily leave their roles. In this literature review, I sought to use the most salient pre-pandemic research within each section. Then I layered the more recent, pandemic-related research to highlight impacts the pandemic had on principal turnover generally, and when available, women principals specifically. I delimited my

literature review to focus on domestic sources. Women principals in the U.S. could have a vastly different reality than peers in other countries and contexts. The U.S. educational system is a unique landscape with many types of schools, state-specific accountability measures, and issues of inequity that may be specific to American schools. For this reason, I used studies, dissertations, books, and reports focused on principals in U.S. public schools. I also read articles and listened to podcasts about the changes in the workforce during the pandemic.

Search Strategies

Keyword search terms included principal turnover, women principals, female principals, COVID-19, job satisfaction, pandemic, retention, school leadership, and The Great Resignation. For research relating to principals and women principals, I used ERIC for forward searches. I utilized Google Scholar to find articles that cited studies relevant to my topic. I reviewed and critically analyzed many sources and included seventy-seven of the most closely aligned articles in the literature review.

Principal Turnover

In this section, I started by sharing the prevalence, impacts, and inequity of principal turnover. Then, I discussed challenges specific to the principalship that may contribute to turnover. Lastly, I synthesized the most recent research on the principalship during the pandemic.

Before presenting the emerging from the existing literature, I want to caution readers on the many ways principal turnover may be skewed in the research. Some research uses job satisfaction or an intent to resign as markers of principal turnover. In my view, a

principal declaring an “intent to resign” is different from a principal who actually resigned from their position; there may have been principals who said they planned to leave but ended up staying and, conversely, principals who planned to stay and left at the end of the year. Similarly, data on factors that contributed to principal retention do not necessarily mean they would leave the job if they no longer experienced that factor. My literature review taught me that principal turnover has been most often studied using these markers. These factors may only be part of the complexity of principal turnover. Furthermore, the research on principal turnover rarely differentiates based on principal effectiveness or job satisfaction. In my view, these factors matter in the complex problem of principal turnover. I wanted to make the reader aware of these cautions before discussing the research. I did my best to explain findings as they were presented in the research despite the many ways this problem has been studied.

Prevalence of Principal Turnover

At the time of this study, the most recent research on the prevalence of principal turnover was conducted prior to the pandemic. In a national survey of about 5,700 principals in 2015-16, 18% of public-school principals across the United States left their position; of these, 10% sought a new role while 6% moved schools (2% left but the status was unknown) (Goldring & Taie, 2018). Nearly all smaller-scale studies mirrored Goldring & Taie’s (2018) finding that about one in five principals leave annually. In a longitudinal study from 1987 to 2001, 14% and 18% of all principals turned over in Illinois and North Carolina, respectively (Gates et al., 2006). Between 2003-2009, 22% of principals in Miami-Dade County Public Schools turned over, most transferring to

other schools within the same district (Béteille et al., 2012). In the Denver metropolitan area between 2010-2015, 19% of all schools had a principal turnover in each given year; on average, 63% of schools experienced principal turnover (Beckett, 2018). The quantitative data on actual principal turnover appears consistent; about 20% of principals leave their roles each year across a national study and city- and state-wide studies.

It can be challenging to visualize what 20% of principals leaving each year looks like in the school context. This meant many principals did not stay at the same school for lengthy periods. Between 1999 and 2017, the average principal in Texas left a school after four years (Guthery & Bailes, 2022). Short tenures are even more common in new principals. Using Texas data from 1989 to 2010, Fuller (2012) found that only about half of newly hired middle school principals (51%) and high school principals (47%) stay in their roles for three years. This meant that the average high school principal did not see their first freshmen class graduate (Fuller, 2012). The more recent data on Texas principal turnover is even more alarming. Davis & Anderson (2021) studied 1,113 first-time principals in Texas from 2008 to 2011 to understand their turnover patterns. Shockingly, half (50.1%) of all first-time principals leave their schools even sooner, within two years. After five years, the most common trajectory (26.6%) for new principals is to leave the state education system, in comparison to promotion (15.5%) or demotion (17.9%). Between 2013-2018, almost half of all Colorado public schools experienced principal turnover in the six-year period (Carpenter et al., 2022). In sum, many principals do not stay at the same school for long. In the next section, I will explore

the impacts of principal turnover, which presents an inequity in the U.S. education system.

Impacts & Inequities of Principal Turnover

In this section, I synthesized research on the impacts on students and teachers when principals leave. Two major themes emerged from the literature in this space. First, there may be a connection between principal turnover and student achievement, though it is complex. Secondly, principal turnover is much more common in schools serving students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and students who have performed low on standardized tests. Five empirical quantitative studies from before the pandemic exemplify these points.

The research shows that principal turnover's effect on student achievement was complex and multi-faceted. Béteille et al. (2012) performed a longitudinal study from 2003-2009 in approximately 400 Miami-Dade County Public Schools. They found that students with a new principal made lower achievement in math (0.007 standard deviations). However, students with a new teacher showed a decrease in math achievement more than twice as large as students with a new principal, who were likelier to have a staff of newer and less effective teachers. Béteille et al. (2012) argued that these causes might have been connected as they found that principal turnover increased the turnover of effective teachers, especially among principals new to the district, which could have compounded the negative impacts on student achievement.

Miller (2013) had a different take on principal turnover and used twelve years of administrative data from 979 schools in North Carolina. Under new principals, scores

dropped for two years before rebounding to typical levels after a five-year principal tenure. This mirrored data from a report from the New Teacher Center (2014) that stated it takes an average of five years for principals to establish a vision and make organizational changes to improve school performance. Miller (2013) attributed the decrease in scores to the instability that occurred with a change in leadership, including lower teacher retention, a loss of institutional knowledge, and less familiarity with students, teachers, and the community.

Another source did not show a connection between principal turnover and performance. Carpenter et al. (2022) used a dataset of all 1,703 Colorado schools from 2013-2018. They found that principal turnover did not significantly impact school performance data or ratings. This study left much to be desired because the researchers only looked at data from the 2013-2014 and 2017-2018 school years and did not to differentiate when principal transition(s) occurred within the six-year timeframe.

Béteille et al. (2012), Miller (2013), and Carpenter et al. (2022) did not differentiate findings with reasons why a principal left. Two studies attempted to address this critique of principal turnover data by looking at types of principal transitions and their effects on school performance. Bartanen et al. (2019) categorized principal transitions into transfers, exits (e.g., retirement), promotions, and demotions and analyzed their impacts on student achievement in Missouri from 2001-2015 and Tennessee from 2007-2015. The results showed that the type of principal transition influenced the change in student achievement (Bartanen et al., 2019). The most prominent adverse effects on standardized test scores were when a principal was promoted to a central office position or transitioned to a

different school. Bartanen et al. (2019) speculated that this drop in scores was because of the departure of an effective principal, given their type of turnover. Conversely, there can be positive effects on school performance when a principal is demoted, presumably for ineffectiveness (Bartanen et al., 2019). While the researcher was explicit in that this interpretation requires caution, the study highlighted that the reason a principal turned over could determine the impacts on student learning: if a strong principal left, the school may have suffered, but if an ineffective principal departed, it might have been positive for the school (Bartanen et al., 2019).

Yan (2020) also categorized principal departure and took it further to study principal turnover regarding student demographics and working conditions. Yan (2020) used the 2011-2012 Schools and Staffing Survey and 2013 Principal Follow-Up Survey, which included 6,590 observations that were weighted to be representative of all public schools in the U.S. Yan (2020) uncovered a stark inequity in principal movement; principals in schools serving high concentrations of color were 60-70% more likely to move to another school that principals serving schools with lower concentrations of students of color (p. 108). The other studies also explored principal turnover as an equity issue. Béteille et al. (2012) found that principals turned over more frequently (26%) in schools that served more students from low-income backgrounds, while only 17% of principals turned over in schools that served fewer students from low-income backgrounds. Higher-poverty, lower-performing schools were 35% more likely to get a principal new to the district than lower-poverty, higher-performing schools. When principals moved within the district, they most often moved to lower-poverty, higher-performing schools. This illustrated that

high-poverty schools were often a “stepping stone” (p. 904) for principals to gain experience before moving to a lower-poverty school (Béteille et al., 2012). Miller’s (2013) findings matched Béteille et al. (2012) that schools serving students who were lower-performing and of higher-poverty backgrounds experienced more principal turnover. Miller (2013) was able to make the correlation that the more times a school had a principal transition, the lower the teacher retention and the lower the student data (p. 65). This most commonly occurred in schools serving students from low-income backgrounds. Grissom & DeMatthews (2020) called this phenomenon “principal churn,” or the revolving door of novice principals in traditionally underserved schools. They named it one of the most significant barriers to educational equity.

It is important to note that studies by Béteille et al. (2012), Miller (2013), Carpenter et al. (2022), Bartanen et al. (2019), and Yan (2022) are missing key factors such as whether principals left voluntarily or involuntarily, whether they were satisfied or dissatisfied in their positions, and whether they were effective or ineffective in their roles. This is a common critique among principal turnover research, as Rangel (2018) noted in her literature review. However, two trends are clear: there may be a relationship between principal turnover and student achievement, and principal turnover is more common in schools serving students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and/or students who performed low on standardized tests. Next, I explored why principals have historically turned over and the added challenges the pandemic brought on for principals that may have increased turnover.

Causes of Principal Job Satisfaction & Intent to Resign

There are many reasons why a principal may want to leave their role. In this section, I explored the trends in challenges that principals faced in their roles that led to job satisfaction or intent to resign. Most of the research in this area was conducted before the pandemic. Throughout the research, the significant reasons for principal turnover before the pandemic were long hours, lack of work-life balance, high expectations despite low autonomy, insufficient compensation, lack of support and professional development, and negative interactions within the community.

Long Hours

As one principal said, "The job of the principal is never done" (Quinlan-Crandall, 2017, p. 128), which can take a toll on the longevity of a principal. Multiple sources have demonstrated that principals' long hours contributed to job dissatisfaction. Goldring & Taie (2018) used data from the 2015-16 National Teacher and Principal Survey and Principal Follow-Up Survey through the National Education of Statistics and found that, of the 5,700 U.S. principals surveyed, almost 60% reported they spent 60 or more hours per week on the job, or twelve-hour workdays on average. Principals who reported long hours were likelier to leave their schools than principals who worked 45 to 59 hours per week (Goldring & Taie, 2018). The number of hours principals work has increased over time. DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran's (2003) study of 1,543 principals and assistant principals in Virginia in 2003 demonstrated this. In that study, 84% of school leaders reported working 50 or more hours per week, an increase from 68% of school leaders in 1988 (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Even though principals worked long hours,

some reported they could still not keep up with the tasks required of the role. Of those surveyed who worked over 40 hours per week, two-thirds said they still did not have enough time to meet minimum expectations (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). This workload is not without impact on a principal's tenure at a school. In a literature review, Fuller et al. (2015) reported that an increased workload significantly increased turnover among principals. Interviews with fourteen charter school principals from New York City supported this trend. Torres (2020) reported, "The toll of working hours…was most salient to leaders' decisions to leave leadership" (p. 171).

Lack of Work-Life Balance

Across the research, it was rare for principals to report a healthy work-life balance. This was associated with turnover as well as adverse health and well-being. The number one reason for job dissatisfaction (77%) among 176 Midwest principals surveyed was balancing professional and personal responsibilities (De Jong et al., 2017, p. 363). These principals specified that working evening events after juggling many responsibilities throughout the day led to exhaustion and frustration (De Jong et al., 2017). Mahfouz (2020) had similar findings, with twelve of thirteen principals in Pennsylvania reporting family-work balance as a stressor, including the many after-school duty hours, especially for principals with young children. Lemoine et al. (2014) underscored the importance of principals being present at school events to build relationships with students, staff, parents, and community members. Two studies demonstrated the additional hours at school may have pull principals away from their families and caused resignations. In a small qualitative study, rural principals in Minnesota reported that lack of time for family

needs was one reason they resigned (Hansen, 2018). Quinlan-Crandall (2017) surveyed 88 principals in a northeastern U.S. state and asked whether balancing their professional work and personal time was essential to their decision to remain in their role. Over 95% of principals agreed or strongly agreed that this work and life balance influenced their career decisions (Quinlan-Crandall, 2017).

The long hours demanded by a the job impacted principals' health and well-being. Ray et al. (2020) found in a questionnaire of 473 building administrators in Arkansas that "principals work longer hours, are more sleep deprived, more dehydrated, have poorer diet practices, exercise less regularly, and spend less time with their family and friends than the general population" (p. 435). A Pennsylvania principal in a qualitative study by Mahfouz (2020) reported, "my health issues since I became the head principal have doubled! The pace you have to keep – I joke, but it's killing me a slow death" (p. 450). It is no wonder that long hours coupled with a lack of work-life balance led to principal turnover (Fuller et al., 2015).

High Expectations Despite Low Autonomy

It is not solely the long hours and lack of balance, the expectations of the principalship also led to stress. Combs et al. (2009), in a questionnaire of 228 elementary principals in the southwest, used findings to describe the principalship as "unrelenting" (p. 13) and pressure to handle many competing tasks at the same time. One principal in the study described handling competing tasks as "keeping all the balls in the air… there is really too much to do!" (Combs et al., 2009, p. 12). Mahfouz (2020) had similar findings in a small qualitative study of Pennsylvania principals. They found that principals face

many job-related stressors, including the constant requirement to address all problems with a sense of urgency, which can cause emotional exhaustion (Mahfouz, 2020). Mahfouz (2020) said it best by saying, "[principals] are expected to take full responsibility for any conflict, misunderstanding or mistake that takes place in their buildings" (p. 452). This was echoed in De Jong et al.'s (2017) survey of 176 Midwestern secondary principals. Ninety percent described feeling "inundated with high job demands and unreasonable expectations" (De Jong et al., 2017, p. 360), leading to job-related stress and job dissatisfaction. In short, the principalship was described as intense, complex, and dense. For these reasons, some principals experienced stress and became unsatisfied with their roles which may have contributed to turnover (Combs et al., 2009; De Jong et al., 2017; Mahfouz, 2020).

The principalship is even more complex because they are often juggling the problems of the school without enough autonomy to feel empowered to solve the issues at hand. The augmentation of state and federal accountability measures combined with compliance-driven initiatives took away autonomy from principals (Goodwin et al., 2005). In a historical view of the principalship, Goodwin (2005) described the role as an "accumulation of expectations over the last thirty years" (p. 1-2), including additional responsibilities from federal and state legislation, local mandates, funding crises, and equity issues. These compliance-based tasks required of principals led to stress. In a quantitative survey of 77 Texas school leaders by Porter (2021), the number one reported stressor was accountability and compliance with federal, state, or other organizational policies (p. 141). This included "unrealistic expectations" (Porter, 2021, p. 143) for

improving scores on high-stakes tests. However, not all research found accountability to be a top stressor. In Mahfouz's (2020) study of thirteen Pennsylvania principals, only two reported that accountability was a stressor for them. This discrepancy may highlight the difference in expectations for accountability in different states and its impact on principals and their stress levels. Instead, Mahfouz (2020) highlighted that constant change, including pivots on policies and procedures, was a stressor reported by over half of the participants. One participant said, "When we finally feel like we're in a good place, oops, wait now, let's push in a different direction" (Mahfouz, 2020, p. 446). Depending on their location, some principals may have felt stress from accountability measures while others felt the pressure to comply with new policies, leading to stress. Principals lacked autonomy in both circumstances (Mahfouz, 2020; Porter, 2021).

Principals have been described as "middle managers" because they are the conduit between school districts and classrooms (DeMatthews et al., 2021, p. 160). Only 55% of the 1,543 Virginia principals reported they had a high level of authority to make decisions in their areas of responsibility (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Furthermore, principals said they were often pulled away from work that they felt was most important; 176 secondary principals in the Midwest reported that only 65% of their time was "making a positive difference for students" (De Jong et al., 2017, p. 359). This lack of autonomy was a factor that may cause principals in rural Minnesota and Texas to resign (Hansen, 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2022). Sixty-nine percent of principals in a survey of 424 principals were frustrated with their lack of decision-making power, especially regarding dismissing personnel at their school (Levin et al., 2020).

In a qualitative study of three North Carolina principals who returned to the classroom, Maxfield (2022) reported that pre-pandemic principals felt they needed to compromise with district leadership, teachers, parents, and community members too often, which led to their decision to depart the principalship. Hansen (2018), who interviewed principals who had left their position, recommended that districts refrain from micromanaging principals and allow them to carry out their vision. Others called for more autonomy, authority, and agency for principals to identify problems and implement solutions (Levin et al., 2020; Ross, 2022).

Insufficient Compensation

If workers feel they are not sufficiently rewarded – monetarily, socially, intrinsically, or a combination– they can begin to feel neglected and thus are vulnerable to turnover (Leiter & Maslach, 2003). In a review of the literature, Rangel (2018) found that salary was the most researched factor in terms of principal turnover; however, the varying ways in which it has been studied cannot provide a clear delineation of salary's impact on principal turnover (pp. 109-110). Two studies have shown a link between principal compensation and turnover from the perspective of principals who have resigned. In a small study of former principals in rural Minnesota, five of six participants reported low compensation as a reason they left (Hansen, 2018). Maxfield (2022) had a similar finding in a qualitative study of three North Carolina principals who left their role to return to the classroom. Participants felt that their principal salaries were not a reflection of their workload and thus was a factor in their resignation (Maxfield, 2022). The inverse was also reported in Yan's (2020) study from the 2012-13 Principal Follow-Up Survey. If

principals were satisfied with their salary, they were 53% more likely to report that they intended to stay in their role (Yan, 2020). Compensation was also a factor for principals planning to leave in the near future. Levin et al. (2020) surveyed 424 U.S. principals on what matters most to them. Of principals who were planning to leave in the next three years, 40% reported compensation as a factor, while only 20% of principals who planned to stay reported compensation as a factor (Levin et al., 2020).

However, other studies demonstrated that compensation was not an essential factor in the decision to persist in their positions. Farley-Ripple et al. (2012) found, in a mixed-methods study of one hundred Delaware principals, that most administrators did not report that their career moves were because of economic factors (p. 803). This was also true in a survey by Quinlan-Crandall (2017) of 270 principals in the northeastern U.S. Participants' compensation was rated as least important compared to time requirements, stress, relationships, and accountability. Overall, the importance of compensation is unclear in terms of principal turnover. Despite this, many have said the time has come to increase compensation for educators in the K-12 space (Carver-Thomas et al., 2022; Cooper & Martinez Hickey, 2022; De Jong et al., 2017; Farley-Ripple et al., 2012) and it may be one of the most straightforward approaches for addressing principal retention (Schwartz & Diliberti, 2022).

Lack of Support and Professional Development

While the jury is still out on the connection between compensation and principal turnover, some research has shown a clear need expressed by principals for their employers to support them. Four studies demonstrated that principals are more likely to

have job dissatisfaction or leave their role without adequate district support, including professional development. In three studies that interviewed principals who had resigned from their positions, all nine participants expressed that a lack of professional support contributed to their decision to leave. Hansen (2018) interviewed six rural principals in Minnesota. All six reported a lack of professional support as a reason to leave their role (Hansen, 2018). Maxfield (2022) studied three principals in North Carolina that returned to the classroom, all of whom reported that there was little support provided to them that was specific to the unique challenges of the role. Farley-Ripple et al.'s (2012) study saw that the inverse of this was also true. Through interviews with forty-eight former and current principals, they learned that positive support from the district was the second most salient reason principals reported remaining in their roles. This support looked like being part of a team, supportive relationships, support for specific needs, and trusting a principal's judgment.

Inadequate district support led to principal discontentment in De Jong et al.'s (2017) study on 176 principals in the Midwest. A lack of district support – described as not being backed by the superintendent in decisions, not feeling encouraged by the superintendent, not being part of a supportive district leadership team, and feeling micromanaged -- led to job dissatisfaction (De Jong et al., 2017, p. 364). Levin et al. (2020) had similar findings. Levin et al. (2020) surveyed 424 U.S. principals on what matters most to them. Principals were grouped by whether they were planning to stay or leave their school at the end of the school year. Over half (51%) of principals who were planning to leave reported that "unresponsiveness from the district" (p. 13) was a factor

for their resignation compared to 32% of principals who were planning to stay (Levin et al., 2020). Additionally, over half (53%) of principals planning to leave reported that their district did not use effective retention strategies, such as providing more fiscal flexibility or additional school resources for effective principals (Levin et al., 2020). This highlighted a lack of trust in principals by their district leadership.

For some principals, support from the district is in the form of professional development. Nearly all principals (85%) in Levin et al.'s (2020) study desired more professional development. Principals who were planning to leave reported a higher likelihood of barriers to professional development, such as lack of time (80% compared to 72% of principals who planned to stay), lack of money (40% compared to 32%), and insufficient building coverage (40% compared to 27%) (Levin et al., 2020). These numbers illustrated the need for professional development for principals to reduce turnover. Another study attempted to explore a connection between factors that lead to principal job satisfaction and thus retention. Quinlan-Crandall (2017) found that principals who reported they were overall happy in their roles were significantly more likely ($p = .001$) to denote that professional development from the district was more important for principals who were unhappy in their roles (p. 126). It is evident in these two studies that professional development matters to principals and could be a factor in their retention.

Negative Interactions Within School Community

Community in the workplace can be described by the quality of social interactions (Leiter & Maslach, 2003). In one study, the principalship was described as "the loneliest

job in town" (Zellner et al., 2002, p. 1). Studies have examined the role of isolation and quality interactions (or the lack thereof) in their connection to principal job satisfaction and retention. Bauer & Silver (2018) surveyed approximately two hundred first-year principals in the southeastern U.S. to examine isolation's influence on self-efficacy, burnout, job satisfaction, and intention to leave. The researchers were explicit in that isolation is challenging to study because of its lack of uniformity – an environment that may make one principal feel lonely may be sufficient for another principal. Their findings, despite this, were that "isolation represents the most potent predictor of a new principal's intention to leave" (Bauer & Silver, 2018, p. 315).

De Jong et al. (2017) looked at community as the impact of negative interactions with staff, students, and parents on principal job dissatisfaction. In a mixed-methods survey of 176 principals from the Midwest, principals reported that managing relationships with difficult staff was the number two factor that led to job dissatisfaction (49%) behind workload (89%) (De Jong et al., 2017, p. 361). Participants reported a constant challenge to communicate with teachers they perceived as unprofessional, poorly trained, or having a fixed mindset about teaching strategies (De Jong et al., 2017). Parents also caused principals grief, citing a lack of parental involvement for students with behavioral concerns and an over-involvement of "helicopter" parents (De Jong et al., 2017). In a different study, De Matthews et al. (2022) interviewed ten superintendents on why rural principals in their district voluntarily resigned. All ten superintendents emphasized the need for a principal's "fit" within their community; principals described as "outsiders" and principals that did not build their life within the community that they served were

more likely to voluntarily resign (DeMatthews et al., 2022). This highlighted the necessity for principals to be enveloped in the community they were serving; if they did not, they were more likely to resign and thus add to principal turnover.

Torres (2020) looked at the inverse of this challenge. He studied fourteen principals and executive directors of stand-alone charter schools in New York and New Jersey and the connection to relationships and retention. His findings were that if principals perceived positive relationships with students, families, and staff, they stated those were the "most important reasons to stay" (Torres, 2020, p. 171). Farley-Ripple et al. (2012) summed this up in their mixed-methods study by stating, "the clearest factor in terms of administrator behavior that emerged as influential in career decision-making was working relationships" (p. 802). This study asked one hundred Delaware principals what they liked most about their positions, and the overwhelmingly dominant response was "the kids!"; this was for two reasons: first, the relationship with students and second, the feeling of efficacy from helping students succeed (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012). Positive relationships with staff and students may be a significant factor in understanding whether a principal continues in their role.

The pandemic presented a new set of challenges for principals which may have increased turnover. In the next section, I synthesized the research on the principalship during the pandemic.

Principal Turnover During the Pandemic

Although teacher turnover due to the pandemic has been highly publicized, less has been reported about principal turnover at the time of this study (Schwartz & Diliberti,

2022). During the pandemic, principal job dissatisfaction and intent to resign were both significantly higher. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals survey of 502 preK-12 principals, in 2021, principal job satisfaction was at a new low, with only 35% of principals being satisfied in their role compared to 69% in 2019 (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2021). Forty-five percent of respondents reported that the pandemic accelerated their plans to leave the profession (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2020). A different post-pandemic survey of 1,540 U.S. principals had similar findings. In 2022, 27% of principals changed their minds about staying in their role – before the pandemic, they reported they were unlikely to leave but now were likely to resign (Steiner et al., 2022). This revealed that the pandemic could have served as an accelerant for principal turnover.

The exodus of principals may have already begun, as Steiner et al. (2022) found that 32% said they were leaving or considering leaving before the start of the 2022-23 school year. This may be because of stress; 85% of principals surveyed reported frequent job-related stress since the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year (Steiner et al., 2022). This aligned with a tumultuous time within schools trying to comply with virtual learning requirements, mask mandates, six-foot separation, COVID-19 tracing, and other necessary safety measures required by principals (Steiner et al., 2022). The research on principal turnover during the pandemic demonstrated a clear trend: principals in 2021-2022 were more stressed, less satisfied with their jobs, and reported being more likely to leave. While this data helped illustrate that an increase in principal turnover was likely in

2021-2022, more research is necessary to know the actual numbers on principal turnover in the pandemic.

Heightened Stress and Challenges

Some research related to principal turnover during the pandemic was published at the time of this literature review. Most studies were qualitative studies about principals' self-care practices and well-being, including stress and challenges they have encountered while leading through the pandemic. Multiple studies found that stress was elevated among principals during the pandemic. Woo & Steiner (2022) surveyed 1,651 secondary principals in the U.S. in March and April of 2021, approximately one year into the pandemic. They found that 83% of these principals experienced job-related stress “often” or “always” compared to 60% of employed adults in the U.S. (Woo & Steiner, 2022, p. 3). Su-Kenne & DeMatthews (2022), in an article on recommendations for improving principal well-being, said principals in 2021 were approaching “a tipping point in their well-being and capacity to stay in their jobs” (p. 213). In a survey of 1,540 U.S. principals by Steiner et al. (2022) in January 2022 and had similar findings. Over two-thirds of the principals (69%) said a top reason to leave their job was that “the stress and disappointments of being a principal aren’t worth it” (Steiner et al., 2022). It’s unclear whether the number of hours increased for principals during the pandemic; however, Steiner et al. (2022) found that of principals who were considering leaving, 42% would reconsider if they worked fewer hours per week. These three studies had a clear theme: principal stress increased during the pandemic. This may have affected their potential tenure in their position. The research showed that the primary stressors for principals

during the pandemic included: pandemic-related stressors, changes in their responsibilities, the well-being of staff and students, and racial discrimination.

Pandemic-Related Stressors

Some of the top stressors for principals were navigating pandemic-related challenges , including communicating changes to stakeholders (Steiner et al., 2022; Woo & Steiner, 2022). The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (YCEI) and Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (CSA) surveyed over 1,000 urban school leaders in May of 2020 in New York City – a time when the city was the epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis. Almost all principals (95%) reported negative feelings of anxiety, frustration, sadness, uncertainty, and being overwhelmed because of health and safety concerns, lack of work-life balance, and concern for students during the quarantine (Brackett et al., 2020). One leader shared their experience:

> "From my kitchen table, I'm running a school with 1,700 students, some of whom we're having trouble finding. I'm also attempting to stay connected to 150 faculty and staff, some of whom have gotten sick and others who are not adjusting well to remote learning. At the same time, I'm attempting to communicate with thousands of frustrated family members who speak dozens of different languages" (Brackett et al., 2020, para. 9).

In another study with similar findings, Bloch (2021) performed a case study on the stress and burnout of six secondary Texas principals in rural schools during the pandemic. Principals reported that they felt alone in handling the "unknown" of the pandemic, calling it "difficult" and "scary" (Bloch, 2021, pp. 77–78). One principal described the stress that the pandemic put on them in their role:

I am now expected to keep every employee and student safe from a virus I do not know that much about. I had to create a COVID plan for my campus, and I am not an

expert. I have over 2,000 students on my campus, so what if I make a wrong choice; then what happens? (Bloch, 2021, p. 77)

Keeping up with these responsibilities required long hours Principals reported they were “always on the job,” working 60 hours or more per week, and working remotely “interfered with their ability to be present at home,” causing additional stress (Bloch, 2021, p. 136).

DeMatthews et al. (2022) described the increase in workload for principals because of the pandemic. Principals closed schools, oversaw the transition to remote learning, found students access to the internet and devices, developed plans for new procedures such as attendance taking, and engaged in constant communication with parents, staff, and supervisors (DeMatthews et al., 2022). This increase in workload was of grave concern for superintendents, who predicted they would see more principals leaving their roles at the end of the 2021-22 school year (DeMatthews et al., 2022).

The Pandemic Changed the Role of the Principal

Principals went above and beyond their traditional job description and served as frontline, essential workers who handed out food to families and brought technology to students (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). The drastic shift in roles and responsibilities was difficult for some principals. In 2022, principals reported spending significantly less time on instructional leadership than pre-pandemic (Steiner et al., 2022). Principals were limited in their ability to use expert knowledge due to the pandemic leading to increased stress (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020).

Reyes-Guerra et al. (2021) found in a case study of nine principals that principalship was shaken up during the onset of the pandemic. Principals leading in the pandemic adjusted their leadership style and tapped into a different skill set than they typically used on the job. Principals needed to personalize and pragmatize their communications as the leaders of their schools (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). This included being accessible through multiple forms of communication, timing messages not to overwhelm stakeholders, and comforting staff and their school communities (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Secondly, principals needed to lead with more flexibility, creativity, and care than ever before. For example, one principal described having a cafeteria worker become a teacher's aide during remote learning. Another started virtual events that included "shout outs" to show appreciation to, support, and motivate staff. Principals were also asked to shift priorities and bend the rules (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). One principal described the period as "the wild, wild West" (p. 135), which illustrated the unchartered territory of remote learning and the lack of guidelines on school policies and procedures (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Additionally, principals needed to be agile in their leadership, including: adapting their communication style to be more pragmatic and personalized; having more flexibility, creativity, and care; quickly pivoting to prioritize current problems, including bending the rules when necessary; and showing resilience under pressure (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021).

The pandemic certainly shook up the work lives of principals; however, not all impacts were reported as unfavorable. Many of the nine principals in the study shared that even though they "didn't have a start and a stop" to the work day, they also found

ways to integrate their self-care while working from home (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021, p. 135). Principals shared that they began new self-care practices that were beneficial to their health, such as exercising and cooking at home instead of eating fast food; other principals picked up an old hobby, spent more time with their spouses, and took time to journal (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021, p. 135). Most literature on principals during the pandemic included all the new responsibilities and stress. At the same time, this article presented ways principals may have had better self-care during the pandemic than usual. At the same time, it is essential to note that principals were interviewed during the end of the 2020 school year when there was a novelty in working from home and the pandemic fatigue that many experienced had not set in. The pandemic certainly changed the principalship, in some ways for the better.

Principals Prioritized the Well-Being of Staff and Students

One stressor was exacerbated for principals during the pandemic: they felt responsible for the well-being of their teaching staff and student body. According to Woo & Steiner (2022), during the pandemic, two of the three top stressors for principals were supporting teachers' well-being and facilitating social and emotional support for students. In a 2021 survey, almost all (90%) of principals said they were concerned about the wellness of their students (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2021). This trend continued in a 2022 survey: an overwhelming majority of principals reported supporting the mental health and well-being of their staff (84%) and students (72%) as a source of stress (Steiner et al., 2022). Browder (2022), through a lens of how principals

spend their resources, reported that principals are expending themselves with "extreme caring for students and feeling consumed by their high needs" (p. 50).

Because school leaders were prioritizing the well-being of their staff and students, their well-being may have suffered. Hayes, Anderson, et al. (2022) interviewed 120 public school principals across the U.S. in the spring of 2020, what we now know was only the beginning of the pandemic. They found "leaders [ate] last" – principals during the pandemic were continually prioritizing the well-being of their staff and students' over their own (Hayes, Anderson, et al., 2022, p. 409). Principals felt responsible for buffering stressors and completing tasks themselves instead of delegating to teachers (Hayes, Anderson et al., 2022). Another theme from this study was that principals had to "keep from falling off the cliff" – meaning, they needed to hold themselves together while in a "survival mode" of juggling the pressure of their personal and professional responsibilities (Hayes, Anderson, et al., 2022, p. 411). This study was impressive with its 120 qualitative interviews and captured the shared experience of U.S. principals during the pandemic.

In another study with interviews with ten rural principals, Hayes, Flowers, et al. (2022) found that principals went above and beyond to care for their staff and students. Rural principals "felt responsible for monitoring and supporting the mental health of… teachers who were socially isolated, who were responsible for supervising their own children while teaching online, and who were having a difficult time with work-life balance" (Hayes, Flowers, et al., 2022, p. 37). In response, principals set up 'happy hours' over Zoom for teachers to support their socialization and reminded teachers to turn

off their work and care for themselves (Hayes, Flowers, et al., 2022). This level of care was also extended to students and families. Principals described setting up systems for "constant communication" with families, so much so that some parents had to ask the school staff to stop calling (Hayes, Flowers, et al., 2022, p. 38). Rural principals in the study facilitated ways for students to interact socially in the virtual setting, something they held in high value (Hayes, Flowers, et al., 2022).

These two studies highlighted how principals went above and beyond to care for their staff and students' well-being. It is important to note that the interviews in both studies occurred in the spring of 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic. There were many more months of the pandemic when principals may have been expected to maintain this level of care for their school community. Data from the 2021-2022 school year was necessary to encapsulate the experiences of principals throughout the entire pandemic.

The extra effort principals made for their staff may have affected their staff's job satisfaction and retention. Johnston (2021) surveyed 1,120 teachers in the southeastern U.S. during the pandemic to determine the relationship between the perceived servant leadership of principals and its impact on teacher retention and job satisfaction. They reported that principals who exhibited servant leadership during the pandemic had a higher perceived level of efficacy and positively impacted teacher retention and job satisfaction (Johnston, 2021). While these factors are undoubtedly important for a school, one might ask: at what cost? While this study was focused on teacher turnover, it may also have supplied insight into the challenges for principals that led to their turnover.

These three studies showed that so much was asked of principals while they prioritized the needs of others over themselves.

Racial Discrimination

During the time of the pandemic, there were heightened racial tensions. These impacts also impacted schools and principals. A survey of 1,540 principals aimed to uncover their specific struggles within the 2021-2022 school year. Steiner et al. (2022) found that racial discrimination was a significant challenge for principals of color. Nearly half (48%) of principals of color experienced at least one incident of racial discrimination, compared to 19% of their white peers (Steiner et al., 2022). Most acts of discrimination towards principals were from families of students, including online or in-person harassment (66% from families), verbal or nonverbal microaggressions (66% from families), perceived lack of comfortability of another person (63% from families) (Steiner et al., 2022). Other administrators were the second most common source of discrimination, including holding principals of color to different standards and singling out principals of color to perform additional tasks (Steiner et al., 2022). The report did not state whether there was an increase in racial discrimination incidents during the pandemic; only that it was high at this time. Simultaneously, principals of color were more likely to report symptoms of depression than white principals (Steiner et al., 2022, p. 6). This finding was somewhat unclear as these differences were no longer statistically significant after controlling for school characteristics. Given that principals of color were more likely to lead at urban schools serving students experiencing poverty (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2019), this could have been because of a more challenging school environment.

In this section, I detailed the prevalence, impacts, and causes of principal turnover. Principal turnover was a persistent issue before the pandemic, and there are signs that the pandemic may have compounded this problem. In the next section, I will center the experience of women in the principalship, in particular areas that may lead to turnover.

Turnover in Women Principals

In this section, I aimed to zero in on turnover among women principals specifically. Before diving into the research on women principals, I want to name that most of the research on gender differences in principals was collected when it was accepted that gender was solely looked at in a binary way. Many of the studies I referenced used male/female nomenclature and discussed sex-based differences and discrimination instead of gender-based. In this review of literature, I was not exploring the full complexity of non-binary gender identities when comparing groups because this data is not prevalent. The sample in my study was not limited to cis-gender women. For consistency, I changed terms from studies from ‘female’ to ‘women,’ ‘male’ to ‘men,’ and ‘sex-based’ to ‘gender-based.’ Additionally, much of the research on women principals compared men and women principals instead of studies centered on women principals. In this section, I explored the prevalence of turnover in women principals and the unique challenges women principals face.

Prevalence of Turnover in Women Principals

While the prevalence of women principal turnover has yet to be heavily studied, there is some data to help describe the landscape of turnover among women principals. In 2015-2016, Goldring & Taie (2018) estimated that there were 46,900 women principals at U.S. public schools making up 54% of principals. Based on a national survey of about 5,700 principals interpreted by Goldring & Taie (2018), women principals were more mobile than men principals. Women were less likely (81.7%) than men (82.7%) to stay in their principal roles from year to year (Goldring & Taie, 2018, p. 7). When women principals left their positions, they were more likely to leave the principalship (10.5%) than men (8.9%) rather than become a principal at a different school (5.7% of women vs. 6.4% of men) (Goldring & Taie, 2018, p. 7). This national data was a snapshot that suggested women principals turn over at a rate higher than men principals.

Three smaller, longitudinal studies helped to fill in gaps in the movement of women principals. Across these studies, states did not have consistent data on whether women are more likely to leave the principalship than men. However, more states consistently had more women principals leaving the education system than their men counterparts. Fuller et al. (2007) specifically looked at the tenure of women principals in over 8,000 Texas public schools from 1994 to 2006. Fuller et al. (2007) followed the 1996 cohort of Texas principals' careers through a data set of certified Texas principals and employee data sets. They found that more women remained at their school as a principal after five (7%) and ten (5%) years than men principals (Fuller et al., 2007). However, more men (12%) were promoted to the superintendency than women (6%), which could have

contributed to less turnover for women principals. Davis & Anderson (2021) had similar findings in a more recent study of 1,133 new principals from 2008 to 2011. In their study, women were more likely to remain at their first principalship (31.6%) than men (22.7%). They attributed that to women being more likely to be passed over for promotion to a superintendency. However, Ni et al. (2015) had different findings. In a longitudinal study of Utah principals at charter and traditional public schools, women principals were more likely to transfer schools. Men principals were 22% less likely to move to a new school than women principals (Ni et al., 2015). This highlighted the potential differences in women principal turnover across states.

Interestingly, Fuller et al. (2007) found that women principals are almost 78% more likely to leave the public education system altogether than men principals after ten years. Fuller et al. (2007) did not elaborate on this significant difference between gender. Gates et al. (2006) had a similar finding that women are more likely to leave the state education systems in Illinois and North Carolina. The study analyzed administrative data from public schools from 1987 to 2001. In a multiple pathways measure, Gates et al. (2006) found that women principals ages 35 to 45 are more likely to leave the education system than men principals in the age range in both Illinois (4.62 standard deviations) and North Carolina (0.19 standard deviations). Different from Fuller et al. (2007) and Gates et al. (2006), Ni et al. (2015) found no significant differences between gender and the likelihood of leaving the education system in principals in Utah. These three studies did not show a clear trend in women principal turnover patterns across the four states that were investigated. This highlighted a need for additional research on the turnover of

women in the principalship, especially in post-pandemic times. I was unable to find any research on the specific impacts on a school when a women principal leaves, another potentially understudied area for women principals.

Unique Challenges for Women in the Principalship

Women face various challenges and barriers to the principalship and within the principalship. In a review of the literature on women in educational leadership, Shakeshaft et al. (2014) revisited barriers that were reported on her in the 1985 book, *Handbook for Achieving Sex Equity Through Education.* More recent research found that barriers such as poor self-image or lack of confidence, lack of aspiration or motivation, financial sacrifices, and role models were no longer as prevalent (Shakeshaft et al., 2014). However, other barriers were still widespread, including: family and home responsibilities; working conditions; gender discrimination and stereotyping; preparation programs not including the realities of women leaders; lack of sponsors, mentors, and networks; and gender discrimination in hiring processes (Shakeshaft et al., 2014). In this review, Shakeshaft et al. (2014) did not go outside of the scope of her previously identified barriers; it may be possible that other barriers existed outside of the themes she named in 1985. In this section, I detailed the challenges women principals face while entering the profession and on the job, including gender-based discrimination, balancing personal and professional responsibilities, and the increased stress women principals experienced during the pandemic.

Barriers to Entering the Principalship

In 2006, the National Center for Education Statistics found that 75% of public school teachers in the U.S. were women (Strizek et al., 2006). Goldring & Taie's (2018) study of 5,700 U.S. principals found that only about half (54%) of all public-school principals were women. This highlights the disproportionate number of women being promoted to the leader of their building.

Barriers may make women principals less likely to apply for principal jobs, as found in two studies – neither of which intended to look at gender differences in entering the principalship. In an informal study by Adams & Hambright (2004), the instructors in a teacher leadership program at Wright State University in Ohio noticed that while their program comprised primarily women, very few applied for principal roles. They surveyed their students to find out why. The women teacher-leaders reported they did not pursue principal jobs because they did not want to lose the close relationships with students in the classroom, did not want to deal with difficult parents or non-compliant teachers, did not want the time commitment the role entailed, and felt the job was too political (Adams & Hambright, 2004, p. 210). This study did not state the sample size of their class or other demographic information.

Weiner & Burton (2006) also unintentionally found grave differences across gender in their preparation program for turnaround principals. They studied nine principal candidates in the program, six of whom were women, through a three-year, longitudinal study. After conducting interviews with principal candidates, the researchers felt compelled to share their findings. They found that the program placed women in a

"double bind" – the program's feedback pushed women principal candidates to be less feminine in nature; however, when women displayed more dominance, they were deemed less likable and thus, may have been less likely to be hired for a principal position (Weiner & Burton, 2006). The women principal candidates felt this tension in their relationships with their mentor principals. They reported that if they were deferential towards their mentor, they said less access to face time with their mentor and fewer networking resources; at the same time, if the women were to be more demanding, they ran the risk of being disliked by their mentor and lose out on leadership opportunities (Weiner & Burton, 2006). Men in the study did not report these issues (Weiner & Burton, 2006). These two studies illustrated why there may be disparities in women entering the principalship.

A third study built onto the gender-discrimination current women principals faced while pursuing their job. Eckman (2004) did a mixed-methods study to understand the similarities and differences in how men and women high school principals experience their roles. The study interviewed eight principals from each gender, with a nearly equal amount from each group who was married (although the study did not state in different-sex or same-sex marriages), had children, and had children living at home. The men principals described being tapped for principal roles (Eckman, 2004, p. 197). This included being called by men superintendents within their networks and encouraged to apply for a principal position. One man principal said he believed "all the good ol' boys didn't want to let the [women] in because they were afraid they couldn't handle the discipline" (Eckman, 2004, p. 197). No woman principal reported experiencing this type

of hiring practice. Instead, the women principals said they believed they were called for token interviews, a strategy used by hiring committees to say they interviewed a diverse candidate pool without actually considering the woman candidate (Eckman, 2004). This study demonstrated some of the gender biases women pursuing the principalship faced, which may contribute to some of the reasons for the underrepresentation of women principals, especially in high schools.

Women Principals Faced Discrimination

Gender-based discrimination may prevent some women from entering the principal hiring pool. It continues for women who land principal jobs. The same study by Eckman (2004) asked women high school principals (n=8) about areas of their job that brought them dissatisfaction. Three participants discussed gender discrimination they experienced, including parents assuming the principal would be a man, a belief that women could not 'control' the building, and that men principals would be better at handling discipline (Eckman, 2004, p. 202). Men principals in the study (n=8) did not describe gender-based discrimination as a factor for their dissatisfaction (Eckman, 2004). This highlighted an added challenge that women principals in the high school setting might experience that men principals may not. While these are not necessarily correlated with turnover, these studies illustrate additional barriers and burdens women principals may experience.

The Intersection of Gender and Racial Discrimination

Women principals of color have unique challenges within the principalship because of the intersection of their gender and race. Lomotey (2019), in a review of the literature

on Black women principals, found that most research on Black women principals explores aspects of leadership, spirituality, and lived experiences, while turnover or challenges are not a significant area of research. I aimed to share research in this space that focused on challenges for Black women principals. Two studies found that Black women principals were assigned to schools in the worst conditions. Peters (2012) conducted a case study of two African American women principals who led through school reforms. The participants were called to lead schools in disarray and asked to "clean up" the school physically and culturally (Peters, 2012, pp. 29–30). Haskins (2020) also found that Black women principals in a phenomenological study were often placed in "clean-up schools" (p. 54). Furthermore, Black women principals faced challenges of racism, lacked opportunities, and felt they needed to work much harder than white colleagues. Those who attempted to disrupt these norms were seen as outsiders (Haskins, 2020).

Another small, qualitative study reported challenges African American women principals from the Midwest faced. Participants reported that the significant challenges to their role included inadequate mentorship, a "good old boys" network, gender and racial stereotyping, and the glass ceiling preventing upward mobility (Craig, 2021). In a mixed-methods study, Morrison Smith (2021) detailed the identity-based discrimination that Black women principals faced. Both Craig and Morrison Smith focused on ways in which the Black woman principal can mitigate the impacts of discrimination through self-care or coping mechanisms instead of questioning where the responsibility of the burden of discrimination should lie.

Liang & Peters-Hawkins (2017) sought to understand the lived experience of Asian American women in leadership roles in U.S. public schools. Through interviews of eleven school leaders in two states, they uncovered challenges Asian American women school leaders faced. Participants discussed having their abilities questioned by stakeholders, the constant pressure to prove themselves, hypervisibility, performance anxiety, and the need to overcome stereotypes of their race/gender intersectionality, including "model minority" biases (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017, p. 56). While the study was not on job dissatisfaction or turnover of Asian American women principals, the findings help tell the story of this group that may be part of the larger picture of turnover in women principals.

Arreiche Yanez (2022) used counter-storytelling to elicit the challenges eight Latina women in Texas faced in their positionality. Latina principals felt they were hired because of their ethnicity, assumed background, or Spanish-speaking abilities and were disproportionately placed in urban campuses with predominately students of color (Arrieche Yanez, 2022). Participants discussed their constant awareness of the stereotype that Latinas are emotional, come on too strong, and had to remind themselves to keep their composure (Arrieche Yanez, 2022, p. 84). They felt the need to get doctoral degrees to have the upper hand and prove they belonged in their roles and the superintendency (Arrieche Yanez, 2022). Again, this study was unrelated to job dissatisfaction or turnover but elicited Latina principals' unique challenges.

Some research included the perspective of women principals of color even if they were not the focus of the study. In a focus group of seven women principals, nearly all

participants reported gender-based discrimination; however, the principals of color said that they felt much of the discrimination they faced was directed at their race more than their gender (Floyd Gutsch, 2001). This illuminates the added burdens women principals of color may face solely because of their identity. However, these findings are not uniform across all studies.

In a study of twenty Black women school leaders and eleven white women school leaders in Chicago, Loder (2005) found that some women reported that gender- or race-based discrimination might be a thing of the past. The women in this study felt racial and gender barriers "had already been broken down by previous generations of women administrators" (Loder, 2005, p. 762). One Black woman assistant principal shared, "If anything, my race and gender are a plus in this district because they are looking for qualified administrators to diversify" (Loder, 2005, p. 762). This study mainly included elementary-level principals (n=27) and only a few secondary principals (n=4), which may be something to consider when interpreting the findings. Indeed, this is not representative of all women principals in the U.S., but it provided a different perspective on the issue of race and gender-based discrimination within women principals.

Balancing Professional and Personal Responsibilities

I observed that in most studies that included women principals, the participants were asked about their personal lives or ability to manage their workload and responsibilities at home. One study by Loder (2005) looked specifically at work-family conflicts for women school leaders in different generations in Chicago. Thirty-one Black and white women principals were grouped into a "younger generation" and an "older generation"

depending on their age during the civil rights and women's movements. Data were collected via survey and open-ended interviews. The study found that, regardless of race or age, women principals experienced stressful work-family conflicts (Loder, 2005). Interestingly, the women in the older generation recalled being frustrated by the mandated one-year parental leave for working mothers in Illinois. This was in direct contrast to the dilemmas the younger generation faced of having inadequate and unpaid family leave and being forced back into the workforce shortly after giving birth (Loder, 2005). Maintaining a marriage was difficult across ages of women principals. Women in the older generation struggled in their marriages because their leadership positions clashed with the typical gender roles their spouses wanted them to fulfill (Loder, 2005). In the younger generation, women encountered issues, mainly not having enough time for their spouses or children (Loder, 2005). Another study highlighted the difficulty women principals have in maintaining their marriage while carrying the workload of a principal. Shabazz-Anderson (2022) studied the well-being of urban high school women principals in a phenomenological study. One of the six participants reported separating from her spouse the year after she became a principal. The other participants said, "Having a supportive spouse is critical to their success as a principal" (Shabazz-Anderson, 2022, p. 72). All principals in these two studies were part of different-sex marriages and did not include voices from women in same-sex marriages or different family settings.

The Cost of Motherhood for Women Principals.

Women principals with children "face conflict navigating the competing demands of motherhood and school leadership" (Parker, 2015, p. 92). This included being pulled

away from their families during weekends and evenings and decreased family engagement while at home because of their heavy workload and lack of energy after the workday (Parker, 2015). Eckman (2004) interviewed both men and women high school principals (n=16) and found differences in how men and women responded to having a family in their career paths and principal roles. In the study, having children impacted all of the high school principals but in different ways for men and women. More than half of the women principals described delays or disruptions in their careers to have children (Eckman, 2004). For men, having young children inspired half to take on more leadership responsibility at work for more money (Eckman, 2004). This highlighted having children as a possible accelerant for men while a decelerate for women in the high school principalship. An equal number of men and women participants had young children at home and described immense support from family; however, they experienced work-family balance much differently. The men principals often described their partners and children becoming part of their 'school family' by attending evening events to both be present at work and with their families simultaneously (Eckman, 2004, p. 199). And, men principals, all of whom were in different-sex relationships in the study, were more likely to report that their wives stayed home and did more of the childcare (Eckman, 2004). Women principals, conversely, described having to set boundaries around work to spend time with their children or do what they enjoy (Eckman, 2004). Several women felt the need to wait until their children were in high school or out of the house to be able to take on the responsibility of being a high school principal (Eckman, 2004). This study, even though it was small, demonstrated that traditional gender roles in the home exist with

some women principals, which could serve as an additional challenge for women high school principals. It is important to note that the participants in this study were in different-sex relationships, and this study did not consider possibilities outside of the "traditional" family structure, including single-parent households, LGBTQIA+ families, or multigenerational households.

Pandemic-Related Stress Higher Among Women Principals

The pandemic brought about new stressors for all principals, but some stress may have been unique to women in the principalship. Woo & Steiner (2022) found in a survey of 1,651 secondary principals in the U.S. in the spring of 2021 that 36% of women principals indicated that they had experienced constant job-related stress one year into the COVID pandemic compared to 24% of men principals. In a different survey of 1,540 U.S. principals at all levels, well-being was "especially poor" among women principals (Steiner et al., 2022, p. 5). A recent phenomenology explored the heightened stress of six women principals at urban high school during in the pandemic. While these challenges may not have been unique to women principals, they were reported by women principals in the study. Women principals during the pandemic said that their roles shifted from "instructional leadership to pandemic management" (Shabazz-Anderson, 2022, p. 102). Participants named many new occupational stressors because of the pandemic, including: COVID-19 management, a lack of communication, limited resources, poor teacher behavior, and the pressure "to always be accessible and available" (Shabazz-Anderson, 2022, p. 68). Participants reported that the struggle for work-life balance was even more challenging during the pandemic. They said they had to "manage their faculty and

students' social and emotional health while simultaneously balancing the act of being grandmothers, mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, aunts, and friends" (Shabazz-Anderson, 2022, p. 102). This study centered women principals during the pandemic and elicited some of their challenges. In this section, I reviewed literature about women in the principalship. In the next section, I aimed to set the stage of a major shift in the workforce happening at the time when women principals in my study were resigning: The Great Resignation.

The Context: The Great Resignation

In the last section of my literature review, I focused on the context in which this study was set in. To best learn the reality of women principals during the pandemic, I examined the exodus of workers from the U.S. workforce in what was called The Great Resignation. I explored the prevalence of resignations among women leaders during this time. Then, I discussed research that explored similar phenomena that fueled The Great Resignation. In this literature review, I defined women in leadership as women who hold roles that manage or supervise other workers. For consistency, I utilized the term 'manager' to describe roles that manage employees and 'senior manager' to describe roles that supervise managers.

In May 2021, just over one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, Anthony Klotz of Texas A&M University predicted a wave of resignations that he coined as 'The Great Resignation' (Klotz, 2021). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, forty-seven million U.S. residents voluntarily resigned from their positions in 2021 (Fuller & Kerr, 2022). There were many causes for The Great Resignation. Some of resignations were for

practical reasons; two-thirds of workers who resigned took an early retirement (Accius, 2022); six million workers were part of a resignation back log from 2020 but did not leave their role because of the uncertainty of the pandemic (Klotz, 2021); some workers took advantage of the surplus of positions compared to available workers (Elting, 2021); and some left workplaces because trusted colleagues left in a "snowball effect" (Gewin, 2022). Mid-career employees (ages 30-45) had the highest increase (up 20%) in resignation rates between 2020 and 2021 (Cook, 2021). The global Covid-19 pandemic was a turning point for many American workers, many of whom took time to reflect.

Because of the stay-at-home orders during the pandemic, many American workers had more time to sit and reflect on what was important in their lives (Klotz, 2021). It "opened space for reflection on personal values versus work time" (Lindborg, 2021, p. 14). Workers took time to ponder "what work life could - or should - look like" (Accius, 2022). This time for reflection gave workers an opportunity to re-evaluate what they want in a career and workplace, including a new level of intolerance for discrimination. This time for reflection allowed some American workers to re-evaluate their values. They were able to "take an honest look in the mirror and [see] what really mattered in their life" (Accius, 2022). The pandemic,

> "made many realize their job does not contribute enough (or at all) to their pursuit of happiness and meaning, and they have decided to invest their energy elsewhere - in new jobs, new careers, or in other aspects of their life such as family, travel, or creative endeavors" (Klotz, 2021).

For some workers, this meant leaving their job for a different role that they found more meaningful. Over the past few decades, more Americans have found their sense of identity, meaning, and connectedness from their careers and workplaces (Hyatt Miller, &

Hyatt, 2022.). There are a culmination of factors that have led some Americans to have more of their social, emotional, psychological, and emotional needs met in the workplace instead of in their personal lives; more Americans move away from where they grew up, more Americans get married and have children later in life, if at all, and fewer belong to spiritual institutions (Hyatt Miller & Hyatt, 2022). Namely, in today's world, "people want to be connected to something bigger through their work" (Hyatt Miller & Hyatt, 2022). In 2021, Lexington Law reported that nearly 60% of Americans would take a 50% cut in salary to do a job they really love (Lexington Law, 2021).

Some may view this shift as an examination of espoused versus practiced values as first described by Argyris & Schön (1974). This concept stated that people hold espoused values – or the worldview people believe their behavior is based off of – as well as their theory-in-use, or the values implied by their behavior (Argyris & Schön, 1974). While some Americans were at home during the pandemic, the time for reflection allowed them to consider whether the jobs they had were allowing them to live out their espoused values; in other words, they considered whether they had alignment in their careers and their values. For other Americans, their reflection during the pandemic led them to finding fulfillment outside of their jobs. The pandemic shifted some Americans mindset from 'live to work' to 'work to live,' denoting a change in priorities and values (Corbett, 2021). For some it led to a change in values that motivated them to change their employment to live out these values in practice. One major way this occurred was a desire to work from home.

Once workers experienced working remotely during the pandemic, many did not want to return to a workplace. Instead, they found other opportunities would allow them to have the same flexibility and autonomy over their work (Klotz, 2021; Lindborg, 2021). Working remotely gave the employee more freedom over how they spend their time. It removes the unpaid time spent of having to commute – employees gained back up to ten hours per week or more by cutting out their commute to and from work (Hyatt Miller & Hyatt, 2022). Workers took lower paying jobs in exchange for the option to work remotely, confirming that "work-life balance is more important than it's ever been" (Hyatt Miller & Hyatt, 2022). Women, especially women of color and women with disabilities, experience fewer microaggressions when they work remotely at least some of the time (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2022). The time for reflection and desire to work from home may have been factors in the resignations of women and women leaders in The Great Resignation.

The Great Resignation and Women

Women were major contributors to The Great Resignation phenomenon. NPR's *Consider This* stated that women left the workforce at double the rate of men since the pandemic started (Cornish, 2021). The U.S. Department of Labor does not report gender-based statistics, however other sources reported the participation of women in The Great Resignation. In 2022, the Women in the Workplace survey by LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company (2022) found that for each woman promoted to a director level position, two left the company (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2022). This rate of turnover for men directors was not as stark. The same survey found there was the largest gap between

women leaders and men leaders leaving their role since 2017 (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2022). This may have further widened the gaps between men and women in leadership roles in the U.S.

Chapter Summary

In this literature review, I sought to analyze and synthesize research pertaining to turnover of women principals. I started with research on principal turnover, including most recent data from during the pandemic. Then, I discussed the data known on women principal turnover, including the unique challenges women principals face. I concluded by setting the context of The Great Resignation. This literature review illuminated the need for more research on women principal turnover, especially in the context of leading through the pandemic. There are significant gaps in the data regarding the turnover of women principals. Very few studies have listened to the stories of principals and women principals after they have left their roles to determine what factors led them to follow through with their decision to resign. My study aimed to share a common experience of women principals who resigned after leading schools through the pandemic. Given the inequitable impact of the pandemic on women and the unique hardships schools endured during the pandemic, more can be learned by exploring this topic further. In the next chapter, I reviewed my methodology.

Chapter 3: Methodology

After I took an in-depth look at the literature on principal turnover, women in the principalship, and the impacts of the pandemic on the workforce, I saw a gap in the research. There were three areas that presented as understudied: principal turnover research that centered women principals, voices of principals who had already resigned from their principalship, and women in the principal role during the pandemic. This study aimed to contribute to the body of literature where there is a noted void. This study elicited stories and ideas from an untapped source to better understand turnover in principals, especially women. Those who hire and manage principals can use the findings of this study to better support and retain women principals. This may reduce the negative impacts that principal turnover has on staff, students, and families.

This was a phenomenological qualitative study that explored the experience of women principals at P-12 schools in the U.S. who voluntarily left their roles during the pandemic. In this chapter, I detailed my methodology. I discussed my positionality, research design, approach to inquiry, research participants, plan for data collection and analysis, trustworthiness strategies, ethical concerns, anticipated obstacles and solutions, and anticipated benefits.

Researcher Positionality

Positionality describes “an individual’s worldview and the position they adopt about a research task and its social and political context” (Darwin Holmes, 2020, p. 1).

Positionality influences research by how data is collected, analyzed, and reported (Darwin Holmes, 2020); one may argue that it can leave a mark on all areas of a research study. I recognized that my "multiple and varied positions, roles, and identities are intricately and inextricably embedded in the process and outcomes of [my] research" (Milner, 2007, p. 389). I aimed to be transparent about my positionality and strived to be explicit in ways it showed up in my research. Milner (2007) said, "Each time a researcher engages in researching, he or she is researching himself or herself all over again, in addition to studying something or someone else" (p. 395). My positionality statement summarized my research of myself before beginning this study.

Positionality Statement

In this section, I shared my positionality statement that I wrote prior to data collection. It begins: I chose this topic because I experienced it; I was a woman principal who led through the pandemic and resigned at the end of the 2021-2022 school year. While there were many reasons for my resignation, I leaned into the most convenient and seemingly acceptable reason – I was going to have a baby. I needed to move to be closer to family. But the reality was that my role as a principal was not fulfilling as it once was. Early in my career, I began working at a start-up charter school that faced many challenges despite having unprecedented student academic achievement success. In the first year, I took on more and more responsibility and was named principal of the school at twenty-five years old. I loved it. I was seduced by the satisfaction I gained from a high level of productivity, complex problem-solving, and the altruistic nature of the job. When the pandemic hit, I was enlivened by the new challenges of running a school virtually.

There was always another new obstacle on the pandemic front, but even more so in our start-up school nature. This included opening a new school that delayed our start date by two months and doubled our staff and student population. About a year into the pandemic, I was worn down. I began to resent the work instead of running toward it.

I started gravitating towards other new-found interests that brought me the same joy and satisfaction that my job once did. I quickly learned I could not do the principal position at 80%. I knew that I needed to resign. Around the same time, I learned that I was going to have a baby and my partner and I felt the pull to move closer to our families in another region of the country. On the outside, it looked like I may have resigned solely for personal reasons. Still, for me, it was a combination of factors from my personal and professional life that were accelerated by the pandemic. While immersed in this study, I further reflected on my experience and some of my interpretations changed. I wrote many memos during data analysis which brought many more unexplored angles of my experience into my consciousness. I leaned into these insights through journaling and then worked to epoche, or set aside my experience while analyzing the data.

Beyond my experience, my identity and personal history have impacted how I viewed my topic and designed the study. Identity markers are a way to help explain and understand a person's worldview, although context always is needed to fully understand someone's lived experience. Although many of my identity markers (white, cis-gendered, middle-class, native English speaker, without a disability) provide me with unearned privilege, my upbringing taught me that I was and would always be an underdog. I grew up in a very isolated area in the Midwest with little opportunity to gain experience about

how things worked in the "real world." Because of this, I always felt that I did not have the skills to independently navigate spaces that were unfamiliar to me. My coping mechanism for this fear of inadequacy is to become hyper-focused on checking every box. I want to know what the exact 'right' way is, even when 'right' does not necessarily exist. For these reasons, I have always gravitated toward a scientific way of thinking. Along a similar vein, I have learned that joy is sparked within me when I can create order from chaos. I am inclined to distill and simplify when I see complexity or disorganization. This led me to hold a belief system that most closely aligns with post-positivism, albeit not in a way that allowed me to check every box within this paradigm. These beliefs and innate motivations guided my actions as a researcher and practitioner.

Some may question a postpositivist conducting qualitative or phenomenological research. However, phenomenology does not necessarily fit neatly into one particular worldview or methodology. Creswell & Poth (2018) state, "Phenomenology lies somewhere on the continuum between qualitative and quantitative research" (p. 76). This is primarily because of the ontological tension between subjectivity and objectivity in the method; individuals have their own subjective experiences and the objective experience of having the phenomenon in common (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 76). Phenomenology's refusal of the subjective-objective perspective can be seen outside the rigidity of postpositivism's belief that one can approach objectivity. However, like Creswell & Poth (2018), I viewed ontology as a continuum with much gray area. Some of the binary thinking that is associated with post-positivism did not accurately fit my worldview. I was comfortable holding both ideas simultaneously: there can be subjective experiences

of participants with an objective reality that they all experienced. Axiologically, transcendental phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994), is well-suited to a post-positivist worldview. Transcendental phenomenology asks researchers to epoche or bracket out their own experiences and approach the data with as few biases or assumptions as possible. Both the philosophical foundations of transcendental phenomenology and post-positivism recognize that the quest to reduce the influence of the researcher entirely is not possible; instead, this method offers a systemic approach to minimize biases, assumptions, and values of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Phillips & Burbules, 2000). This was why I chose transcendental phenomenology over hermeneutic. Epistemologically speaking, there are some tensions between how post-positivists traditionally view knowledge (truth can be approached) and the nature of constructing knowledge from participants' subjective experiences in phenomenology. My reality was a combination instead of an either-or. I was not seeking a grand narrative from this study. I wanted to elevate the perspective of my participants, which I believe could get us closer to what is true through a better understanding of experiences. I accepted these philosophical gray areas and did my best to address them as they came about within my study.

Creswell (2013) said, "In my experience, individuals are quite surprised to find highly structured approaches to phenomenological studies on sensitive topics" (p. 226). I found this to be true -- many elements of transcendental phenomenology fit my post-positivist mind like a glove. First, I chose to collect data via semi-structured interviews because I found it to be the most efficient way to receive the most pertinent information about the

experiences of women principals. While I collected and analyzed the data, I wrote reflexive memos, used member checks, and debriefed with a peer to acknowledge and challenge biases, assumptions, and values that I inherently brought to the study. I used the systemic steps for transcendental phenomenology described by Moustakas (1994) for data analysis, which aligned with my postpositive worldview, including the use of epoche. I created themes from significant statements that satisfied my drive to create order from chaos. My worldview showed up in other ways within this study—for example, my systemic approach to purposeful sampling, using an interview protocol, and organizing themes in a table by participant.

My conclusions after conducting the literature review also shaped my decisions as a researcher. After reading Farley-Ripple et al. (2012), I felt the most impactful data would be found through the stories of participants. A purely quantitative approach like a survey would not supply the detailed description needed in this space (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012). I wanted to capture a variety of narratives from participants and make sense of them. For that reason, I was drawn toward phenomenology. I saw a clear line from my innate drive to create order within the phenomenology method; its goal is to take stories and perspectives of a phenomenon and distill them into a single summary: the essence of the experiences of the participants.

Because of my lived experience, I had an insider perspective on this study. I viewed my insider positionality both as a strength and as a limitation. I utilized some of the insider advantages described by Darwin Holmes (2020), including more accessible access to participants, having prior knowledge that allows formulating more meaningful

questions, building rapport and trust quicker as an insider to elicit more honest and authentic answers, and understanding educational leadership-specific language and culture to engage in a smooth dialogue with the participants (p. 6). Because I had the lived experience studied in this inquiry, my ability to gain access to and understand the perspective of participants was enhanced. I could relate to the experiences of the women principals I was interviewing. This offered me even more insight into the phenomenon. Some of the disadvantages of being an insider described by Darwin Holmes (2020) included: harboring inherent and unknown biases, being too close to the problem and unable to raise provocative questions; a participant believing that I possess more or better knowledge than them, leaving data uncovered; and an inability to step outside of the problem, gain external perspective, or ask 'dumb' questions that an outsider may ask (p. 6).

While interviewing the women principals of color, I realized I had an outsider's perspective on their lived experiences. I could not relate to some of their stories of facing discrimination they faced because of their duality of being both a woman and a leader of color. After I analyzed the first round of interviews, I came to the second interview better prepared to fully hear their perspective and ask questions to facilitate a more productive dialogue about that aspect of the findings. I recognized that each of these factors may have played a role in my ability to collect data.

As the researcher, I continually checked my assumptions and biases. Through reflexive memos, I critically questioned whether I was falling into either of these traps periodically throughout the study. One assumption I continually worked to unlearn is that

participants' stories had parallels to mine. I needed to truly epoche or set aside my experience and "take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell, 2013, p. 80). Another assumption I held is that a woman principal's experience is inherently different from a man principal's experience, although I was not sure this was true. Lastly, I assumed that the pandemic had many impacts on women principals, both personally and professionally. In being explicit and honest about my assumptions, I aimed to question them at every step. I further detailed my plans to manage my biases through reflexive memos in the trustworthiness strategies section. This was my view, for better or worse, and I aimed to do my best to collect, analyze, and present data holistically and acknowledge my participants to the best of my ability.

Methodology

Creswell & Poth (2018) described phenomenology as "on the continuum between qualitative and quantitative research" (p. 76). In the data collection of this study, there were primarily elements of qualitative design. Creswell & Poth (2018) stated, "We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored [and] because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue" (p. 45). I chose qualitative elements in this study because I wanted to know the experiences of women principals that led to their decision to resign during the pandemic. I felt it could only be fully explored by hearing from those who experienced the phenomenon. I viewed the forming of the phenomenon's essence as the making of a model, which aligned more closely with quantitative thinking. This offered a blueprint of the shared experiences of participants. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) believed that "understanding from the perspective

of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (p. 1). Herein lies the hope that this research brought about a fresh perspective with new potential solutions to make the principalship a career that many desire to stay in, especially for women. In the next section, I detailed my methods.

Methods

My approach to this study was a transcendental phenomenology. The origins of phenomenology are attributed to Edmund Husserl, a German mathematician, who viewed the methodology also as a philosophy (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) utilized Husserl's foundation to further develop transcendental phenomenology. The focus of this method was to "understand the essence of the experience" with the goal of "describ[ing] the essence of a lived phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 67). And more specifically, the transcendental phenomenon is "the development of descriptions of the essences of these experiences, not explanations or analyses" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Transcendental phenomenology, as described by Moustakas (1994), is focused on describing the phenomenon with as little interpretation from the researcher as possible. After epoche, the researcher collects data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data is analyzed by finding statements of significance that are organized into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Merriam & Tisdell (2016) stated that this approach was "well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences" (p. 28). I thought leading a public P-12 school during the tumultuous time of the pandemic may fit this description. I believed this approach would support me in uncovering why women felt compelled to resign from

their principal roles in this context. I chose this approach because it allowed me to handle qualitative data more systematically, especially in my attempt to distance my own experiences from the data.

Some assumptions undergird the phenomenological approach. First, this methodology assumed that participants' experiences are conscious (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenologists are interested in the meaning that participants make in their experiences and how they bring these experiences into consciousness. Second, there is an intentionality of consciousness, meaning that reality is not divided into subjects and objects but rather dually as part of the consciousness (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 59). In this study, the participants shared their stories of being a principal during the context of the pandemic. The narrative and interaction of factors mattered more so than individual factors that may have led to their resignation. Another assumption is that there is no subject-object dichotomy: "The reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual" (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 59). This is particularly important for this study as the data presented by participants were situated within their context and worldview. Lastly, phenomenology asks the researcher to suspend all judgments, or epoche, about what is real until they appear in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016, pp. 58–59). This assumption is fundamental to my study because of my positionality as an insider who has experienced the phenomenon.

Phenomenology as an approach is not without challenges. First, as the researcher, I needed to be intentional in how my understanding was introduced in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Since I experienced this phenomenon, being explicit about my

positionality was important. My ability to epoche was critical to the validity of this study. Lastly, participants were chosen carefully to find a common understanding of the phenomenon across women principals from different backgrounds (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In the next section, I discussed my steps for selecting participants.

Purposeful Sampling Strategy and Participants

After IRB approval (located in Appendix A), I began to search for eligible participants. I started by recruiting participants by posting the recruitment flyer with a description (found in Appendix B) and link to the interest form (found in Appendix C) on my social media pages. I joined social media groups specific to principals and posted within those pages. I tapped into my professional networks by texting the flyer to former and current colleagues. I emailed my university's list serve to send the recruitment information to students within the Educational Leadership program.

The interest form (located in Appendix C) served to choose participants based on criterion and purposeful sampling. Creswell (2013) stated that for a phenomenological study, criterion sampling works well to ensure all participants have experienced the described phenomenon (p. 155). In this study, participants must have: (a) served as a P-12 public school principal in the U.S. during the pandemic, (b) identified as a trans- or cis-gendered woman, (c) voluntarily resigned during or after the 2020-2021 or 2021-22 school years. Potential participants may have resigned from their positions for a principalship at another school, an early retirement, a different job opportunity in education, or a job opportunity outside of education. Through my recruitment and

screening, I did my best to exclude women who were terminated or forced to resign; this did not come up with in my participants, as all reported they voluntarily resigned.

I collected demographic and school data for purposeful sampling and maximum variation in the interest survey. Maximum variation "documents diverse variations of individuals or sites based on specific characteristics" (Creswell, 2013, p. 158). First, I aimed for maximum variation across participants in personal identity markers. Initially, there were eight interested and eligible participants. After collecting preliminary data via the interest survey, I chose six participants that fit the study's criteria and created a diverse participant pool in demographics and school experiences. Of the eight interested participants, three were women of color (Black, biracial, and Latina). The remaining five interested participants were white women in their forties, cis-gendered, straight, married with children, and not disabled. Because I had already included the three women of color participants, all who served in urban, district-run elementary schools that served students of color, I chose three remaining participants based on school settings. Of the white women participants, I chose one who was a principal at an urban charter high school, one from a rural, district-run alternative high school, and one from a suburban district-run elementary school. I felt I had maximized the variation within the sample from the eight eligible and interested participants. Unintentionally, all participants were cis gender, straight, did not report having a disability, worked at Title 1 schools, and five of the six participants earned their doctorate or were in a doctoral program. This lack of diversity in these areas was a limitation of the study.

I emailed those six initial participants an email template that outlined the study (in Appendix D) and attached the consent form (in Appendix E). I thanked the two eligible participants I did not choose to be part of the study for their interest and informed them they were not needed for the study in a prepared email template (in Appendix F). Participants filled out and signed the consent form (Appendix E) via DocuSign before their first interview. I asked participants to choose a pseudonym to ensure privacy. I felt pressed for time to complete my study for an on-time graduation and could not overextend myself past the six participants for which I had planned. Had time not been a factor, I may have included the two additional participants or tried to recruit more eligible participants.

Initially, I completed interviews with six participants. During data analysis, I realized the sixth participant, a white woman from a rural area, was an outlier. Her husband was the superintendent in her district and thus her boss. It was very difficult to parse out her story from her marriage and husband's influence through his position. In collaboration with my advisor and in the peer-review process, I determined that this participant's data was a distraction. Her story, while an important one, was more about the complexities of working for your spouse and less about the phenomenon of women principals who resigned during the pandemic. For this reason, I chose not to include data from this participant. I included data from all five of the other participants who were interviewed. Next, I introduced the participants of my study.

Snapshot of the Participants

In this section, I provided a snapshot of the participants for my study. I started with their personal demographic data (Table 1), professional demographic data (Table 2), and school demographic data (Table 3).

Table 1: Participants' Personal Demographic Data

Name	Location	Age	Race	Of Hispanic or Latino descent?	Marital status	Parental status
Renee	Suburban South	40	White	No	Married	3 children
Erica	Urban Midwest	44	Biracial (Black & white)	No	Married	4 children
Blanca	Urban South	32	Native American	Yes	Widowed	No children
Ellen	Urban Southwest	48	White	No	Married	Grown children
Carol	Urban Northeast	45	Black	No	Single	No children

Table 2: Participants' Professional Demographic Data

Name	Date of Resignation	Type of Voluntary Resignation	Current Role	Education Level	Years of Principal Experience
Renee	Summer 2022	Sought another position	Director at educational non-profit	Doctorate	3
Erica	Summer 2021	Tapped by an outside organization	Director at state department of education	Doctorate	11
Blanca	Summer 2021	Sought another position	District office leadership	Doctorate in progress	2
Ellen	Summer 2021	Moved locations; sought superintendency	Superintendent	Masters	12
Carol	Fall 2022	Resigned without an opportunity	Not working full-time	Doctorate in progress	7

Table 3: Data on Participants' Schools

Name	School Type	School Level	Student Population	Student Demographics	Title I School	Years Principal at School
Renee	District	Elementary	375	White (54%) Hispanic (36%) Black (4%)	Yes	3
Erica	District	Elementary	650	Black (68%) Hispanic (19%) White (7%)	Yes	4
Blanca	District	Elementary	600	Hispanic (60%) Black (40%)	Yes	2
Ellen	Charter alternative	High	400	Hispanic (72%) White (12%) Native American (8%)	Yes	9
Carol	District	Elementary	240	Black (80%)	Yes	7

The tables serve only as an introduction to the participants; in chapter 4, I shared narrative profiles for each of the women principals. Next, I explained my procedures for collecting data.

Data Collection Procedures

My central research question was: what meaning did women principals ascribe to their experience leading P-12 schools in the U.S. through the pandemic and their decision to resign? After screening and selecting research participants based on criterion and purposeful sampling for maximum variation, I began collecting data. I collected data via two semi-structured interviews and an artifact.

Initial Interviews

Through email, I set up an initial, one-on-one interview with each participant. All participants completed an initial interview. The interviews took place via Zoom and were approximately 60 minutes in length. The interviews were semi-structured– meaning I had a set of questions ready but asked follow-up questions and built rapport by sharing my

own story throughout the conversations when appropriate. I used the semi-structured interview protocol (in Appendix G). I used Zoom's recording and transcribing features to collect the data. To begin, I read the preamble at the start of each interview to remind participants of the purpose of the study, ways I would ensure their protection, and confirmed that it was okay to record. I asked participants if they had any questions before beginning. Then, I opened the conversation by asking participants about their career trajectories. Then, I asked questions about their school, leading during the context of the pandemic, and their process of deciding to resign. To conclude the initial interview, I set up a time for a second interview in the upcoming one to two weeks. I explained that I would like them to create a visual representation of their experience of being a woman principal who resigned during the pandemic.

After each initial interview, I cleaned each interview transcript. I did a round of open coding on each transcript and reflected on what I learned. Throughout this process, I kept track of follow-up questions for each participant in a Word document.

Artifact Collection

Creswell (2013) said that in phenomenology, researchers could collect other data in "observations, journals, poetry, music, art, etc." (p. 81). To address the research question from multiple angles, I asked participants to submit an artifact that represented their experience. I did not confine them to any type of media. Three participants created visual representations and emailed them to me before our second interview. Artifacts were stored in a folder in my email. For participants who submitted a visual representation, I asked about their artifacts in the follow-up semi-structured interview to gather more

insight. Unfortunately, two participants did not have time to create and send me a visual representation of their experience.

Follow-Up Interview

In the second interview, I re-read the preamble that confirmed their consent to participate in the study and be recorded. Then, I asked the questions for the second interview listed in the interview protocol (in Appendix G) and the prepared follow-up questions for each participant. If time allowed, I asked participants about my current working themes and gathered their feedback. Four of the five participants completed an hour-long follow-up interview with me via Zoom. One participant, Blanca, could not meet me on Zoom but answered the questions via e-mail. Additional data analysis took place during the second round of interviews. The complete plan for data analysis is detailed next.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is "the process of making sense of the data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). Merriam & Tisdell (2016) recommended performing data analysis simultaneously with data collection to use findings from one interview to inform the following interview (p. 196-197). Maxwell (2013) seconded this by saying, "The experienced qualitative researcher begins data analysis immediately after finishing the first interview… and continues to analyze the data as long as he or she is working on the research" (p. 104). Based on this guidance, I cleaned, organized, and analyzed each interview shortly after its conclusion. Some subsequent initial interviews took place before I could analyze the previous interview. For instance, I did three interviews in one

day because of a scheduling bind, and it took me a few days to clean, organize, and analyze those interviews.

I used Zoom's recording and transcribing features for the interviews. I saved each Zoom recording on the cloud within the platform. I saved each transcript in my password-protected Google Drive. The transcription was not a perfect dictation, and thus I needed to edit each transcript to make it readable. To do this, I listened to the audio version while reading and editing the transcript. Maxwell (2013) stated that the process of transcribing and cleaning the data may also present an opportunity for analysis; during this listening and editing process, I wrote notes and memos on what I "[saw] and hear[d] in the data and develop[ed] tentative ideas about categories and relationships" (p. 105). When initial ideas percolated through the data cleaning process, I wrote a reflexive memo. I saved my memos on a single document within my Google Drive. When the transcript was clean and with some ideas in mind, I began to code.

To code, I followed a modified version of Merriam & Tisdell's (2016) step-by-step process of analyzing data. The first step was to review the purpose of my study: to explore the experiences of women principals in the U.S. who voluntarily left their roles during the pandemic. This intention-setting process was to stay focused while reviewing data. After all, "the practical goal of data analysis is to find answers to your research questions" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 202–203). Then, I began open coding in NVivo. During the first read of a transcript, I coded data that "[struck me] as interesting, potentially relevant, or important to [my] study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 204). I used the NVivo software to construct categories from codes. After the first three initial

interviews, I realized that my initial findings from inductive coding were not congruent with my conceptual framework. I decided to lean into the new working theories I found through the inductive coding. I wrote many reflexive memos to help process these findings. I planned to follow a prescriptive, guided protocol for reflexive memos that I modified from page 208 of Merriam & Tisdell (2016) (in Appendix H). I followed this process after most interviews, with the exception of when I was backlogged after three interviews in one day. While I initially planned only prescriptive times to pause and write a memo, I found myself wanting to write memos to process my thoughts more frequently than planned. Whenever I needed to think through an idea, I opened my memo document and began writing. I started a new document within my Google Drive that served as a way to capture 'working themes.' A third document captured a list of personalized follow-up questions for each participant in their second interview.

Initially, I struggled to code the three visual representations that I received. They were all very different – a timeline, puzzle pieces, and a list of numbers frequently used during the pandemic with explanations. I decided not to inductively code the artifacts and revisit them once I better understood what was happening in the data.

After I inductively coded all five initial interviews, I had a working draft of the themes and essence of the phenomenon. It was at this time that I revisited my personal experience as a women principal who resigned during the pandemic in a journal entry. There are many different perspectives on when to epoche (Creswell, 2013); I did this exercise before data collection and again after I had my initial findings. I gleaned many new insights about my journey after hearing my participants' perspectives. Many parts of

my experience were brought into my consciousness through the interviewing and coding processes. I worked to put those experiences aside to attempt to be true to the transcendental phenomenology method. During this time between interviews, I wrote draft versions of participant profiles. Next, I re-read and deductively coded all initial interview transcripts. I revised my deductive codebook as needed (in Appendix I). At this time, I switched from NVivo to using an Excel spreadsheet within my Google Drive because I was not confident in using the tools within NVivo. In my Excel spreadsheet, I created a list of significant statements within the broader themes, many of which I had already highlighted in deductive coding. I made a sheet for each theme with columns for each participant where I pasted their quotes. I used rows to explain and group subthemes on the sheet within the theme. Some themes emerged as the essence – or the shared experience across all participants – through horizontalization. I continued to clean, organize, and deductively code each follow-up interview, sometimes asking participants their thoughts on my working theories. I reworked the essence and themes better to fit the initial and new data. I incorporated the artifacts into the deductive codes. I wrote more reflexive memos. I finalized the narrative profiles for each participant so that readers may get to know each participant's story and recap for myself the most critical parts of their narrative. After I had working themes, I began to use some of my trustworthiness strategies to verify and adjust my data as needed.

Trustworthiness Strategies

I took steps to make sure my findings were trustworthy. I utilized the following strategies: member checks, peer debriefing, researcher reflexivity, maximum variation,

and rich-thick descriptions. These strategies promote validity and reliability within the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). In this section, I detailed these strategies.

Member Checks

Member checks are a way to increase validity and credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). Maxwell (2013) called this strategy "respondent validation" and said it is "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say" (p. 126). After analysis of both interviews and the artifacts, I had a working draft of my findings. I created a document for each participant that included only their findings by deleting all other participants' data. I emailed each participant for feedback using the template (in Appendix J). To keep track of their feedback, I created a table akin to Merriam & Tisdell's (2016) on page 247 (in Appendix K). When I received their feedback, I adjusted my findings and noted them in the table.

Peer Debriefing

In my study, I utilized peer debriefing. Peer debriefing is a strategy that increases internal validity by asking a colleague to read "some of the raw data and assess whether the findings are plausible, based on the data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 250). I shared my initial findings and debriefed the data with a peer in my doctoral program. She gave me valuable feedback on ways to rework some of my themes to incorporate the data better. I shared the feedback from my peer and actions taken in the table in Appendix L.

Researcher Reflexivity

Maxwell (2013) said that the "researcher is part of the world he or she studies—it is a powerful and inescapable influence" (p. 125). In this study, I wrote reflexive memos to

uncover my biases, dispositions, and assumptions about the research. By being transparent about how I might be affecting the research and research process, I attempted to uphold the integrity of the study and ensure consistency, dependability, and reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 252). I wrote reflexive memos throughout the planning and execution of my study. During the planning of this study, I wrote memos outlined by Maxwell (2013), including my identity as a researcher, conceptual framework, research questions, research relationships, methods, and validity threats. I expanded on some of these prompts in my journal. One of my professors once told me that "writing is thinking," and much of the planning of this study has evolved via thinking as writing. During the study, I continued reflexive journaling. After each initial interview, I wrote a reflexive memo using the prompts (in Appendix H). I journaled to continue the thinking process when I saw themes emerging or diverging. I looked back on my journals to recall thoughts about my findings.

Maximum Variation

A goal of this study was to find data that was transferrable and thus useful in the P-12 education space. To enhance transferability, I used maximum variation within my participant pool (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 257–258). In this study, that meant finding women participants from different walks of life and diversity of school settings that experienced the same phenomenon. I chose participants that brought variation in participant characteristics to the study, including age, race, ethnicity, marriage status, parental status, years of experience, and location. I also used purposeful sampling to have a representative sample of participants from a variety of school settings. This included

rural/urban/suburban, alternative/general education programs, elementary/middle/high, small/large school populations, schools serving primarily students of color/white students, and charter/district-run public schools.

Rich, Thick Description

To report my findings, I used rich, thick descriptions using participants' words to illustrate the themes and essence. This allowed readers to contextualize each of the participant's situations that were part of the shared essence. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) stated that rich, thick descriptions are one of the best ways to enable the transferability of the findings to another setting (p. 257). These were my strategies to ensure trustworthiness. In my data collection and analysis, I carefully considered the ethics of my study, which is discussed in the next section.

Ethical Considerations

I aimed to uphold this study to the highest ethical standards. I submitted an IRB application for human subject research and received approval (Appendix A). This was an expedited review in category 6 – a collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings. Through ethical safeguards like privacy, confidentiality, and consent, I minimized risk to participants.

Privacy & Confidentiality

Strict measures were taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of each participant. All datasets, including transcripts, had identifiable details removed and replaced with a pseudonym. References to participants had personal information removed to protect participants from identification. All recordings, transcripts, memos, and notes

were securely stored on a password-locked computer and cloud storage that only I had access. There were no printed transcripts of interviews in this study. After the study, all recordings, demographic data in the interest survey, and a list of corresponding pseudonyms were deleted. Five years after the study's conclusion, all transcripts related to the study will be deleted.

Consent

All participants were emailed information explaining the research and their role in the study. They signed a consent form when agreeing to participate in the study (found in Appendix E). At the start of each interview, participants were asked to recall their signed consent form and reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time. In the following sections, I outlined the obstacles and benefits I anticipated in the study.

Anticipated Obstacles and Planned Solutions

Like many studies by novice researchers, I knew there would be some hiccups along the way. I tried to predict these obstacles. I thought that my first hurdle would be finding a diverse pool of participants. To confront this barrier, I joined principal-specific groups on social media with thousands of members. I had eligible participants fill out the interest survey before choosing participants so I could be purposeful in selecting the sample. This intentionality worked out.

A second obstacle I predicted was scheduling of the interviews. I kept my availability open and prioritized participants' availability to make the interviews happen. I was flexible and gracious when participants needed to cancel or reschedule. I was able to

complete nine out of ten interviews with participants with one participant answering the follow-up interview questions via email.

Lastly, I predicted there would be times when I would be my biggest obstacle, and I needed to "get out of my own way." When I felt stuck, I leaned on my advisor and colleagues in my program to help me problem-solve and march on through this process. This was an on-going obstacle for me, but this process taught me a lot. These were the obstacles I predicted in my research and my proposed solutions.

Anticipated Benefits

There may be many benefits to this study. In this section, I discussed the anticipated benefits of research and practice for participants and communities that I planned prior to the study. While this is a small study focused only on women principals, there may be more significant implications for both school leaders and women in leadership.

In the research, as it stands, no single study has been able to 'crack the code' to decrease principal turnover. While this study is not situated to solve this problem entirely, I hoped to contribute new knowledge from a fresh perspective: women principals who led through the pandemic and have voluntarily resigned. No studies I found specifically studied women principals who chose to leave their roles, let alone within the context of the pandemic. This participant pool had rich wisdom to share with the field that could forge a new path to a more sustainable principalship, especially for women.

This study aimed to contribute to the P-12 education field in practice. By providing recommendations for retaining women principals, I hoped to directly impact the most important people in education: the kids. I aimed to help mitigate the negative impacts of

principal turnover on students and their teachers. Furthermore, I wanted to help mold the principalship into a feasible career for women throughout different stages of their personal and professional lives. I hope this study's findings can support human resources departments, school districts, those who manage principals, and women principals themselves. My biggest hope was that participants in the study would see their voices included in changes that made the principalship more sustainable for women.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I detailed my methodology. I started the chapter by being explicit about my positionality. I discussed my qualitative focus and phenomenological approach to studying women principals who resigned during the pandemic. Then, I discussed the chosen participants, the data collection and analysis plans, and trustworthiness strategies. Lastly, I reviewed strategies used to safeguard ethical concerns and explained anticipated challenges and benefits. In chapter four, I included the analysis of the data collected.

Chapter 4: Findings

After conducting the semi-structured interviews and collecting the visual representations, I analyzed the data as described in chapter three. In chapter four, I presented the findings from the analysis. The central research question for this study was: *what shared meaning did women principals ascribe to their experience leading P-12 schools in the U.S. through the pandemic and their decision to resign?* Through this question, I sought to better understand what it may have been like to be a woman principal who voluntarily resigned during the pandemic.

I presented my findings by first introducing the participants. I shared profiles of each participant to highlight the significant events in their stories within their contexts. I shared common themes among participants that answered my research question. They included: a) women principals found fulfillment in their job because of its challenges, b) during the pandemic, feeling aligned with their workplace was more important and urgent than ever, which accelerated career changes for women principals, and c) an irreconcilable difference in values between women principals and their district/charter organization led to their decision to resign. Next, I shared the essence of the phenomenon of women principal participants who resigned during the pandemic. Lastly, I shared a common theme among participants who were women of color.

Meet the Participants

In this section, I shared a narrative profile for each woman principal participant that detailed their personal and professional context and the process of their decision to resign.

Participant Profile: Carol

Carol was a teacher, assistant principal, and principal in New York City for twenty-three and a half years. She is a Black woman in her mid-forties. She is not married and does not have children. Previously, Carol was a school principal that closed as part of Mayor Bloomberg's initiative to break up large schools. Carol's most recent principalship was at a district-run elementary school of about 250 students serving primarily Black students. She was there for seven years.

A big part of Carol's story was her experience as a Black woman in a principal role. Carol talked about the different set of expectations for Black women principals in her district. She felt like she was constantly under the microscope in her role. She gave an example of a white man principal declining a parent's request for a meeting. As a Black woman principal, she felt this was not even a consideration - she made time for every parent who asked and documented each session. She felt a lack of psychological safety in her job that caused her to keep intricate files. She followed protocols to a T because the accountability from her district was so apparent. This was attributed to her positionality as a Black woman leader.

New York City was the epicenter of the initial COVID-19 outbreak. On the last day of in-person school in March 2020, Carol had a 105-degree fever. Her staff and their

families were sick, too. The following month, she attended a funeral of a teacher who died from COVID-19 complications. Amid that, she was expected to spearhead a remote learning program for her school, including training staff to use new technology while orienting herself to it. She described that part of her story as incredibly challenging, but it was not the peak of her stress as a principal in the pandemic.

Carol and her staff could work from home for most of the 2020-2021 school year. The transition back to in-person learning in the 2021-2022 school year was tough for various reasons. Some of her staff were scared to fully engage with students and their work which Carol felt was justified because of their fear of COVID. Some staff had previously brought COVID home, and it killed their mother. Many teachers left. The teachers that remained were stretched thin and disgruntled. While absorbing teachers' stress, anxieties, and extra work, Carol was asked to do more from her district. She felt that the expectations asked of her were completely unrealistic. The district wanted students to perform at pre-pandemic levels and constantly pushed new initiatives around special education, learning recovery, and after-school programming.

Furthermore, her transition was hard – her 30+ minute commute now felt like a burden. In January 2021, after twenty-three years of service to her city's Department of Education, Carol realized that her district did not value her. Carol felt she was an expendable employee at her district and decided to resign. She left her principalship without a job offer and took time off to consider what was next for her.

Participant Profile: Renee

Renee said multiple times throughout her interviews that she thought she would be a principal until she retired. She started as an elementary school teacher for over ten years and then worked as an assistant principal for four years. She began her principalship at an elementary school in 2018 in the same district in Northern Texas. The school she was the principal of was a Title I suburban school serving approximately 375 students, predominantly of Hispanic and white backgrounds. Renee is a white woman in her forties. She's married with young adult children.

Renee described her school as a wonderful place with a fantastic community. The staff and leadership team were excellent. She felt she was able to make a positive difference for the students in her school community and felt a sense of purpose as a principal. When the pandemic started, there was a need to tap into and expand her communication skills as a leader. Being in a very conservative area, her school opened before many other schools nationwide. The 2020-2021 school year was very unpredictable, with a dramatic increase in workload. Constant changes and new requirements came down from the district, and the work of implementation fell on principals.

Over the summer of 2021, she hoped the next school year would bring more stability, and she would return to the same sense of purpose she had before the pandemic. However, she quickly realized in the new school year that she, along with other principal colleagues, was utterly overwhelmed by the workload expectations of the district. Principals were tasked with updating a COVID-19 tracking dashboard, managing

Chromebook check-out systems, and updating safety plans, among other uninspiring and repetitive tasks. Renee accepted that she was the leader and that, sometimes, the work was not glamorous. However, this expectation of mundane and menial task completion continued for months. At the same time, the boundaries between work time and home time were blurred by evening and weekend meetings set up by district leadership. Furthermore, she saw her physical and mental health deteriorate despite her continued efforts to care for herself. And, while she was expected to offer grace and support to her staff, she felt her district leadership did not extend those same sentiments to her.

Renee felt very strongly that support, development, and community building for principals could make a world of difference for her and her colleagues. In October 2021, she met with the superintendent to discuss changes to principal meetings and potential strategies to help principals from burning out. Her superintendent disagreed that principals needed support and did not find an investment in the principals necessary. At this time, Renee realized there was a misalignment between her values and the espoused values of her district leadership on the importance of investing in school leaders. Moreover, she felt the strain on her family and health was not a fair exchange for work she did not find as meaningful and fulfilling as it once was.

A past colleague began working at a non-profit educational consulting firm and told her how her career shift helped create a better balance in her life. Renee resigned as a school principal and found a new opportunity to support principals in their leadership – something important to her – in a role that gave her a better balance between her personal and professional life.

Participant Profile: Erica

In Erica's first principalship, she won a national award for turnaround work in a low-performing school. Then, she found herself a little bored. In 2017, Erica sought a new challenge at a turnaround school in a larger district and city. She was excited about this opportunity in a second principalship, and her new school district was equally enthusiastic about her and her leadership. The district went above and beyond to accommodate her and her family; her children were placed at a school with a waitlist, and her husband's salary request was met. The school was located in a city in the Midwest. It had approximately 650 students, and over two-thirds were Black students.

Erica immediately got to work at her new turnaround school. She saw multiple areas for improvement, including the personnel on her leadership team, the need for a district-provided curriculum for teachers, and fixing the run-down appearance of the school entrance. She needed to collaborate with her superintendent and district leadership to solve these problems. She had a very positive relationship with her previous superintendent. Given her new superintendent's extravagant welcome of her, she assumed she would have similar levels of autonomy and respect. Later, she would find out this was not the case.

Erica immediately got to work to improve her school. She was leading one of the state's lowest-performing schools and needed resources for her teachers, competent personnel, and collaboration with district officials. Erica wanted to do what she believed to her core was her life's work: to serve children in need.

Erica was a trailblazer for other principals in her district on how to run a school in a remote setting. Erica went above and beyond for her school when the pandemic hit. She went into the building to serve meals – something that was only expected of principals in high-needs areas. She continued the weekly professional development series with her staff virtually. She was the first principal in her district to post daily virtual announcements for her entire school. She knew her students could not miss any instructional time and got creative on how to continue learning remotely.

When Erica received her evaluation at the end of the 2020-2021 school year, she thought there must have been a mistake – her scores were far below any evaluation she had ever received. She began to put the pieces together. She realized her drive to serve her students through advocacy was seen as stepping on her superintendent's toes. Erica did not realize her district's race-based and gender-based politics and prejudices. Erica is a biracial (Black and white) woman in her 40s. She described multiple stories with the same theme: the superintendent did not want to answer to any vocal Black woman. Erica described the discrimination as specific to Black women with their duality of race and gender, citing that nine Black women leaders left or were let go by the district under his leadership. Furthermore, she realized the district leadership was not looking to truly do the work of turnaround for her school, they only wanted the bare minimum done to keep the school open. Erica was disappointed by this realization; had she known this, she would not have pursued this turnaround principal role.

While Erica was not actively looking for a new job, she was recommended for a position at the state's Department of Education that she could not pass up. Erica was

excited by the opportunity to have a more significant influence on education within her state. She went to her superintendent to resign in person. He became angry and admitted that the poor evaluation was a tactic for her to learn not to question him. She was disappointed to leave on bad terms but knew it was the best decision.

Erica shared how she did not know that the principalship had dire impacts on her ability to be present at home and her health. Until then, Erica had been a principal for most of her four daughters' lives. In her new job, which was more flexible and less demanding, she was able to be more involved with her own kids. Her kids even noticed her heightened level of engagement in their lives. While telling me this, Erica was disheartened– she didn't know how much she had missed her own children while trying to provide for the children in her school. Additionally, after starting her new job, she realized how poor her health was as a principal. During that time, she did not take time off for doctor's appointments, gained weight, and went to the emergency room twice, thinking she was having a heart attack. Even though these were not factors that necessarily led to her resignation, they are essential parts of her journey of leaving the principalship.

Participant Profile: Blanca

Blanca was fast-tracked to be a principal at age 27. After teaching for three years and serving as an assistant principal for two years, she was tapped to take over an elementary school in an urban Texas district. The school was in turnaround status because of chronic underperformance. The school served approximately 600 students, mostly of Hispanic

and Black backgrounds. As a Latina from a low-income background, she felt a sense of purpose serving students of color who were living in poverty.

Blanca's job was high-pressure because there was a looming fear of the state's takeover of the district if any of the schools in turnaround did not meet their goals. After losing her husband in a natural disaster, she put her whole self into her work, finding her purpose and fulfillment in being highly effective at her job. Blanca loved the challenge of leading in a high-needs school and approached her career with intensity. She was quickly noticed for her excellence, earning Assistant Principal of the Year and First Year Principal of the Year within the district.

The turnaround principal role in her district was a disastrous combination of high stress with unstable support. There was high turnover among principals of turnaround schools in her district. In her four years in school leadership, she had four different supervisors from the district who had their own set of expectations and criteria for success. This support was even less effective when the pandemic hit, as none of her supervisors had ever led schools during such a critical and worldwide crisis. Beyond that, she felt like she was micromanaged in a way that her white or men counterparts were not.

When the pandemic hit, Blanca went above and beyond to serve her school and community. She partnered with local businesses to find computers for all students in her school. She led the academic transition to virtual learning, including a new model for coaching teachers and professional development on quality virtual education. Furthermore, because Blanca had proven herself as a stand-out principal, she was asked by the district to transform her school into a resource center for the community. The

resource center included a health clinic, laundromat, and a place for Wi-Fi connection for any student, including those from other schools, to learn virtually. She welcomed students back for in-person learning in July 2020, months before other schools in her district because there was concern about her student population and potential learning loss. She was asked to serve as a model for other schools as they reopened. She began coaching other principals in her district as they reopened their schools.

Blanca enjoyed coaching other principals and inquired about formally moving up in her district to a principal coach role. She was told that she needed many more years of experience as a principal across multiple settings before the district would consider her for that role. She disagreed with this notion and decided to resign. She landed a new job coaching principals at turnaround schools through a nonprofit organization.

Participant Profile: Ellen

Ellen had the unique experience of holding leadership roles (principal, assistant principal, and director of special education) in both district- and charter-run schools. Most recently, she served as principal at a charter school in an urban area in the southwestern U.S. The school was a credit recovery high school with approximately 400 students – most of Hispanic descent -- and 30 staff members. Ellen is a white woman in her late forties who is married with grown children.

Ellen identified patterns in the factors that led her to transition out of school leadership roles over her career. First, she knew it was time to resign when she felt she had brought the school to the next level by exhausting her strengths and innovation as a leader. For example, in her most recent principalship, she doubled the student population,

opened a daycare facility on the campus for students who were parents, significantly increased the graduation rate, and created efficient systems for tracking student progress. Ellen felt she had brought the school as far as she could, and it was in the organization's best interest for someone else to bring fresh ideas for continuous improvement.

Secondly, Ellen named that not being able to trust her supervisor and their judgment was an indicator that it was time for her to move on. When she was an assistant principal at her previous charter school, the director made illegal choices about the school. This led to Ellen having to testify about his actions in court. She knew she no longer wanted to work for someone whose decisions she could not stand behind. In her most recent principalship, she began to question the judgment of her charter school director because of a decision made in a delicate situation involving the sexual harassment of a staff member. Later, she found he was being dishonest. After the leadership team and the director agreed upon a decision not to pay for an employee's higher education, she happened upon a receipt he signed agreeing to do just that. Because Ellen felt she could not trust her supervisor and his decisions, she thought it was time to move on.

Lastly, Ellen identified not feeling a baseline level of support from her supervisor as a significant factor in her decision to leave a principalship. One example that she gave was her superintendent's response to her handling of a bomb threat. Ellen followed the orders of the police to immediately evacuate the building, even though many students were in the cafeteria. Afterward, Ellen was told by her superintendent that she had made the wrong decision -- she should not have followed the police's orders. Despite the ethical concern, she was disappointed that her supervisor could not see her dilemma and did not

support her in what she thought was the right thing to do. Later in that principalship, the assistant superintendent, her direct supervisor, approved a plan for student incentives. Her supervisor did not support her when she stuck with her schedule, and the parents were so upset that they went to the news. Ellen felt she was in no-win situations frequently, an indication to her that it was time to move on.

When the pandemic hit, Ellen's school had some systems in place to smoothly transition to remote learning. However, Ellen felt the boundaries between home life and work life were blurred. Ellen's husband also had a high-stress job during the pandemic. They took time together to think about what they wanted in life. They decided it was time to try something new with their last child at home moving out. Crime was high in the urban area they were living in. They could take advantage of the housing market pricing by selling their home. Ellen resigned from her principal role and took a superintendency position in a small, rural district.

In the next section, I shared the most common themes that I found from inductive coding in a themes matrix.

Themes Matrix

In Table 4, I shared my working themes matrix. I came to these themes by combining similar codes without any overlap. Then, I used horizontalization, or the practice of finding themes that were common across all participants, to find the essence of the phenomenon.

Table 4: Themes Matrix

Theme	Renee	Erica	Ellen	Blanca	Carol
The pandemic spurred reflection and change	x	x	x	x	x
Misalignment of values with district/charter organization	x	x	x	x	x
Found fulfillment/purpose in the principalship because it was challenging	x	x	x	x	x
Left a principalship when not challenged		x	x	x	
Unrealistic expectations	x				x
Experienced a different workplace because of positionality of gender/race		x		x	x
Principalship negatively impacted health	x	x	x	x	
Not supported	x	x		x	
Not valued	x	x		x	x
Not given autonomy		x		x	

Next, I outlined the shared themes of women principals who resigned from P-12 public schools during the pandemic.

Theme 1: Women Principals Found Meaning and Fulfillment in Their Principal Role Because It Was Challenging

The women principals I interviewed described a paradox in their experience. They said that the job was incredibly challenging. Yet, they loved it. The participants described challenges from stress, pressure, serving students in low-income communities, using their entire skill set, and the early morning required of a principal. These challenges gave way for a sense of purpose, fulfilment, and love for the job. Blanca illustrated this by saying,

“The most fulfilled [I've been in my life] has been being a principal. I had a lot of control as a principal. I had all this stress. I had all the pressure. But, it was very fulfilling to create a team from scratch to see that team [grow].”

Blanca further explained this with her school context. She said: “I love[d] the challenge of it. I love[d] supporting kids that mirror[ed] the upbringing that I had - high poverty... I felt like I had purpose in that community, and I loved the kids.”

Erica talked about her turnaround school with similar sentiments. She said, “That building was the sixth lowest performing school in this entire state for English…so it was a challenging school. I loved every minute of it. I loved my staff. I loved my kids. I loved most of my parents but loved it, loved my job. [I] was not looking [to leave].”
She added, “It was horribly stressful to be a building principal. However, it was the most favorite job I've ever had. I loved it.” Erica put it plainly in both of these quotes: the job was hard, and she loved it.

Carol said the love for her job included the challenge of long hours, starting in the early morning. She illustrated this: “I was the first one in my building [in the morning], not because I had to be, but because I wanted to be. I woke up at 4:30 every morning. I always said I was there for the start of the welcome parade for the school safety [and] for the kitchen [staff]. Good morning, Miss [..]! Good morning! Good morning! Good morning! Good morning!”

Carol loved the responsibility of being the leader of the school. It brought meaning to her life. Similarly, Renee described the sense of purpose she felt in her role as a principal. In Renee’s visual representation, she made a heart map (Figure 2) that described her

feelings throughout her experience. She recalled how in February 2020, she had a sense of purpose in her role as a principal.

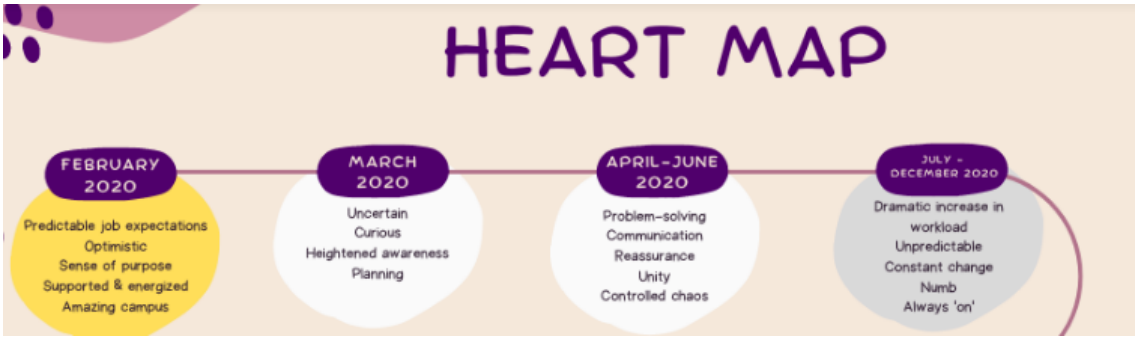

Figure 2: Renee's Heart Map Part 1

In an email, she explained to me how having challenges in her principal role was important to her feeling of fulfillment. She wrote: "I do feel that there is a great need for me, and other female leaders, to be involved in work that is both challenging and purposeful… Our work meant that students were learning." Renee explained her commitment to the work, including the challenges. She said, "I will honestly say I thought I was going to be a principal until I retired." Renee had been a principal at her campus for three years.

Ellen, who had been a principal at both a district-run and charter-run school, had experienced plateauing in her work at different schools. She felt she needed to move on when she wasn't fueled by challenges anymore. She said about her alternative charter school, "I didn't feel like there was anything else I could do for them. I felt like I had kind of run through my skill set, and maybe it was time for someone with some new, fresh ideas to come in and take the next step." Without the challenge of the job, Ellen wasn't getting the same fulfillment and resigned to seek new challenges elsewhere.

The challenges that the participants loved about their job ranged, including complex problem solving and leading a team. One important consideration was that challenge and workload were not synonymous. Some participants said that at some points, they loved the heavy workload. For example, after Blanca lost her husband, she was thankful that she could always have more to do in her role. However, heavy workload was not necessarily part of the beloved challenge of the role across participants. Across my discussion with women principals who resigned during the pandemic, a trend was clear: they loved their job because it was challenging. All participants also shared the experience of being a principal during the pandemic, in which the next theme emerged.

Theme 2: Through Reflection During the Pandemic, Women Principals Found Feeling Aligned with Their Workplace Was More Important and Urgent Than Ever, Which Accelerated Career Changes

All five participants expressed how the pandemic allowed more time for self-reflection. With so many uncertainties looming with the pandemic, the participants considered how they were spending their time – both in their work and at home. They realized ways in which they were spending their time that didn't match up with the vision for themselves or their families. This made them more open to leaving their roles for work that they felt more in harmony with. Ellen contrasted how people may have thought before the pandemic and how the uncertainty led to people wanting fulfillment and alignment in their careers. She said, "I think what the pandemic did is it exponentially raised that factor... before, if your values weren't aligned, you might be able to wait it out a couple of years. But when the pandemic hit, I think everybody kind of really took stock

of their lives and decided life was too short... I'm not going to stay in this sort of setting when I don't know what tomorrow brings, what next year brings. If I'm not being fulfilled, and I don't feel like I'm in a place where I can truly make a difference, and it's going to make a difference for me, too, then it's time to go."

She continued, "[the pandemic] made people question the value of their life. And, not knowing what the future brings, are you going to spend time in an organization that isn't aligned with where you are?" Ellen's reflection during the pandemic made her more open to seeking opportunities that she would feel better aligned with. Carol talked about a shift in her mindset and values because of the tragedy she witnessed during the pandemic. She said: "In this season of life, I'm learning to value me. So many people died in the pandemic. I spent twenty-three and a half years there. So don't be fooled - this is not like a little job I had for ten years... No. I'm still in the journey because I'm not really working, but my mind was made up [I was leaving]."

Upon her reflection during the pandemic, Carol felt there was an incompatibility between valuing herself and her job.

The uncertainty of the pandemic spurred conversations between women principal participants and their partners about what they really wanted in life. These conversations led women principals to be open to making changes. Renee said: "We [my husband and I] had lots of deep conversations about our goals for our kids and our family, and our life, and what this should look like. So, after that conversation, it just got me thinking a lot about… what do I want for myself? What do I want for my kids? If nothing changes, how will that look for me in the next couple of years?"

Ellen and her partner, who was also in a high-stress job, shared similar times of reflection that moved to action. She recalled one of these conversations. She said: “We [my husband and I] were both burning the candle at both ends, and we decided - you know what: life's too short. We can't keep doing this. We've got to change something because right now, all we're doing is living to work, and it's not fulfilling, and it's not enjoyable.”

In a member check e-mail, Erica went more in-depth on her journey of reflection during the pandemic. For her, it was realizing the amount of time she spent on the job that took away from her kids and health. She shared: “The pandemic made me take a hard look at the years I spent giving my all to everyone else's families. I had been a principal since my oldest daughter was five months old (she is now 13). I never took time to think about the excessive hours and how most things at home were checklists of responsibilities instead of really being present and involved… I'll never go back to how I was working again. I didn't take off for medical appointments; I missed every first day of school for my own girls. Everything took a back seat to my job.” For Erica, her reflection spurred on by the pandemic led to prioritizing herself and her family.

For Blanca, who was earlier on in her career and had recently lost her husband, the reflection during the pandemic led her to be more laser-focused on her dreams. She touched on this topic in her interview, and I emailed her to learn more. She wrote: “I was going through my grief process and didn't feel the need to stay somewhere where I didn't feel challenged and valued. I sold my home -- the one I had built with hopes of growing a family with my late husband -- and took a job in a different city. It was time for me to dive deep into my personal commitment of reaching my goal of becoming a

superintendent and took a promotion elsewhere. Since then, I have moved to another city for another promotion, and I will continue doing so until I reach my personal commitment. I do think this willingness to change locations and commit to my dreams came in part as a result of the pandemic." Even though Erica and Blanca's reflections led them to prioritize different personal goals, they both were energized to make career changes that were more in line with their needs.

These reflections were monumental in the stories of some of the women principal participants. By pausing to consider their mortality and values, they pondered whether they were spending their time in a way that was true to them. This reflection made them consider whether they were aligned with the values of their workplaces and made them more open to making a career change. In the next theme, I shared the common experience of participants: when they did not have values-alignment in their organizations, they decided to leave.

Theme 3: When There Were Irreconcilable Misalignments in Values Between Women Principals and Their Organizations, They Left

The third theme explained why women principal participants who served at P-12 public schools in the U.S. voluntarily resigned from their roles during the pandemic. In their reflections, which were six months to nearly two years after their last day at their principalship, they shared that a lack of alignment in the espoused or practiced values of their organization was a major factor in their voluntary resignations. The five participants had different situations, but in the end, their resignations boiled down to a lack of alignment of values – whether that was being people-centered instead of outcomes-

centered, not practicing the espoused values of the district, disagreement with rigid district policies, or losing trust in a supervisor.

In both Renee's and Carol's situations, their district leadership did not value their people. There was a baseline level of support and care that these participants felt was necessary as an employee and school leader. Carol had much to say on this topic and she didn't mince words while illustrating that district leadership's lack of care for her as a person had reached an unacceptable level. Carol explained (the bolding of the quotes is mine for emphasis): "I think the cherry on top was that I was in a car accident. I was really hurt. I fractured my left wrist, I had three herniated discs in my back, three bulging discs in my neck, and you know what my district office was calling me about: when am I coming back because my review is due… I don't want to be recorded saying what I feel, so I'll say it nicely: I'm like, 'Carol, they don't care about you one bit' … after that, **they really showed me how much they didn't value me and how I was dispensable to them, I decided to become just that: dispensable."** This feeling of being dispensable had been building up over time as her district leadership was outcomes-focused rather than people-focused. Carol thought that the priorities of her district were entirely out of touch with the reality that principals and their staff were living. Carol noted that having unrealistic expectations without regard for a principal's reality was something that had been a customary practice in her district for a long time. She recalled: "I remember having conversations with my district team, maybe even two years before the pandemic. 'Oh, if you don't get the scores up...' I said, 'Wait a minute... There's a process here. These ineffective teachers met me here. I didn't hire them'... But it's all a process. **I can't**

snap my fingers, do ya' step, and the school just magically change. We started with the culture... getting kids excited about learning, you know, all of that great stuff. We did all of that. But instruction is a chore… it's a process. And they used to say to me, 'Well, you got to get the scores!' And I said to them, 'Well, you know what, if you feel you can get somebody else in here that can do this job better than me. I will step out of the way. I won't fight you; I promise.' So, I think it was always in there, underlying some of the nonsense that was going on."

Carol explained another instance of her district caring more about outcomes than about people when the pandemic hit. She said: "I left when the school closed in March of 2020; I had Covid. I left the school with a fever of 105, and I was sick**. In the midst of all of that, you know the drill, they want the school up and moving remotely**. That's it... Well, we got it up and going. If I could say so myself, we had a really good program. But just the stress, right? I'm sick. My teachers are sick. Their husbands are sick. They're losing their mothers. They're losing their fathers. And **the expectation was that we just push on. And I found myself more and more saying, doing, and pushing agendas that I just didn't believe in**. In April 2020, I'm in a funeral home for one of my teachers. It was sixteen of us, with chairs spread all out, all masked up, right? Just trying to pay my respects. It was... it was a lot." The district did not consider the anguish its school leaders were experiencing. This continued even after the onset of the pandemic. Carol said that in the 2021-2022 school year, "[district leaders] want pre-pandemic outcomes or better post-pandemic and not realizing everyone's trauma." Carol illustrated this by saying: "But the year before I left [2021-2022 school year], the district they were pushing hard.

Everything! Everything! Now we want to crack down on Special Ed. We want to crack down on [academic] recovery. The teachers don't want to work after school. They're burnt out. We still don't have enough staff. I'm teaching a math class in one grade and an English class and another, and you want to know why I'm five minutes late to a meeting. Just unrealistic expectations, just spreading myself so thin."

She spoke more about the unrealistic expectations and the unrelenting demands of the district in the same interview. She said: "It was becoming too much. And it seemed like they wanted more. More, more, more. More data collection, more this, more strategies, more implementation of this. It was impossible. And I found myself telling teachers - and, of course, they're getting disgruntled, and they're going to the union - I didn't disagree with them! It was too much! And I said, 'I can't do this anymore.'" This culmination of experiences led Carol to see that this misalignment of values and priorities between her and her district was irreconcilable, and she decided to resign.

Renee's decision to resign also involved a divergence in her values and the values of her district leadership, specifically around the support and development of principals. The lack of support took a toll on her and her principal colleagues. Furthermore, the district did not seem to care that the principals were struggling. She explained: "Not only was our district not looking to grow leaders in leadership, they didn't think it was important. And I do, you know. I know a certain part of the responsibility falls on us as leaders to grow ourselves. But also, there should be intentionality and growing leaders. I mean, these are the people in charge of schools. And they need more support. I mean, I saw my colleagues. There were times we just felt like we were drowning. And where could we

look for support? …it just seemed not intentional and not important. And so, I don't know, if you feel like you're not growing, and that's not important, why am I here?"

When Renee sensed this divergence of values, she tried advocating for her needs and the needs of her colleagues. She said: "I set up a meeting with our superintendent. He said, 'What do you propose we do?' And I said, 'Here's what I think our principals need,' and I laid out a plan for him… He said, 'I just don't see that as a need like you do.' And so, I asked him, 'What do you think principals need?' And he said, 'I think they need to get things done that I'm asking them to do.' This was a misalignment."

It was unfortunate that her superintendent did not consider that values alignment amongst leadership to be important. Ultimately for Renee, it was more about feeling heard and valued than the support. She said: "I even think had the district said, 'We absolutely need support for leadership,' that would have been enough to keep me. Because if they really valued what we had to say as administrators, I think they would have made a change."

In her heart map visual representation (Figure 3), she explained how this realization was a turning point for her in the fall of 2021. Values misalignment was a 'decision point' in her timeline when she began considering leaving her school.

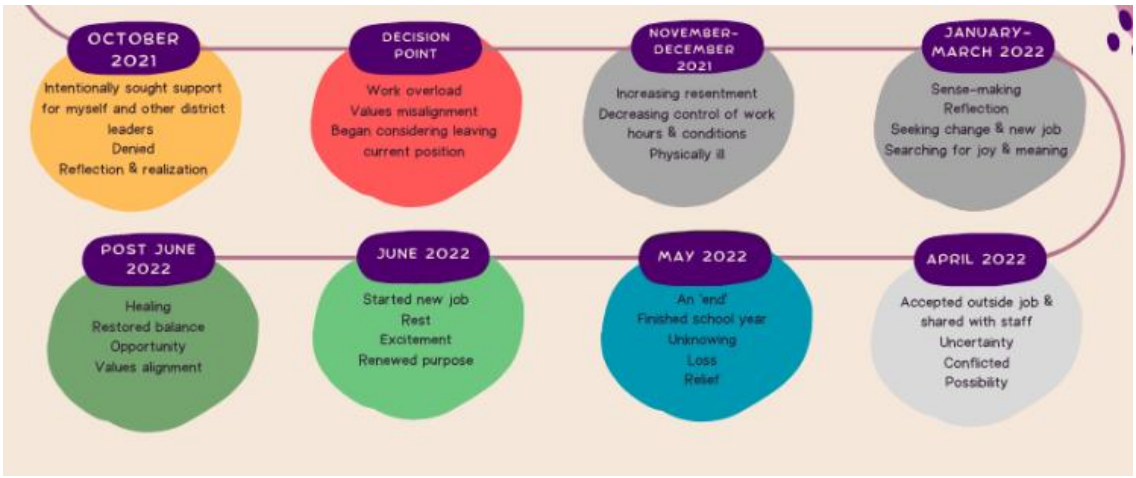

Figure 3: Renee's Heart Map Part 2

She summed up the importance of alignment of values with her workplace in her exit interview survey. Renee said, "I offered that in the exit interview. [the question asked], 'Why are you leaving?' [and I answered] 'I'm pursuing a job that aligns more with my values.'" For Renee, this alignment of values was critical. She reported in her heart map (Figure 3) a values alignment and restored balance in her new role at an educational non-profit that she started in June 2022. For both Renee and Carol, they wanted to feel aligned with their workplaces in the value of people. When they felt they could not achieve this alignment, they left.

For Erica, a misalignment in values was also the ultimate factor that led to her accepting another position for which she was recommended. However, her situation was more complicated because she agreed with the espoused values, but not her district leadership's values in practice. Erica explained: "My values align with the public message of the [district]. We're gonna do the best thing by kids, etc., the public-facing persona of what the superintendent is trying to push forward. Where we don't align is, as with many things, everything looks shiny and new and pretty and dazzling from the

outside. But until you actually live and work in it and understand the dynamics that are happening behind the scenes. So, I'm thinking about The Wizard of Oz, right? Like when the curtain is finally lifted and it's just a man behind this huge spectacle. I feel like the [district] is very much like that, unfortunately."

In her visual representation (Figure 4), she explained further: "The colorless piece in the center is the perfect representation of the outside edges of the puzzle covering up the gaping hole in the middle. … the center puzzle piece is representative of the stark contrast between what is presented publicly [by] the superintendent and the reality of what happens behind closed doors."

Figure 4: Erica's Visual Representation

Erica gave many examples of how the espoused values of her district were different from the values in practice. Most prominently, her district had a policy aimed to diversify the leadership in the district. Erica explained: "They have a board policy around minority engagement and employment and making sure that they are hitting certain percentages. The Board President was a Black man. Our superintendent is a Black man. And so that was really a lovely experience having [the policy] as a minority."

This policy, while it sounded good, did not positively impact the respect and retention for Black women leaders in the district. Erica explained how this played out. She said: "What I believe wholeheartedly is that our superintendent, though he is a Black man, has

a significant problem with Black females who are vocal. If you [ask a] question, [even if] you're not questioning him personally, it is a personal attack."

She added her feelings to this sentiment. She said, "It's really, really scary that we are expected to keep our mouths closed because of the fear of retaliation, especially when dealing with children." Erica told me about the consequence she endured because she spoke out: a poor evaluation. She explained: "Evaluations came out that year. I've always been effective or highly effective, but I've never 'needed improvement' or never been brought in, nothing in my entire career… I received my evaluation, and I honestly thought there was a mistake… I was .18 away from improvement or needs improvement. I couldn't believe it. I mean, I hadn't been talked to about anything. I hadn't been brought in for anything. Like nothing, no warning. I thought for sure [it was a mistake]. I started calling my colleagues, 'Hey, how are your scores?' You know, this kind of thing. And so, it was at that point I realized, I'm not going to get support here. And, this was done, I think, to teach me a lesson."

Erica discussed that this was a common practice of her superintendent to treat Black women leaders this way, despite the policy on engagement with minority leaders. She said: "What's crazy is he [the superintendent] has been in the corporation for nine years. and over those nine years, nine black female administrators have been demoted, have left, or have been run out… The data, the statistics, the percentage doesn't hold up in any other demographic."

This discrepancy between the stated value of leaders of color and the poor treatment of Black women leaders was not the only way in which the superintendent was not living

out the espoused values of the district. Erica talked about another difference – what the district said they expected of a turnaround school and what they actually wanted. She said: “You [the superintendent] asked me to turn around, but what I'm realizing is you really just want somebody in here who can keep the issues of this building off your plate. You don't want to end up in the news. You want somebody who knows the laws and can get some things done. And if kids happen to learn along the way, great, but that was like a secondary benefit to just keeping things off your plate... I just feel like [the superintendent] should have said to me: that's what we want. Because then, I wouldn't have taken the job. But when you tell me that my job is to turn around and make a school successful, then I'm going to do that.”

The discrepancies between espoused versus practiced values and a lack of alignment with her personal values were ultimately what led Erica to pursue another opportunity. At the close of the second interview, I asked Erica about different factors to see if they would have swayed her decision to remain in her role. She responded, “No one could have saved that. I'm just not going to work for him. No. Once I understood what was really going on, it would be equivalent to selling myself to the devil.” It was clear: Erica could no longer look past the district’s disregard for their own stated priorities. Instead, she resigned.

Blanca’s decision to resign also had to do with the misalignment of values in her district. Her district wanted streamlined practices despite having yearly turnover in the person expected to support principals in implementing these practices. Blanca explained this in an email to me. She said: “The rotation of principal supervisors made it exhausting

to keep up with changing expectations and constant fight to prove my right for autonomy within my building. I believe the issue was that [district] was huge and they wanted alignment. It's very tough to have streamlined practices when you are a part of such a diverse city. I thought leadership valued streamlined practices more than autonomy, originality, and results."

This divergence of values between Blanca and the district occurred again when she inquired about potentially moving to district leadership. Blanca explained: "I already am coaching principals, so why not become a principal coach? And so I told my boss... and they said, 'You know, that's not the trajectory here in the district. Yes, you do have a bright future here. But you have to put in the years of service...'... and I was just like, 'No... I know that that's the traditional trajectory. But I've met people that have done it other ways. So why do I have to follow that?' ... I just felt I wasn't aligned to the leadership that was in the district, and if that was their philosophy that you have to be twenty years in a position before they deem you competent enough to move up. Then that's just not something that I wanted to be a part of."

These described instances illustrated the difference in values between Blanca and her district. After hearing she could not be considered for a principal coaching role within her district, she found a similar role through a nonprofit.

In Ellen's situation, she encountered the misalignment of values through broken trust with the director of her charter school. She said: "Once I knew I couldn't trust what he was saying and that he wasn't sticking to the decisions that we made, I just felt like it was dangerous for me to stay… I still had eight or nine years before I could retire. I was not

willing to let my career go up and smoke if his next decision was something that was illegal."

On top of trust, Ellen also valued having an aligned vision with her charter director. She said, "I just felt like we were going down the path that I didn't want to go down… my vision was no longer aligned with his... and so I made the decision to start looking around at other things." When I asked her what the director's vision was, she said, "I don't think he could articulate what his vision was because he hadn't had any other district or school experience beyond that. He kind of had a very narrow view, I guess, of what was possible." For Ellen, this inability to trust her boss combined with a lack of striving for improvement were areas in which her job was no longer compatible with her values.

Across all the participants, a misalignment of values indicated that it was time to resign. In the next section, I shared the essence of the phenomenon.

The Essence of the Phenomenon

In essence: the pandemic intensified the need for women principals to feel in harmony with their workplaces; when they did not have this alignment, they moved on. This was the common experience of all participants, who were women principals that resigned during the pandemic. In the next section, I shared a theme specific to participants who were women of color in a fourth theme.

Theme 4: Women Principals of Color Faced Inequities Because of Their Positionality

All three women principals of color described how their identity as women leaders of color shaped their experience. For each of these participants, they named different ways

in which their organization treated them differently. Each of them stressed how it was not solely gender-based discrimination or race-based discrimination; the equity issue arose because of their intersection of being both a woman and a leader of color. Much of Erica's story regarding her experience as a Black woman in her district was included in Theme 3. Blanca and Carol both had sentiments to add on being micromanaged and appraised more often and intensely than their colleagues who were white women or men.

Blanca, a Latina, explained her experience in an email to me. She wrote, "Even though we had turned around a five-consecutive year failing school and had increased enrollment by 100+ students, I was micromanaged more than white female/male peers." Carol, a Black woman, had a similar experience. She said: "I watch how other principals, males, be it Black or white, Caucasian women, even within the same system, don't seem to have to be as bombarded with everything as I was. And I'm not just speaking for me but even the other Black women in our district. It felt like it was too much."

She felt she was constantly "under the microscope" and was explicit that this feeling was not shared by colleagues who were not women of color. She learned she could avoid trouble by keeping receipts for every protocol she followed so she did not have to worry that anyone could say otherwise. She discussed the lack of psychological safety in her job, which caused her to always want to have documentation. Here's how she put it: "If I could be honest with you… as a Black woman, they just kept on… if I didn't follow a protocol, it was like, literally, off with my head… So, there was a receipt for everything. I probably I stressed everybody out with these receipts because accountability was always so heavy."

When she told me this, I asked her if she received any support from her district leadership. She explained: “I had two Black [woman] superintendents during my tenure. The first one, she was also a receipt keeper. Because I think she recognized as a Black woman, she better have receipts, too. She was a receipt keeper, so I had to be a receipt keeper, and that was that. The second one, I think she tried to support us [Black woman principals]. And then they got on a bandwagon for her. She no longer works there. She is back up, principal in [another neighborhood]. She resigned - her own free will, too.” Carol’s quotes illustrated the different set of expectations she saw and experienced in her district for women of color. Erica and Blanca also named inequities experienced in their roles attributed to their intersectionality of being both a leader of color and a woman. The other participants, who were white, did not discuss facing inequities as a central part of their experience as a woman principal who resigned during the pandemic.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I shared the profiles of each participant. Then, I detailed three themes that were cross-cutting across participants. I wrote the essence of the shared phenomenon of women principal participants who resigned during the pandemic. In short: women principals loved their jobs despite the challenge and stress; the pandemic prompted reflection on what was important to them; and they voluntarily resigned when they were out of alignment with the values of their workplaces. This is significant because it can guide school districts and those who hire principals to consider ways to retain school leaders, especially women. I shared a theme that all women participants of color had in

common. Based on these findings, I outlined further discussion, implications, and recommendations in chapter five.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This transcendental phenomenological study aimed to explore the experience of women principals at P-12 schools in the U.S. who voluntarily left their roles during the pandemic. My central research question was: *what shared meaning did women principals ascribe to their experience leading P-12 schools in the U.S. through the pandemic and their decision to resign?* By studying the turnover of women principals from those who have experienced it could add valuable knowledge to educational leadership on the causes of principal turnover for women. Data on this topic could elicit new strategies for retaining women principals. This study used qualitative data collection via semi-structured interviews with five women principals who resigned during the pandemic. Some participants also created visual representations to explain their resignation process. The data was analyzed into themes and distilled into an essence of the phenomenon. I sought to understand the shared experiences of women principals who resigned during the pandemic to offer a new perspective on why women principals principal leave.

In this chapter, I discussed and interpreted the findings. I shared implications and recommendations for future research that could support the recruitment and retention of women principals at P-12 public schools in the U.S.

Discussion of Findings

This study was designed to explore the shared experiences of women principals who led through the pandemic and voluntarily resigned. My conceptual framework – or my

working theory of what I thought was happening – was based on the literature I reviewed on principal turnover and women in the principalship. Through the findings of this study, I realized that my conceptual framework was too surface level. It did not dig deep enough to see the complexities and humanities of women principals. When I shared the initial findings of this with Ellen, a participant, she said this to me: "What you [are] describing are all very touchy-feely sorts of things, which I think women administrators try to stay away from because they can be seen as weak or emotional. I almost wonder if sometimes we feel like we have to blame other things… to give justification to why we're leaving rather than acknowledging those softer aspects."

I redesigned my conceptual framework to better show the process of women principals who resigned during the pandemic. It is displayed in Figure 5.

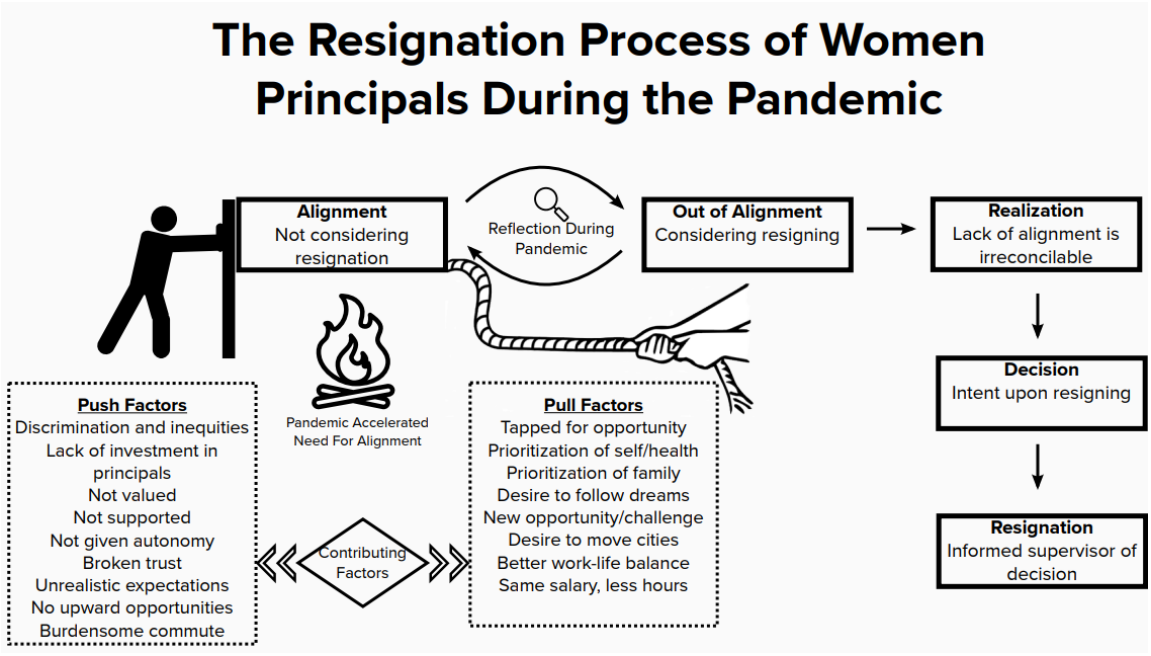

Figure 5: Revised Conceptual Framework

After data analysis, some components of the conceptual framework needed to be redesigned to match my findings. I changed the terms ‘pre-contemplation’ and ‘contemplation’ to ‘alignment’ and ‘out of alignment,’ respectively. I added the stage of ‘realization’ to illustrate when women principals realized that the lack of alignment was irreconcilable. The final stages of ‘decision’ and ‘resignation’ stayed constant.

The push and pull factors changed based on my findings. These factors pushed and pulled women principals out of alignment with their workplaces instead of simply a push or pull to resign, an important difference from my first version. I listed the push and pull factors that led the women principal participants in my study to be out of alignment. I included major and minor factors across the five participants, as some were weighted heavier by some participants than others.

The process of going from alignment to out of alignment was illustrated as more cyclical, with two arrows showing a forward and backward movement instead of a linear, one-way movement. The reflection from the pandemic magnifying glass is shown at the center of this process. This showed how women principals in my study took time to reflect on their alignment, or lack thereof, as part of their resignation process. The fire, which initially said ‘pandemic as an accelerant’ became more specific in this version. It now more accurately describes how the pandemic intensified the situation – it accelerated the need for alignment for women principals. Identity markers were shown to mediate the push and pull factors. However, there were additional factors outside of identity markers, thus I changed the language to ‘contributing factors.’

My discussion of the findings helped highlight what is depicted in my conceptual framework and some softer aspects that may not already be present within the research. In the remainder of this section, I offered a further analysis of each theme from my study.

Theme 1: Women Principals Found Meaning and Fulfillment in Their Principal Role Because It Was Challenging

There is extant research on the multifaceted challenges of the principalship, such as lack of autonomy, personnel management, and lack of work-life balance (Byrne-Jiménez & Orr, 2012; De Jong et al., 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Goodwin et al., 2005; Lemoine et al., 2014; Mahfouz, 2020). There is also emerging research about the challenges for principals during the pandemic, including shifting to remote learning, prioritizing their staff and students' mental health, and an increase in working hours (Hayes, Anderson, et al., 2022; Steiner et al., 2022; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020; Woo & Steiner, 2022). While the participants in this study acknowledged these challenges, they were not given as core reasons for their resignation. This brings up a concern that Snodgrass Rangel (2018) raised in her literature review, "Job satisfaction on its own may not help distinguish between leavers and stayers" (p. 103). This illustrated a dichotomy in my findings: women principals reported loving their job despite experiencing the challenges that lead to job satisfaction. The idea that women principals leave because of challenges, or push factors, in their job does not capture how the participants in this study described the stress of their job and their love for it simultaneously. It elicited further questions that there must be something deeper happening. This is not to minimize job

satisfaction as a priority, only to say that more exploration is needed to explain the connection, if any, between job satisfaction and retention of principals.

Theme 2: During the Pandemic, Feeling Aligned with Their Workplace Was More Important and Urgent Than Ever, Which Accelerated Career Changes for Women Principals

The context of the timing of the resignations of participants was intertwined with the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic contributed to a global trend of resignations in 2021 (Klotz, 2021). This was especially apparent in women (Cornish, 2021) and women in leadership (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2022). The time for reflection during the pandemic caused people to make career moves that they may not have previously made (Accius, 2022; Corbett, 2021; Klotz, 2021). These findings were consistent with the findings of this study that centered on women principals within the context of the pandemic. Much of the research on The Great Resignation included themes like values exploration and alignment, which will be further discussed in the next theme regarding alignment of values as an important factor in staying at a workplace.

Theme 3: When There Were Irreconcilable Misalignments in Values Between Women Principals and Their Organizations, They Left

This finding dovetailed emerging research about the recent shift in employees' expectations of their employers. Although there is speculation that this was a byproduct of the pandemic, research shows there has been a growing need for workers to have their need to belong and have a sense of community met in the workplace because of a void of this in their personal lives (Hyatt Miller, & Hyatt, 2022). A growing number of

Americans find their sense of self in their jobs and workplaces. This could be attributed to Americans getting married later in life, having fewer or no children, moving away from where they grew up, and fewer belonging to religious or spiritual organizations (Hyatt Miller & Hyatt, 2022). This void may be part of Americans' increased expectations for their workplaces. A study by Beyond Blue Consulting & Future Workplace (2021) explored these increased expectations. They found that Americans across sectors want their workplaces to be a fit for them in three dimensions. This included being "good for me," or investment in employee well-being, "good for us," or trust in employers to create a sustainable workplace culture, and "good for the world," meaning making a positive difference (Blue Beyond Consulting & Future Workplace, 2021, p. 2). My study elicited similar sentiments through the prism of women principals. The participants in my study wanted to feel a match between their values and vision and a complement to their expectations for workplace culture and how they are asked to spend their time and energy. Both studies showed the importance of organizational health and alignment between the employer and the employees.

This finding also echoes the monumental research by Argyris and Schon (1974) regarding the need for practiced values to match espoused values. Once women principals realized that their espoused values, or the espoused values of their districts, were no longer compatible with their personal values, they resigned.

Theme 4: Women Principals of Color Faced Inequities Because of Their Positionality

All three participants who were women principals of color said they experienced their workplaces differently than their peers who were white women or men, even men of color. This finding is consistent with the context of the pandemic as workers had a heightened level of intolerance for workplace discrimination (Accius, 2022). The participants noted this theme had been happening long before the pandemic. It appears complex and systemic because this experience was present even across supervisors from different backgrounds – be it white, Black, men, or women supervisors. From this study, I did not have the opportunity to fully flesh out how the lived experiences of women of color were different. Some studies have looked at the experiences of women principals of color centered in the research (Arrieche Yanez, 2022; Craig, 2021; Haskins, 2020; Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017; Lomotey, 2019; Morrison Smith, 2021; Peters, 2012) or in comparison to their white women peers (Floyd Gutsch, 2001; Loder, 2005). However, little is known about how women principals of color experience their workplaces differently than men principals of color. This finding suggests that women principals of color experience the systems of oppression more complicatedly than lines of gender and race. It also suggests that oppression mechanisms may be specific to women leaders of color because of their intersectionality.

Implications

The findings of this study elicited implications for practitioners and educational leadership researchers. The study may have implications for district-level policy, these were included within the implications for practitioners.

Implications for Practitioners in the Field

The findings may have implications for practitioners in the education field. The first theme has implications for those who manage principals. It suggested that simplifying the principalship by reducing challenges may not be the solution to retaining women principals. Women principals in this study loved aspects of the complexity of the role. The finding suggested it may be critical for those who manage women principals to ask them what they love about their roles and continue to provide opportunities to do the work they find fulfilling. However, the challenge of the job need not be confused with unrealistic expectations or an unmanageably heavy workload.

The third theme, regarding alignment, may resonate with those who lead school districts and charter organizations. It highlighted the importance of having explicit organizational values, vision, and mission in which their school leaders are invested. It also suggested that these organizations must consider whether they are living up to their espoused values. The finding demonstrated that it is critical for school districts and charter organizations to listen when their school leaders call out areas where the organization can grow; this alone may increase retention among women principals.

More specifically, this finding may be significant in hiring and retaining women principals. In the hiring process, discussing the compatibility of a principal candidate's

values with the school district or charter organization may be significant. This finding suggests that school districts and charter organizations should open two-way conversations on the progress and alignment of these aspects to retain more women principals.

The fourth theme regarding the inequities that women principals of color also has implications. It suggested that women principals of color do not experience equity and inclusion in their school districts or charter organizations. This is significant because those who manage principals may not be considering how their organization may knowingly or unknowingly oppress women principals of color. Even school districts or charter organizations with a leader of color or a woman leader of color may not be immune to the systems of power that continue to oppress women leaders of color. District leadership may be compelled to look at not only how oppression infiltrates across lines of gender and race difference but also how the systems specifically impact women principals of color who live at the intersection. The results of this study suggest that there is more to explore with workplace discrimination that is not as simple as race in isolation and gender in isolation.

Implication for Researchers

The findings of this study also have implications for researchers in this field. Theme 1 may implied that researchers in the principal turnover field need to further flesh out the connection, or lack thereof, between job satisfaction and turnover. The women principals in this study found that some of the role's challenges led to both fulfillment and a

decision to resign. This is significant because it shows a more complex process than a direct, linear relationship between challenges and turnover.

The theme of alignment or misalignment between the principal and their district or charter organization may compel researchers to dig deeper. There may be more necessity to research organizational health from the for-profit sector and see if there are applications within the P-12 education field. There may opportunities to look at turnover in the education field through the lens of values alignment that have been overlooked in the principal turnover research.

The fourth theme suggests there is more to be learned in how women principals of color experience inequity and a lack of inclusivity in the workplace. There may be an implication that more research is necessary specifically on how and why these lived experiences of women principals of color differ from their white women and men peers. Other narratives in this area may provide more detailed findings on this unexplored area. Based on the discussion and implications, I crafted recommendations to serve as potential solutions to the problem of turnover in women principals.

Recommendations

The discussion and implications of this study led me to recommendations that aim to serve as the next steps for those district-level leaders, those who hire and manage women principals, educational leadership preparation programs, women principals themselves, and future research. Through this study, I have learned that the retention of women principals is less about sustainability and more about alignment. The recommendations reflect that finding. This made me consider the research on principal turnover and women

in the principalship I read for my literature review. It brought to mind the quote by Albert Einstein, “The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.” My recommendations based on the findings were crafted through this lens. I aimed to offer a different way of viewing the turnover of women in the principalship in hopes that the solutions offered could create real change.

Recommendations for District-Level Leadership

One of the participants, Renee, summed up an important recommendation that I share with district-level leadership. She said, “If there is going to be any change in education, certainly we've got to rethink what we're doing and reprioritize what's most important.” There may be value in considering the most important priorities and going all-in on those initiatives. It is more important than ever that districts and charter organizations do the work to be clear about their values, vision, mission, and current priorities. Following a protocol from an expert on organizational health, such as Lencioni (2012), could help districts and charters become ready to dive into this work. Seeking the answers to questions about your organization like ‘Why do we exist?’ and ‘How do we behave?’ may create clarity and alignment within the district or charter organization (Lencioni, 2012). By focusing first on organizational health and clarifying what is most important at the district level, principals will be better able to prioritize what’s most important in their work at the building level. It is critical that these stated values are viewed as dynamic. The district and charters should view this not as a one-time project, but an ongoing and evolving process of finding the heart of their organization.

Once the values, vision, mission, and priorities are distilled and widely shared, it is critical that the district or charter works to put its espoused values into practice. Organizations must have a systemic way to interrogate their practices to find ways they are not living up to their stated values. Then, they must have the courage to face and remedy these areas of growth. An organizational audit including employee surveys may aid in finding these areas of misalignment. When there is a practice identified that is outside of the stated values, districts and charters must re-engage with the work of defining values, modifying policies and procedures, and fine-tuning priorities. Women principals in this study wanted to feel aligned with their workplaces and were often vocal in trying to achieve that alignment. If districts and charters ignore the voices of women principals, they risk losing school leaders to other organizations where they feel in harmony with their workplace.

It is also critical that district-level leadership evaluates ways they may be perpetuating systemic inequities at intersections of race and gender. School districts and charter organizations should conduct equity audits of their organizations. Typically, equity audits have been conducted in regard to students; this would be a different take on equity audits that focus on employees and the workplace. These could include employee surveys on equitable practices (both tacit and explicit) with responses disaggregated by identity markers. Then, school districts and charter organizations must have the courage to create change in areas that they are perpetuating systemic inequities.

Recommendations for Hiring Principals

Once values, vision, and mission for the district or charter are fleshed out, it is important that they are embedded in the hiring process of principals. These cornerstones of the organization should be explicit in principal job postings. They should be embedded into the interview process – potentially by revising or adding interview questions and scoring candidates based on alignment. If districts and charters screen principal candidates for values-alignment, this could prevent turnover in women principals by avoiding poor matches. Simultaneously, women principals can determine if their personal values align with their potential workplace before beginning their tenure.

Recommendations for Educational Leadership Preparation Programs

Educational leadership preparation programs must prepare their graduates to develop and lead healthy organizations that run our public schools. The work of organizational health is hard. Living up to espoused values in a complex system can be very difficult. Having the courage to make change in a system that is not serving everyone is not without challenges. Educational leadership preparation programs should provide opportunities for their students to grapple with these concepts and put them into practice in a low-stakes way. Graduates who are licensed for district-level leadership must be trained in organizational leadership, specifically on vision-setting, values-alignment, and change management.

Recommendations for Women Principals

My recommendation for women principals is to take time for self-reflection. I invite you to pause. Get to know yourself. Discover, examine, and clarify your current personal

core values. Honor what makes you come alive in your work. Consider ways your organization is a strong match for you and ways you may need to advocate for change. All participants in this study needed to take the time away from their to-do lists to find clarity on what was most important to them. Only through self-discovery can you decide whether you are aligned with the organization you work for and how important that alignment is for you at this stage of your career.

Recommendations for Future Research

Many recommendations have been produced in the body of literature regarding principal turnover. This study is one of the few that have interviewed principals after they had already left their roles. The time and space away from the principalship and their school site may have allowed participants to truly process their experience. This approach may have produced more accurate or deeper findings because participants are not in the thick of day-to-day distractions and are not afraid of retaliation by sharing unfiltered thoughts about their workplaces or supervisors. Principal turnover is a complex problem and will require innovative, multifaceted solutions. I recommend that more researchers studying job retention consider the context of when the study is taking place and how the findings are shaped by the context.

While building on the context of the research, I call for a diversity in methods while studying principal turnover. This phenomenological study with five participants is only one piece of the puzzle. Additional quantitative findings through surveys may be able to confirm or dispute these findings on a greater scale with more participants. Other methodologies, for example, grounded theory could develop a theory on the process of

turnover in women principals may add a new angle to this body of research. Or, perhaps developing an in-depth description of turnover in women principals through a case study would present a new perspective to this area of study.

In addition to expanding the approach to methodology, this study urges researchers to ask deeper questions. Much of the literature around principal job satisfaction and principal turnover asked surface-level questions and, in my view, reported surface-level findings. In this study, I was surprised by how much the participants shared about their dreams, desires, and fears. If I could do this study over again, I would plan to ask questions that get to the deepest level of their decision-making. I went into this study with a superficial understanding of this complex problem and want to encourage future researchers to not be afraid of the softer, more emotional elements that may be at the heart of the problem.

Conclusion

In this transcendental phenomenological study, I sought to explore the shared experience of women principals who resigned from P-12 public schools in the U.S. during the pandemic. I found the essence of the experience from the perspective of my five participants. Women principals loved their jobs because it was challenging, the pandemic spurred self-reflection on the importance of alignment and accelerated career changes, and the primary reason that women principals resigned from their roles was that they were not aligned with the values of their district or charter organization. These findings are significant for district-level leadership, current women principals, women

considering the principalship, those who hire and manage principals, and researchers in the education field.

This study aimed to show women principals as the active, nuanced professionals that they truly were in their process of deciding to leave their principal role. Women principals need to feel aligned with their district and charter organizations to lead positive changes in their buildings. The success of our education system depends on having excellent leaders who carry out the mission at the building-level. By creating organizations that women principals can feel invested in long-term, we may find opportunities to truly achieve the goals of education.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY of DENVER
OFFICE OF RESEARCH & SPONSORED PROGRAMS
Research Integrity & Education

DATE:	March 1, 2023
TO:	Jessica Racine Urbaniak, M.Ed Lolita Tabron, Faculty Sponsor
FROM:	University of Denver (DU) IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	[2019133-1] A Phenomenological Study of Women Principals Who Resigned During the Pandemic
SUBMISSION TYPE:	NEW **STUDENT PROJECT**
APPROVAL DATE:	March 1, 2023
NEXT REPORT DUE:	March 1, 2024
RISK LEVEL:	Minimal Risk
REVIEW TYPE:	Expedited Review
ACTION:	**APPROVED**
REVIEW CATEGORY:	Expedited Category #7
	Category 7: *Research on group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer and Description

Needed: research participants for an educational leadership study.
I am completing my dissertation on the experiences of women principals that led through the pandemic and then voluntarily resigned. I am searching for potential participants for my study. Calling participants who:

1. served as a P-12 public-school principal in the U.S. during the pandemic,
2. identify as a trans- or cis-gendered woman,
3. voluntarily resigned during or at the conclusion of the 2020-2021 or 2021-22 school year. The resignations had to have been voluntary but can be for any reason including a new job opportunity, new principal job, left education, went back to school, early retirement, etc.

The study is asking participants for their time for two 45-60-minute interviews over Zoom and to submit a visual representation of their experience.
If you are an eligible participant and are interested in participating in the study, please fill out this interest form (linked).
Any connections or sharing of this post would be greatly appreciated! If you have any questions, please email Jessica.racine@du.edu. Thank you!

Appendix C: Interest Form

Demographic Data Survey for Purposeful Sampling

Interested participants answered the following questions on a Google Form:

1. Name & email address
2. Participant fit:
    a. Did you serve as a public-school principal in the U.S. during the pandemic? (yes/no)
    b. Did you voluntarily resign during or at the conclusion of the 2020-2021 or 2021-22 school year? (yes/no)
    c. Do you identify as a cis- or trans-gender woman? (yes/no)
        i. Nature of resignation (new job opportunity in K-12 education, new job opportunity outside of K-12 education, resigned without a job opportunity, early retirement, or other. If other was chosen, they could give an explanation.)
    d. Date of resignation
3. School setting data:
    a. Name of school, location of school, setting (rural/urban/suburban and elementary/middle/high/K-8, 6-12, other), student population (approximate number of students, Title I status, approximate racial breakdown of students), type of school (charter, district-run, other)
4. Demographic data: (no questions are required; all questions have 'other' option)
    a. Location, years of principal experience, age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, cis/trans gender, (dis)ability status, marriage status, parental status

Appendix D: Invitation to Participate in Study E-Mail

Dear [name],

Thank you so much for your interest and willingness to take part in my study. Based on your responses in the interest survey, you meet all the participant criteria. I would love to opportunity to hear about your story as a woman principal who led during the pandemic and ultimately chose to resign.

Please read the attached consent form about the study. All your personal information will be protected, and identifiable information will be changed. Please sign the consent form via DocuSign. If you did not receive an email from DocuSign, please let me know. (I'm new to DocuSign but I'm pretty sure I did it right!)

I would love to set up a time for our first interview time together. Do you have an available hour in the coming week? My current availability is [enter]. Please send me a few times that would work for you, and I will send you a calendar invite with a Zoom link shortly after receiving your email so that you do not have to hold time on your calendar.

If you have any questions at all, please let me know. Again, thank you so much for being willing to participate in my study. I look forward to receiving your consent form and availability so that I can begin to understand your story and the stories of other women who led schools and resigned during the pandemic.

Sincerely,
Jessica Racine

Appendix E: Consent Form

Note: actual consent form will be with a DU template that includes headers and footers

Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Turnover in Women Principals During and After the Pandemic

IRBNet #: 2019133-1

Principal Investigator: Jessica A. Urbaniak, M.Ed., EdD Candidate

Faculty Sponsor: Lolita A. Tabron, PhD

Study Site: Zoom

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision about whether to participate.

The purpose of this form is to provide you with information that may affect your decision as to whether you may want to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will describe the study to you and answer all your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether to give your permission to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you indicated that you were a woman principal who resigned during the pandemic.

Purpose

If you participate in this research study, you will be invited to share your story as a woman principal who led through the pandemic and ultimately resigned.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to understand the experience of women principals who led through the pandemic and decided to resign from their positions. To take part in this study, eligible candidates will first complete an online questionnaire regarding the nature of their resignation and their identity markers. Then, eligible participants will be asked to submit an artifact that represents their experience. Participants can choose between a menu of options including: a journal entry, a visual representation of their journey (diagram, timeline, web, etc.), a song or anthem, a photograph with the caption, their letter of resignation, an influential quote, or a magazine article. Participants can also suggest a different type of artifact that represented their experience. Participants will take part in two 45–60-minute Zoom interviews with the researcher. Follow-up interviews may be requested if additional data is needed. Participants may decline to answer any question at any time for any reason.

Risks or Discomforts

There are no expected risks to you as a result of participating in this study. If, at any time, you feel uncomfortable, stressed, or over-emotional during the study and would like to stop the interview, your request will be granted. Video and audio recordings of the

interviews will be recorded. If a participant would like to review the recordings or delete any portion of the interview, they can do so by requesting this process via email.

Benefits
The benefits which may reasonably be expected to result from this study is the opportunity to contribute to research on the turnover of women principals. We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from this study.

Confidentiality of Information
Data from this study will be presented in an anonymous fashion using pseudonyms for your name and your school's name. The link between your identifiers and the research data will be destroyed after the records retention period required by state and/or federal law. My advisor, Dr. Lolita Tabron, will have access to identifiable data.

Limits to confidentiality
Before you begin, please note that the data you provide may be collected and used by Google Forms as per its privacy agreement. This research is only for U.S. residents over the age of 18. Please be mindful to respond in private and through a secured Internet connection for your privacy. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Specifically, no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties. Your name will not be used in any report. Identifiable research data will be encrypted and password protected. Your responses will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in an encrypted and password-protected file. Only the research team (my advisor and myself) will have access to the file. When the study is completed, the list and your identifiable survey response will be destroyed. With your permission, I would like to videotape and audiotape this interview so that I can make an accurate transcript. Your name will not be in the transcript or my notes. After the study, I will delete the recordings. You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study.

Use of your information for future research
Your information collected for this project will NOT be used or shared for future research, even if we remove identifiable information like your name or the school that you led.

Data Sharing
De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance educational research. We will remove or code any personal information (e.g., your name, school site, etc.) that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information or samples we share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee the anonymity of your personal data.

Consent to video / audio recording/photography solely for purposes of this research

This study involves video/audio recording, and/or photography. If you do not agree to be recorded, you cannot take part in the study.

_____ YES, I agree to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

_____ NO, I do not agree to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

Questions

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact Jessica (Racine) Urbaniak at Jessica.racine@du.edu or 906-362-4333. My faculty sponsor, Dr. Lolita Tabron, can be reached at Lolita.tabron@du.edu or 303-871-3365.

If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the University of Denver (DU) Institutional Review Board to speak to someone independent of the research team at 303-871-2121 or email at IRBAdmin@du.edu.

Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

_____ _____ _____

Printed name of subject **Signature of Subject** **Date**

Please take all the time you need to read this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you decide to participate, your completion of the research procedures indicates your consent. Please keep this form for your records.

Appendix F: Thank You for Your Interest E-Mail

Dear [name],

Thank you so much for your interest to take part in my study. Unfortunately, my study has a small sample size, and I will not need your participation at this time. I will delete all of your data collected via the interest survey.

Again, I am so appreciative of your interest! Wishing you all the best.

Jessica Racine Urbaniak

Appendix G: Interview Protocol

Opening Protocol:

1. Provide the Informed Consent Form to the participant and ask that the form be read.
2. After the participant has read the form, ask the participant if she has any questions about her consent, the research, or the process.
3. Answer any questions the participant may have and ask the participant if she is willing to participate in the study and to sign the copy of the Informed Consent Form through DocuSign.
4. If willing to participate, give the participant a copy of the informed consent form and retain a signed copy for yourself through DocuSign.

Preamble:

Good [morning, afternoon, evening]. My name is Jessica Racine Urbaniak. Today is [date] and I am with talking with [fill in name]. Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview! The purpose of this research is to learn the factors that led to resignation in women principals during and after the pandemic. The reason why you were asked to participate in this interview is because you fit the criteria for this study including: (a) served as a P-12 public-school principal in the U.S. during the pandemic, (b) voluntarily resigned during the pandemic and (c) identified as a trans- or cis-gendered woman. Your opinions, experiences, ideas, and participation are important in this study and may contribute to important research on principal turnover and turnover in women in leadership. Please know that I am not here to promote a particular way of thinking or shape your experience, I want you to feel comfortable sharing both the good and bad parts of your experience as a woman principal. There are no right or wrong answers. I received consent to audio/video record our discussion today so that I can ensure the best accuracy in note taking for this study. For your information, please know that only my faculty sponsor and I will see or hear the recording or read the transcript of this interview.

Additionally, I will destroy the recording after the notes have been transcribed and the research project is completed. Because of these efforts to provide protections, the informed consent form signed by you today meets the requirements for human subject research for those 18 and older.

The form explains that: 1) All information shared during our conversation will be kept confidential; 2) Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may stop at any time without penalty if you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed; and 3) there is no harm intended through this study. I will not put your name or any other identifiable information that can be traced back to you on the final report.

During this time, I have several questions that I would like to ask you. To respect our time together, I may need to interrupt our conversation if we're running short on

time. As a follow-up to this interview, I may request additional comments and feedback during the writing of the report to ensure that your opinion, experiences, ideas are accurately reflected.

Now I will ask some questions regarding the study. You may ask me questions at any time during this process. Before I continue, do you have any questions?

First interview opening:

This is the first of our two interviews together. I want you to know that I also was a woman principal who resigned during the pandemic. I recognize that it may have been a while since you've thought through this period of your life. So, I just want to tell you to take all the time you need to recall parts of your story. Are you ready to get started?

Questions for Interview 1:

1. How did you end up in the principalship? Walk me through your career up until this point.
2. Tell me about your school. What did you love about your school? What did you love about being a principal?
3. What was hard about working at your school? What was hard about being a principal?

For this study, I am defining "the pandemic" is not solely the health crisis that the world faced. I am defining "the pandemic" as the historical era that we lived through with multiple crises happening. Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, a renowned voice in education research, talked about this time period as four pandemics. To summarize her:

> we [were] in the midst of four pandemics. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, the structural racism that we have experienced that has certainly blown up in our faces after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Part of it being so present for us that we had to stay home and actually see it. There was also a third pandemic in the looming economic collapse. We have people who were literally awaiting evictions from apartments. We know that 800,000 women have left the workforce – a lot of them mothers providing childcare or daughters providing elder care. And, the fourth pandemic is the environmental catastrophe. If we have one more storm, we have to use the Greek alphabet to name them. In Michigan, it's the quality of water. All of these things are happening at the same time.

This is the lens that I'm using to define "the pandemic." The next questions will ask you about this time period. Please know that I want to hear about all of your experience as a principal during this time, not solely about the COVID-19 crisis.

4. How, if at all, did your principal role change when "the pandemic" first started?
5. How did the role change as the pandemic wore on?

6. Walk me through a typical day of "principaling" during the pandemic. Start when you woke up in the morning until you went to bed at night.
7. Tell me about a time that you felt stressed in your role as a principal during "the pandemic."
    a. What impacts did the stress of the job have on your health?
8. How, if at all, did your personal responsibilities change during "the pandemic"?
9. Tell me about a time that you felt stressed as a [identity markers] during "the pandemic."
10. When did you first think about resigning? How did you arrive at your decision to resign from your principal role? Walk me through that process.
11. Did you try to advocate for any change before deciding to resign? Tell me about that.

These are all of the questions that I have for you for this interview. I want to share the questions that I'll ask you next time so that you have some time to think about them before our next time together. I will email you the questions right after we sign off of this call.

I also want to ask you to create a visual representation that represents your experience as a woman principal that resigned during the pandemic. This could look like a diagram, a timeline, a web, or some other representation that makes sense of your experience. It can include quotes, song lyrics, or even photos. Do you have any questions about the artifact? Please send me your visual representation one day before we talk again on [date]. [skip to closing script]

Second interview opening: [read preamble detailing consent] Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me again. I enjoyed our previous time together and am looking forward to learning more about your story today. Before we dive in, I want to tell you thank you for preparing and sending me your visual representation of your journey.

Questions for Interview 2:

1. To start off, tell me about the visual representation you sent me. How does it relate to your experience as a woman principal that resigned during the pandemic?
2. Ask additional prepared questions about artifact
3. What events, stories, or memories came up for you while making this visual representation?
4. What feelings came up for you as you revisited your experience?
5. Shifting gears a little bit - I want to ask you about the support you had in your school community. In what ways did you feel supported? In what areas do you feel you could have used more support? Did these supports change at all during the pandemic?

6. To conclude: let's say there's a dream principal job that you could walk into at any time. What would have to be promised in the job for you to take it?

Closing script

Thank you again for your time and your participation in this study. Your work and your interview are important to my study of turnover in women principals. Once I am done with a draft of my analysis of the interview data, I will email it to you. When you receive it, please review it for accuracy and send any feedback to me. Should you have any questions or concerns please feel free to email me at Jessica.racine@du.edu. Have a great rest of your day.

Appendix H: Reflexive Memo Prompts

1. What are the main categories and themes that emerged from this interview? What codes and/or categories fit into each theme?
2. What main insights have you gleaned?
3. What is the answer to your research question?
4. What did you not ask about that you wish you knew? Write questions for a follow-up interview.
5. How does the data support (or not support) what you think you see?
6. What might you be projecting onto the data based on your own beliefs and life experience?
7. How does your positionality affect what you see? Specifically, how might your identity markers that are different from your participant be showing up?
8. How are your biases showing up? What assumptions are you bringing to the data?

Appendix I: Deductive Codebook

Code	Description	Example
Loved job even though it was challenging	Discussed the difficulties of the job while simultaneously stating they loved it	It was horribly stressful to be a building principal. However. it was the most favorite job I've ever had. I loved it.
Reflection during the pandemic	Description of time taken to make their decision – include within the context of the pandemic	In this season of life, I'm learning to value me. So many people died in the pandemic. and I'm not going to [continue].
Divergence in values	Description of a way their district or charter's values did not align with their own	I offered that in the and the exit interview. Why are you leaving? I'm pursuing a job that more aligns with my values.
Women of color experienced their workplaces differently than white women and men peers	*(from a woman of color)* description or example of way different experienced because of their race and gender	Even though we had turned around a five-consecutive year failing school and had increased enrollment by 100+ students, I was micromanaged more than white female/male peers.

Appendix J: Member Check E-mail Template

Dear [participant name],
Thank you again for taking part in my study. To make sure that my interpretations of your interview were as accurate as possible, I am sending you my initial analysis for your review. I aim to capture your story in a way that truly resonates with your perspective. Please read the attached document and let me know your thoughts. I am open to all feedback, from big misinterpretations to fine-tuning to make the wording more correct. Again, thank you for your participation in my study. I look forward to hearing from you.
Sincerely,
Jessica Urbaniak

Appendix K: Member Check Feedback Organization

Date	Name	Comments	Action Taken
4/7/23	Blanca	Provided additional information for the draft themes. "Even though we had turned around a five-consecutive year failing school and had increased enrollment by 100+ students, I was micromanaged more than white female/male peers." Provided suggestions to those who manage women principals.	Added additional quotes to my deductive codebook. This quote made me revisit the subtheme of the experiences of women principals of color. It pushed me to consider this as a stand-alone theme instead of a subtheme. Added her suggestions to my running list of suggestions from interviews to be considered in chapter 5.
4/9/23	Renee	I think you captured it all pretty well. Nothing big stands out to me as inaccurate. Great work!	None needed
4/10/23	Ellen	I think you accurately and adequately captured what I said. It's somewhat overwhelming to see it all written out like this and helps me solidify my thinking in that I made the right decision to leave!	None needed
4/12/23	Carol	Discussed themes with her via Zoom. All themes resonated with her.	None needed
4/16/23	Erica	Gave additional context for themes 2 and 4d.	Embedded additional quotes into findings from email
4/27/23	Renee	Checked thoughts on theme 1 – confirmed.	Added context to quote used
4/30/23	Blanca	Checked thoughts on theme 2 – confirmed.	Added quote from email

Appendix L: Peer Debriefing Feedback

Session	Feedback From Peer	Actions Taken
1	• Confirmed my feelings that the theme about the experiences of women principals of color needs to stand alone instead of being a subtheme. • Three quotes fit better under different themes. • Feedback on phrasing of themes to include the entire picture of data. • Participant six is an outlier and distracts from the rest of the data.	• Moved subtheme to new theme. • Asked advisor about subtheme about being led by fear for further guidance on where it fits best. • Quotes from interviews were moved to most appropriate themes based on the feedback. • Re-worded themes based on where quotes fit best. • Removed sixth participant.