Crisis Communication by School Leaders

Crisis Communication by School Leaders during the COVID-19 Global Pandemic

by

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COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The members of Simon Braun's Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled

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and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of Master or Arts in Educational Leadership and Management.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Schools are not immune to crises. Whether it be earthquakes, wildfires, shootings, or global pandemics, schools will always be required to react quickly and efficiently to crises (Liou, 2015, p. 248). One large component of this reaction is communication. Therefore, school leaders need to be prepared to communicate quickly, efficiently, and effectively both internally and with the broader community during times of crisis. The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 created an exceptional urgency for schools to practice and refine their crisis communication as they dealt with the ongoing pandemic (Government of Canada, 2022). In British Columbia, the pandemic caused a state of emergency that has lasted nearly a year and a half (Lawson et al., 2021). During this time, schools went through many different situations of crisis, including short-term emergencies and long-term sustained stress. Schools also needed to react quickly to changing government guidelines, community exposures and public health directives (BC Ministry of Health, 2021). The purpose of this study is to examine the opportunities and challenges that arose as school leaders attempted to develop best practices, processes and procedures that amounted to effective communication during an unprecedented international health emergency.

Communicating effectively in a crisis can save lives; for example, in an emergency evacuation, every extra minute could help more people escape danger. Knowing best practices and most effective strategies of communication can help schools better prepare for crises and help these communities avoid new and unprecedented pitfalls. This study hopes to gather reflections from independent school leaders in British Columbia to pool the resources and ideas

that may not have been evident to any single school or individual amid the pandemic. The

outcomes of this study will help to better prepare school leadership to address communication

strategies within larger public emergencies; it will provide actionable practices to prepare them

to react quickly and effectively in their messaging and their handling of information. It will also,

therefore, fill a gap that currently exists in the school-based literature on communication in

situations of crises.

A brief investigation into existing literature finds that schools play a vital role in helping

communities navigate and recover from disasters (Mutch, 2022). Indeed, schools are often

involved in crisis at each stage, including before a crisis occurs (Mutch, 2014). The school

closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have shown how critical schools can be for the

communities and children they serve. Statistics Canada has highlighted how closing schools, or

resorting to remote learning, can have severe effects on the mental and physical health of

children and negatively affect the socio-economic status of families (Government of Canada,

2021a). This study has taken place before the COVID-19 pandemic was over in British Columbia,

which means that many of the issues facing children and families are ongoing, and the full

impact on communities may not be fully understood for several years (Government of Canada,

2021b).

By recording successful practices, this research meets the mandate set by the BC

Educational Leadership Development Framework (BC Ministry of Education, 2017). This

research fits into several categories of this framework including "Measuring Success" (BC

Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 3) and "Building Relationships" (BC Ministry of Education, 2017

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p. 27). This research should help BC policy makers better understand the practice of local school

leaders and adapt current policy to better integrate the lessons learned during the pandemic.

The research for this study was conducted at independent schools in British Columbia.

Independent schools function very differently from public schools. Because they charge tuition,

the schools often serve a higher socio-economic community. Even though many schools offer

tuition relief or scholarships, it is still likely that many families do not consider an independent

school as an option when selecting schools. As enterprises which may have more resources

than typical public schools, these institutions may have had opportunities to use a wider variety

of communication media; this may be helpful for this study and lead to some rich analyses. It

may, in turn, help other schools to manage financial resources wisely and sustainably, in order

to adopt effective communication tools in situations of emergency.

For this study, I contacted the head of the Federation of Independent Schools of BC

(FISA), an organization that has a representative from the main six BC independent school

associations which represent 95% of independent school students in BC (FISA, 2021). The sitting

chair of FISA was able to put me in contact with the chairs of the six independent school

associations who, in turn, were able to nominate leaders from their organization who fit the

parameters of this study and could help to locate participants. While these leaders were

located throughout the province, all participants were from the mainland of BC and the large

majority were from the Lower Mainland of BC.

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Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following question to better understand the lessons

learned by school leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic:

What are the effective communication strategies that have been developed by school

leaders in independent schools located in British Columbia during the COVID pandemic, and to

what extent might these be useful to other schools, in the future, when developing policies

related to school preparedness for emergencies?

As this study adopts a broad interpretivist methodological approach, specifically a

phenomenological lens, it may be helpful to consider the main research question as seeking to

understand what it was like for leaders to communicate during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

This study is seeking to gain insights into, not just the communication methods and techniques

that leaders used, but also the way that they made sense of the information around them, and

how they went about making decisions during this unprecedented time.

The main goal of this research was to gather the best practices adopted and developed

by school leaders, that could be applied in other contexts in the future and contribute to the

body of literature on communication within the wider landscape of school crisis preparedness.

To answer this question, discussions were held with school leaders about the communication

practices and platforms that they used during the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that their school

provided clear, effective, and accurate communication to their communities. Interviews with

participants discussed the methods and approaches that they found were most effective, as

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well as examined how they assessed that their messages reached the target audience and

served its objective.

School leaders in this study are not limited to principals but include anyone in a

leadership role such as school directors, teachers, administrators, and anyone identified as

being tasked with leading the school in communication. The leaders must have been directly

involved in communicating with their school community.

Key Terms

The term 'crisis' can refer to a myriad of situations but usually these contexts share an

element of danger to the health and safety of individuals involved. Seeger and Sellnow (2019)

describe a crisis as "an extreme event that is abnormal, threatening, creates uncertainty, and

requires a response" (chapter 1, section 2). Under this definition, the global pandemic fulfills all

the criteria of a crisis.

Crisis communication is distinct from standard communication. It has been described by

Seeger and Sellnow (2017) in the following terms:

Crisis communication is the process of planning, developing, and disseminating

informational and persuasive messages for avoiding, containing, and managing harm

from risky, threatening, and uncertain conditions. Crisis communication has many of the

same features of other forms of communication, including senders, receivers, messages,

and channels...In most major crises, there are many senders and this sometimes creates

confusing and conflicting messages. (chapter 1, section 3)

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The characteristics of crisis communication further highlight the need to investigate best

practices and to determine the ways that leaders reduced confusion and conflict during the

global pandemic.

Crisis Communication by School Leaders
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Crisis

A common understanding of what constitutes a crisis is that "perceived threat, high levels of uncertainty, and short response time are three defining characteristics of most crises we experience" (Seeger & Sellnow, 2019, p3). Other characteristics may include various levels of ambiguity both in the crisis itself, as well as the solutions available. Building off this central definition are the theories that attempt to analyze and understand the workings of events that constitute crises (Crandall et al., 2014, p. 9). Seeger and Sellnow (2019) use the surprisingly contemporary example of a global pandemic as being a break from the normal:

> The flu season is a normal, regular event and most of us know specific steps, such as getting a flu shot, washing hands, and covering coughs and sneezes, can limit the risk of getting sick. In some cases, flu can become a very serious threat to public health, such as the 1918 so-called Spanish flu, which killed between 50 and 100 million people worldwide (Taubenberger & Morens, 2006). When a crisis disrupts our sense of what is normal, we no longer have a clear sense of what to do, how to avoid risks, and what will happen next. (p. 3)

While the events of a crisis are unpredictable, Seeger and Sellnow also highlight that it can be hard to know what to do about the problems or risks within a crisis. This uncertainty presents a unique challenge for leaders in all contexts, but particularly in relation to communication since it can become challenging for them to determine what to communicate while not fully understanding the gravity or having a complete picture of the situation.

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Another key characteristic of a crisis that is pertinent for this study will be the perceived threat to the well-being of the people involved. There is, therefore, an element of subjectivity in how crises are defined and identified. Perceptions of events create individual experiences of a crisis; some experiences may be traumatic to one person and not to another. This is based on previous experiences or what is expected and seen as normal. Seeger and Sellnow (2019) use the description of a snowstorm to demonstrate how different geographical areas see snow as a crisis situation, while others are able to continue their daily life relatively unaffected. This subjective perception of danger or varied responses to these experiences will be important to understand the reactions and actions of leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fink (1986) first described any crisis as having a life cycle and a clear birth, life, and death – a biological life cycle of sorts. Fink's model consisted of four basic steps and, since then, several authors have developed other frameworks which contain varying numbers of stages, from three to five (Coombs, 2006; Crandall et al., 1999; Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Myers, 1993; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). These frameworks have all sought to bring greater clarity or understanding to the complexity of the management of crises and some have been adapted and revised to better fit new and unprecedented crises as they arise (Crandall et al., 2009).

One crisis model stands out as a particularly promising for future investigation, especially in research pertaining to schools. The model of a *dynamic crisis life cycle,* put forward by Liou (2015), draws from and builds upon past theories and frameworks to offer a more holistic and complex understanding of the distinct stages of a crisis. Liou uses Fink's 1986 model, combined with chaos theory and complexity theory, to provide flexibility in our

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understanding of the dynamic nature of events that constitute crises. Their model focuses on

the development of a lens that measures response to crises in relation to various school

dynamics, and acknowledges the decisions and unique attributes of each school. These

attributes include staffing and decisions that are made by leadership, as well as the

repercussions of these decisions.

Leadership

Crisis leadership is a section of the broader field of research on leadership. However,

crisis leadership to this day remains a smaller, less researched area within the broader

discipline. Hannah et al. (2009) even went so far as to comment that "leadership in extreme

contexts may be one of the least researched areas in the leadership field." (p. 897).

Furthermore, crisis leadership research is dominated by business and other non-educational

scholarship. Research concerning schools and, in particular, school leadership in crisis is

minimal (Mutch, 2014; Mutch, 2015). Additionally, research into the preparations that are

made by schools are not as common in North America as they are in other parts of the world

(Seddighi et al., 2021). A recent study of disaster education programs around the world

identified North and South America as having the fewest studies that refer to preparing

students or teachers for disaster situations; in that same study Asia had four times the studies

of the Americas combined (Seddighi et al., 2021, p. 9). Studies in high-risk zones have also

highlighted that teacher education and training are highly influential in the success of disaster

preparedness and recovery (Barakat et al., 2013, p. 17).

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When examining crises, a trait theory (Amanchukwu et al., 2015) approach is usually

taken which seeks to examine the strengths and weaknesses of leaders during a crisis. Mutch,

(2015) focuses on the real-world stories of people that are affected by a crisis and they has

travelled to many different countries, both in the developing and developed world (Mutch,

2020b). Their framework identifies, within case studies, three main factors that help frame the

human experience in situations of crisis. Table 1 is a brief description of the main leadership

factors (Mutch, 2015, p. 190) that appear in this work.

Table 1

Factors Influencing Leaders During Crisis Situations

Factors	Explanation
Dispositional	What leaders bring to the event from their background, personal qualities, experiences, values, beliefs, personality traits, skills, areas of expertise and conceptions of leadership
Relational	The ways in which leaders offer a unifying vision and develop a sense of community within the organisation, engendering loyalty, enabling empowerment, building strong and trusting relationships and fostering collaboration
Situational	How leaders assess the situation as it unfolds, understanding the context, being aware of different responses (including cultural sensitivities), making timely decisions, adapting to changing needs, making use of resources (both material and personnel), providing direction, responding flexibly, thinking creatively and constantly re-appraising the options

(Mutch, 2015, p. 190)

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The dispositions of leaders are an important variable to take into account, as each leader will have a different and unique experience of the ongoing pandemic. The situational and relational factors are equally important to this research as leaders are constantly reacting to new information regarding the pandemic. As this study is focusing on communication, it is inherently tied to the relationship between leaders and their communities as senders and receivers of communication (Seeger & Sellnow, 2019, chapter 4). The values and culture of individual schools will also drastically affect the way that leaders transmit, and receivers perceive any potential communications (Falk & Scholz, 2018, pp 18.4-18.5).

Communication in the Context of Crises

Crisis communication is a field of study within general communication studies and is described by Seeger and Sellnow (2019) as:

> Crisis communication is the process of planning, developing, and disseminating informational and persuasive messages for avoiding, containing, and managing harm from risky, threatening, and uncertain conditions… In most major crises, there are many senders, and this sometimes creates confusing and conflicting messages. (p. 3)

This definition is helpful as it describes communication as a two-way process and involves both sending and receiving information.

Authors suggest that communication in times of crisis must be clear and controlled. Ensuring that leaders and organizations present clear messaging is key to avoiding conflicting messages or ambiguity (Kielkowski, 2013; Smith & Riley, 2012). Estep (2013) suggests selecting a spokesperson to communicate on behalf of the organization and stresses that this person

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should be responsible for controlling the message and be the go-to person for media and

outside organizations. In the case of most schools, the principal is the one who will likely

become this spokesperson, as their roles shift into that of crisis managers (Mutch, 2020a). This

is a role that most principals feel ill-prepared for, and they are often new to the key concepts

that are important in these areas (Mutch, 2015). Williams (2019) found that the amount of

literature that discusses principals and communication during crisis is limited and needs further

research (p. 43). However, a few studies do highlight the importance of properly equipping

leaders for crisis events, no matter how rare these may be (Williams, 2019, pp. 37-38).

Crisis communication and schools is often described as being of critical importance

(Kielkowski, 2013, p. 62; Mutch, 2020b, p. 83; Smith and Riley, 2012, p. 68; Thornton, 2021, p.

400; Williams, 2019, p. 119). In a description of the phases of crisis and the roles of leadership,

Mutch (2014, pp. 50-52) describes communication or a communication skill as being necessary

at almost every step. For these reasons, studies like this one are important to growing the

understanding of the real world experiences of leaders during a crisis.

Clear communication during a crisis is difficult because of the amount of information

that is being processed and the ambiguity which leaders must operate within. As described by

Allen and Ashbaker (2004), "crisis situations, particularly those occurring during school hours,

create a wave of panic and confusion that often exceeds the helping capacity of the limited

number of trained school professionals" (p. 139). In situations where information is not clear or

where unknown elements outweigh known elements, it is difficult for leaders to present

information in clear terms. Thornton (2021, p. 400) describes the challenge of receiving and

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disseminating information to various groups through several platforms and managing the

expectations of those in the community. Thornton describes how principals were required to

read and reply to vast numbers of emails and other traditional sources of information, but were

also under pressure to interact through social media platforms and online videos

Communication via social media is a relatively new form of communication which saw a

great uptake in use by schools during the COVID-19 pandemic (Thornton, 2021, p. 400). In

terms of access, social media is much more available to the public than traditional forms of

communication channels, and has become a major part of how organizations communicate

with stakeholders everyday (Thornton, 2021). James et al. (2013), describe social media as

being both a helpful and dangerous tool as "social media has forced leaders to be more aware

of how their organizations can be both helped and hindered by this new technology. The ability

to communicate rapidly to both internal and external stakeholders during a crisis can be

enhanced by social media" (p. 14). One major challenge with social media is that there are

more voices to fill the vacuum of information during a crisis as it is a public forum.

During a crisis there is an urgent demand for more information, even when such details

may not yet exist. This is referred to as a vacuum and represents a very difficult situation for

leaders who are looking to communicate clearly. Pang (2021, p. 209) describes how, in this

vacuum, there is a tendency for any information to fill the void including misinformation as well

as disinformation.

Communication practices are often discussed in terms of internal and external

audiences. As Crisis Management Theory points out, there is an inside and outside landscape to

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every crisis (Crandall et al., 2009, p. 10). Veil and Husted (2012), Augustine and Pang (2013), as

well as Seeger and Sellnow (2019), have created guides and theories on how to best handle

internal and external situations. A summary of these practices, and an illustration of the divide

between internal and external demands, appears in Table 2. While many of the items in Table 2

are applicable to both internal and external communication, they have been sorted by what the

literature sees as being primarily an internal or external need.

Table 2

Internal Practices	External Practices
Follow a process to target activities [2,3]	Form relationships [1,3]
Make a plan [1,3]	Listen to the public [3,2,1]
Accept uncertainty [1,3,2]	Communicate honestly [1,2,3]
Collaborate with credible sources [3]	Meet the needs of the media [3,2,1]
	Be compassionate [1,3]
	Provide actionable messages [3,2,1]
	Acknowledge and account for cultural differences [1,2]
1. (Veil & Husted, 2012) 2. (Augustine Pang, 2013) 3. (Seeger & Sellnow, 2019)	

Schools in Crisis

There are some main areas that are investigated when discussing crisis situations in

schools. The first area is focused on students' psychology and reactions to crises. Norris et al.,'s

(2002) study included over 60,000 victims from over 100 events and found that "youth

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exhibited additional problems unique to their age groups, such as behavioral problems, hyperactivity, and delinquency, but like adults, they were also vulnerable to PTSD depression, somatic complaints, and ongoing stress" (p. 241). These studies, focused on students, also often consider the effects of a traumatic event on the broader community. Lazarus et al. (2003) note that "it is important to acknowledge that although a given natural disaster may last for only a short period, survivors can be involved with the disaster aftermath for months or even years" (p. 3). Mutch (2020a) further explains how prolonged crises can wear down people because of persistent stress and anxiety. Economic impacts or cumulative disasters (Mutch, 2014), such as droughts, will have long-lasting effects on families and the broader community.

One key notion that Mutch discusses is the idea that students need to be in school as soon, and as often, as possible to provide normalcy in any difficult situation (2014 p. 13; 2014, pp. 12-13). One school that was destroyed by a tornado was reopened in a different location within two days to prioritize student wellbeing (Potter et al., 2021, p. 98). This community highlighted that "we lost our building, but we didn't lose our school" (p. 100). Furthermore, these school leaders chose to project confidence and consistency, even in their school schedule, in a new location, affirming their dedication to the community they served. While the school was moved in a short span of time, the long-term effects of the tornado took much longer to resolve.

Another reason for keeping schools open and welcoming is their role in the community. When crisis events happen that affect the broader community, such as an earthquake, it is likely that schools will become a hub for agencies and support systems. In several of the case

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studies published, schools became places for people to be housed when disasters destroyed

homes (Mutch, 2014, p. 12). Disasters of this scale again highlight the importance of principals

being prepared to be crisis managers when called upon to lead.

Assessment of Communication

Using the best practices of dispositional, relational, and situational leadership outlined

in Table 1, Veil and Husted (2012) examined the Red Cross's response to Hurricane Katrina and

attempted to assess the successes and failures of that organization. There is no consistent way

of assessing the communication that occurred during a crisis. As previously stated, there are

more examples of failed communication than positive communication. Husted (2012) describe

this problem:

> Failures last longer in the public memory… failures often offer vivid examples of how not
>
> to respond to crises as many lessons can be learned from the crisis response failures of
>
> Exxon as can be gleaned from successes such as Tylenol's response to product
>
> tampering. (p. 135)

Veil and Husted (2012) discuss other challenges to studying crisis communication: "while most

fields consider and learn from successes, most crisis communication case studies analyze partial

or complete failures" (p. 135). This results in the existence of a large amount of literature that is

analyzing mistakes without potentially offering up examples of best practices.

School Leadership During COVID-19

Research into the experiences of leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic is growing and

there will surely be more information published in years to come. Some of this research

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highlights the challenges associated with the technological aspect of the pandemic. Given that

there are different attitudes towards technology in schools, there have been sharp learning

curves for some.   This has also highlighted the need for leaders to be available to coach

members of their organizations (Croucher et al., 2022; Hauseman et al., 2020; Ho & Tay, 2020).

Additionally, the frequency of change that occurred during the pandemic was a considerable

challenge that was not always addressed or attenuated by technology (Harris & Jones, 2020;

Hauseman et al., 2020).

The majority of publications regarding COVID-19 and schools is focused on the shift to

online learning that occurred early on in the pandemic. These studies are focused on the

changing nature of principals' jobs and the specific hurdles which administrators faced during

this period with the pivot to online learning and issues related to the wellbeing of staff and

students (Kaul et al., 2020; Pollock, 2020).

Gaps in Research

The main methodological approach to research concerning crisis leadership is recording

case studies. These case studies are then amalgamated or searched through for trends and

themes that can be applied to more general events (Mutch, 2021 p. 248). Case studies tend to

be collected and documented in developed nations which have an academic institution already

established in the country; however, there is a growing body of work that is also being

conducted in developing nations by researchers from other countries (Mutch, 2022). The

question of whose stories are being told and, more worryingly what stories are left untold in

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research conducted by foreigners should be considered before making any thematic

generalizations based on existing case study research.

One limitation of the current research in this field is a lack of Canadian sources prior to

the COVID-19 pandemic. Several searches found little to no mention of crisis communication

studies in Canada before 2020. While there are obviously many similarities to crisis situations

being observed and studied in other developed nations, the lack of Canadian sources impacts

this study. However, this is also an opportunity for this study to begin to fill a gap in research in

Canada and provide suggestions to expand our local knowledge. The gap in the Canadian

literature is limited to the topic of crisis communication before COVID-19. Since 2020 there are

several studies that have been published regarding the Canadian response to the pandemic.

This still leaves a large gap of non-pandemic related crisis response studies in Canada which

would provide a more wholistic understanding of crises within this geo-political context.

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Chapter 3: Theory

This study examines the lived reality that has been constructed by a group of school leaders during a crisis. While each leader has had a different experience, as they were not necessarily in contact with each other, they still created meaning and knowledge through social interactions. These leaders created "community understandings and collective realities" (Clarke & Visser, 2019, p. 9) through their work with others in solving the issues they have faced through the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has employed social constructionism as its theoretical framework to examine the realities that leaders created within their community contexts.

As a theory, social constructionism seeks to better understand the way that knowledge, understanding, and meaning are constructed collectively by groups and communities. It emphasizes the role of interactions between community members (Andrews, 2012, p. 41). Social constructionism examines the history of decisions and negotiations that have occurred within organizations (Galbin, 2014, p. 83), therefore it applies well to the work of school leaders who are deeply connected to the lived experiences of their community. Furthermore, "social constructionism places great emphasis on everyday interactions between people and how they use language to construct their reality" (Andrews, 2012, p. 44). Social constructionism focuses on communication between individuals and is therefore an excellent framework to examine the way that leaders created meaning and reacted to the constructs of reality developed by others, during the pandemic.

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Social constructionism rejects the idea of an objective truth (Andrews, 2012). It also

rejects the idea that the researcher is able to be an impartial observer who can clinically record

universal findings without bringing their own biases and preconceptions into conversations or

analysis (Burr, 2003, p. 107). As such, the findings of this study are not universal truths, but

simply the local experiences of certain leaders. They cannot be taken as applicable in all

situations but are instead "provisional and contestable, and accounts are local and

historically/culturally specific" (Burr, 2003, p. 112). The findings of this study are one version of

the perceptions developed and realities constructed by leaders during the pandemic; alternate

versions of reality may have been created based on the context of leaders in different positions

and locations.

Scholarship on leadership has been historically focused on positivist approaches and the

search for universal principles (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2014). However, it is becoming increasingly

apparent that subjective constructions of reality and individual meaning making can be key in

understanding how organizational spaces evolve and are shaped (Bombała, 2014). An

interpretivist paradigm allows researchers to examine these experiences to unearth rich and

nuanced analyses of workplace dynamics. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging time

for people worldwide; everyone has had to make sense of the events around them in their own

way. Many of the behaviours, patterns, and events that have emerged represent individual

attempts to make sense of unprecedented crises. Leaders will not have been in a position to

rely on pre-existing mechanisms and policies, and will have had to use their own lived

experiences to adapt to these situations. Given these extremely subjective conditions, it will be

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important to employ an interpretivist outlook and examine the decisions made and realities

created as social constructs which have evolved through interactions with broader

communities.

Chapter 4: Methods and Methodology

Choice of Methodology and Justification

This study followed a broad interpretivist lens and used social constructionism as a particular focus. The adoption of this theoretical stance leads to the selection of methodologies which are also interpretivist, particularly phenomenology. Phenomenology is a theoretical way of understanding the world but also a way of wholistically examining the experiences and choices of people within their individual contexts. This study sought to understand the unique decisions made by school leaders in specific situations and phenomenological tools help to capture the personal narratives and emotions that were part of leaders' decision-making process.

Research was conducted through in-depth, open-ended interviews to better understand the role and rationale of the people who made decisions during the pandemic. During these interviews, participants were encouraged to take tangents, tell stories, and share what their experiences have been like during the ongoing pandemic. Leaders were free to explain their specific contexts and take the time they needed to fully tell their stories. Phenomenology was the appropriate methodological choice for this study, because its tools focus on the specific experiences of individuals while keeping in mind the larger societal context which leaders found themselves in. This study is based largely on the thoughtful reflection of leaders, which can also be analyzed to determine meaning making done by individuals (Koopman, 2017, p.5).

This study followed a set number of school leaders, whose interviews were analyzed as individuals and as the record of the lived experience of both individuals and the group, in an

effort to understand the meaning making process of school leaders. The decision making done

by leaders is worthy of investigation to better understand the mechanisms that have been at

work in relation to communication in schools during the COVID-19 crisis. The leaders were

confronted with unprecedented challenges in communication. Most had little or no pre-existing

processes in place to handle these events, and each leader developed their own meaning

within the institutional chaos, based on their lived experience. Phenomenology supported the

investigation into the lived experiences and the exploration of the subjective constructs of

reality which have emerged from the pandemic.

Much of my data comes from broad, semi-directive interviews which add a narrative

component to my methodology. To capture the context of the interviews, and their broader

themes, I have borrowed strategies from narrative methodology to better understand the

"stories a person lives and tells over time" (Caine et al., 2020, p. 12). During the interviews I

attempted to focus on stories so that the interviewee felt that they could fully immerse

themselves in the personal and unique ways they handled communication in schools during the

pandemic. In many ways, I was working with these leaders as co-creators of the research

process, and there were elements of participatory research integrated in places as the narrative

of the meaning making drove our exploration (Caine et al., 2020). The participatory research

elements present in my design were informed by the phenomenological lens. As Koopman

(2017) points out, "this means that instead of conceiving the object the moment it is observed,

its true meaning is revealed through a process of reflection" (p. 5). Conversing with participants

was done in the hopes of drawing authentic narratives, instead of simple, pre-determined,

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talking points. These methodological strategies were employed to capture a more authentic

and an intimate understanding of the ways leaders created meaning. Authentic stories may

have otherwise not been captured, as it is clear these leaders are accountable to various

stakeholders and may otherwise sometimes have tried to revert to a formal, official narrative of

their management of the pandemic disruption.

To better understand the reactions and emotions of the interviewees, I kept notes –

completed after each interview – that described my impressions and observations of the

interviews, the way they unfolded, and the different opportunities the participants offered me

to understand their lived experience. These notes also attempted to better capture the feelings

and inferences which may have otherwise been lost in the subsequent transcription of the

interviews. These notes were helpful in keeping the emotions of the interview alive after

decoding.

At the start of my study, COVID health protocols in Canada meant that I was ethically

required to carry out interviews virtually, rather than face to face. Mid-way through the study

there may have been an opportunity for my interviews to occur in person but, due to the

geographic spread of participants as well as scheduling concerns, all interviews were conducted

virtually. For interviews, Zoom was the preferred platform of communication, and no

participants highlighted any issues in relation to the use of this platform.

Snowball Sampling

To find candidates that fit the parameters of this study, I employed a process of

snowball sampling where initial participants suggested candidates to be contacted for potential

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interviews (Parker et al., 2020). The president of the FISA (Federation of Independent School

Associations) and SCSBC (Society of Christian Schools of British Columbia) forwarded my study

details to the executive leaders of the BC independent school associations. The leaders of the

various associations then shared my study parameters with leaders that would best fit my

study. At the end of each interview, I would check whether the participant could suggest

further potential participants who I would then contact via email. While I initially had hoped to

conduct six to eight interviews, I stopped interviewing after six when I felt I had reached data

saturation. Constantinou et al. (2017) describe saturation in this way: "data is saturated when a

dataset ceases to provide new information or themes, which relate to the research question"

(p. 575). I believed I had achieved data saturation after I reflected on the responses that I

expected to hear from participants before my final two interviews. In the sixth, and final,

interview I was able to correctly predict the major ideas and strategies that would be discussed.

After this interview I was confident that future interviews were unlikely to provide new

responses to my questions.

I had intended to carry out all interviews within the same BC health region. This was not

possible due to low response rates. It also turned out that this specific geographical parameter

had little impact on the data collected, as most independent schools discussed information

coming from the province and not from their individual health regions. One school did highlight

some confusion between preschool and k-12 school programming in relation to jurisdiction, but

preschool programming was not a part of this study.

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Data Interpretation

To extract meaning from the interview transcripts I followed a descriptive coding

analytical method (Saldaña, 2011, p. 104). To start, I analyzed the data collected by coding the

interviews using the major themes encountered and ideas that tied the stories together. Coding

the interviews was done with the hope of being able to extract helpful advice regarding

communication strategies for leaders to use in future crises. The first two interviews were

manually coded linearly so that themes and concepts could be developed naturally as the

research progressed. Using data from the initial interviews to develop a coding process, rather

than relying solely on codes from the literature, allowed my research to be more authentic and

more specific to the local context. The remaining interview transcripts were coded, using the

outcomes of this initial process carried out on the first two transcripts.

The later stage of the data analysis attempted to identify the frequency, significance,

and scope of mentions of the initial codes throughout participant narratives. In addition to the

interview transcripts, I coded the post interview notes that I made to see if there were

additional themes and ideas that I observed at the time. These journals added to the

phenomenological process of meaningful reflection on the experiences of both interviewer and

participant. Once all the interview transcripts were coded, I followed the methods laid out by

Giorgi (1985, p. 10-19) which involved repeated readings of interview transcripts, creating

meaning units from the texts, contextualizing the meaning units and creating a consistent

description of events and ideas. These steps helped build a conceptualization of the

phenomena I saw at play, that could then be used to better understand the themes and ideas

that were being presented within the lived experiences of the interviewees.

To interpret the interview transcripts and my notes I created eight main codes to

highlight. These codes were school culture, external communication, internal communication,

impact of communication, opportunities and limitations, modes and methods of

communication, sustainability and future considerations, and school branding. Interviews were

coded manually using colors in the text for each code. After coding the interviews, I went

through and made a note, or meaning unit (Giorgi, 1985), of each section which was written on

a sticky note and posted to a section of wall for each code. Each note was given a rating out of

five stars and a reference as to where it could be found in the transcripts, in case more context

was needed and for future reference. The five-star rating was a way of giving importance to

data that was more important than information mentioned in passing. However, lower rated

data points were useful in seeing patterns. In general, a five-star rating meant that the item was

a well-articulated central point, for example "reasonable common sense" (Colin) was a

comment made that showed great understanding of Colin's community. A one to three star

rating was useful in finding patterns across interviews.

In order to look for deeper meanings, I compared the coded notes in a number of

different ways to reflect on, and dig deeper into, the thinking and experiences of leaders. After

the interviews were coded and organized into notes, I created a chart where I attempted to

determine what topics were discussed by all, some, or none of the interviewees. This resulted

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in a list of topics and the number of interviews they appeared in. This was helpful to begin to

see patterns and more universal concepts across the different transcripts and experiences.

After coding and creating meaning units I followed the latticework method described by

Mutch (2018). Each interview was first analyzed on its own, using the codes that were identified

in the first two interviews; this is referred to as vertical analysis (Mutch, 2018, p. 7). Taking each

interview and using the meaning units suggested by Giorgi (1985), as well as those highlighted

by the codes that I identified in the first two interviews, I was able to carry out a horizontal

analysis across the interviews to find broader themes (Mutch, 2018, p. 9). There were six main

themes that came out of this horizontal analysis

Using all the information I collected I began to conceptualize and organize data into

themes that appeared across multiple interviews. The result was five main themes that I was

able to identify as being key to the experience of most of these leaders during the COVID-19

pandemic. These topics were themes that began to be perceived, through my process, as

common to the lived experiences of the interview participants. These themes became more

evident the more I reflected on the experiences of the leaders interviewed. The themes did not

emerge from any coding of a single abstract, but often evolved and came to light as part of

notes from several different codes. In a few cases, there were codes which were present in

multiple themes, as a canvas weaving through them.

I found that by coding, reorganizing, and re-reading the notes that were taken from the

interviews, I was able to better separate myself from the topics discussed and allow the words

of the interviewees to be seen more objectively. This conformed with the process of bracketing,

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where a researcher attempts to separate their own thoughts and feelings from their research

subjects (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). By reducing the interviews to smaller data points, and

removing all contingent data, I was better able to gain insight into the more universal

experiences of participants. Social constructionism focuses on the realities that we create as

societies and so I sought to better understand the created realities that school leaders were

creating together. This, hopefully, has led to a richer understanding of the collective lived

experiences of leaders in the study.

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Chapter 5: Findings

Participants

The six participants have been given aliases based off the NOAA 2022 Hurricane Names list (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, n.d.) for anonymity. Table 3 gives a brief overview of the basic data that may add context to each participant's responses. The order of participants in the list is the order in which they were interviewed.

Table 3

Overview of Participants

Name	Position	School Grades	Approximate School Population	School Region	Years in Leadership
Alex	Marketing and Communications	PK-12	950	Greater Vancouver	unknown
Bonnie	Deputy Head	PK-12	924	Greater Vancouver	10+ years
Colin	Superintendent	K-12	880	Greater Vancouver	10+ years
Danielle	Vice Principal	8-12	675	Greater Vancouver	1-2 years
Earl	Principal	PK-12	600	Fraser Valley	7-9 years
Fiona	Principal	K-12	450	Okanagan	10+ years

Codes

There were eight main codes that were used in analyzing the content of the interviews. These codes were:

- School culture

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- External communication stakes

- Internal communication stakes

- Impact of communication

- Opportunities and limitations

- Modes and methods of communication

- Sustainability or future considerations

- Communication as branding

These codes emerged through a manual coding of the first two interviews carried out by me as investigator; I did not feel that any further major themes later came up that could have been coded in future interviews.

School Culture

So much of this information was so divisive and people were in one camp or the other. So how do you, as a school, walk that middle ground of being respectful of people's personal choices and what we did was we continually brough it back to our values. We continually brought it back to how are we being respectful, how are we being inclusive, how are we considering other cultures and perspectives? (Alex)

Again, it's so weird to say it out loud, saying it to an outsider, when here, it feels like it's you know, normal. (Danielle, to the interviewer)

In terms of communicating, it's not just, a me to you, here's the message; there is a method to communication that shows who you are as a people. (Danielle)

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In my own messaging, it was important that parents hear loud and clear that we are

concerned about, you know, the safety and wellbeing of their kids, of the quality and

the excellence of the program we provide, which is just kind of our core. So, I would just

keep echoing this will happen. (Fiona)

Culture was one of the most discussed topics in the interviews. Contrary to my

expectations, leaders were very concerned with the values, mission, and vision of their schools,

during the ongoing crisis. All interviewees sought to relay the values of the school in all their

communications. The crisis communications related to COVID protocols and regulations was

much less important to leaders than ensuring that the tone and format of their message

conveyed the school's core beliefs. This notion of school culture was also a starting point for

some leaders to begin openly discussing controversy and misinformation. One leader described

how "if they agree with the mission and vision of the school and they're willing to work with us,

even in the smallest compromise, I want them to feel like they belong here still." (Colin) These

shared values were a place where leaders could begin addressing controversial topics and

amounted to a space they could return to when divisions began to become more common in

the community. Leaders who shared descriptions of some of their interactions with

misinformed individuals, found it much easier to resolve tensions if they always kept coming

back to the school's mission. It allowed them to identify the areas where there was consensus,

and this reassured all parties that they were on the same side.

The focus on the school's culture was likely tied to two facets of the structure of these

schools. Firstly, the mission, values, and culture of school's center around student wellbeing.

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This means that, at their core, schools want to care for their students and focus on those core values when a crisis occurs. While the protocols and regulations were there to instruct schools on how to maintain the health of students, they were not wholistic when it came to the overall wellbeing of students. The second facet of school structure is likely a need for independent schools to continue attracting families to their schools. The reason for an independent school's existence is tied, in the first place, to their values, whether they be religious or academic. Therefore, values need to be communicated clearly to their own community, as well as to prospective families.

External Communication Stakes

…very strategic, the result of that communication was, yes, every parent knew me, they knew to call me, they knew where I was and what I stood for. (Bonnie)

One of the things that we did, because we found that this was just becoming a constant stream of information… we created a section of our newsletter that we called the safety snapshot. (Alex)

School leaders had many partners in communication: families, parents, alumni, and supporters of the school all participate in external communication. One interviewer described a brief discussion with local media outlets, but the press did not play a major part in the COVID communication strategies of most of these leaders. External communication was instead very concerned with providing a clear and consistent message directly to the community. External messages were usually related to government COVID regulations, protocols, and outbreaks;

they were, however, also an opportunity for leaders to communicate their caring for the

community. Five of the six participants discussed hosting regular, virtual town halls where any

member of the school community was able to log in and hear directly from school leadership,

as well as ask questions about what was happening at school. According to several participants,

this allowed leaders to communicate in as personal a manner as possible, given the safety

regulations in place at the time. These town halls were times when leaders were able to have

conversations and show their humanity to a broad audience, showing that they understood the

current regulations and cared for the children of the school.

Social media was also a process highlighted by leaders as a way to communicate outside

of the school walls. However, social media divided the participants into those who had

communications departments or a social media strategy, and those who did not have any social

media strategy and were updating and refining those practices as the crisis wore on. All six

interviewees mentioned using Facebook and Instagram but none mentioned Twitter as a tool

that was used regularly. These platforms were also universally used for marketing instead of

official COVID communications.

Social media was another way that independent schools showed their desire to be seen

in a particular light and to be known for their values. These platforms were, according to the

participants, ways in which schools brought families into the learning community to see student

art, activities and other programming going on inside the buildings which were otherwise

closed to families. In most cases, this was again tied to a strategy driven by culture and values,

which sought to engage the school community. This topic area also highlighted the gap

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between schools who already had strong strategies in place before the pandemic and those that needed to invent them to keep the community involved in the functions of the school.

Internal Communication Stakes

> You have to know your people first and those are the things where, if you're working on crisis management in a crisis, you've already kind of lost right? You can't facilitate those skills in crisis… (Danielle)

> You never want to blindside your staff. So, whenever we're writing standalone communications it goes off to the staff first… it's so important that staff feel like they've got the lead time on whatever's going out to the community. (Bonnie)

Internal communication was mostly focused on staff but there were some leaders who also discussed students as internal members of the school. However, since students typically received communications from teachers or from external communications, they were not largely discussed in the interviews. School staff were the main focus of communication for these leaders, and the main priority appeared to be keeping staff informed of changes to protocols.

All six leaders discussed the need to inform staff before the general community. There were several reasons that were given for the need to inform staff first including collaboration and an attempt to maintain a controlled stream of information. School leaders often sent communications to staff to solicit feedback from them regarding the message and tone of a message -before it was published. Even at larger schools this was done to see if something

could be added or subtracted to make the information clearer. Another reason given for

informing staff before the community was an idea that leaders didn't want to blindside their

staff with new information. This may have been a way for schools to ensure that staff are

receiving and relaying the official information from the school. In many cases this was also

somewhat ironic, however, especially at small schools, given that staff and their families are

also community members.

Some leaders discussed how challenging it was to keep everyone informed when the

main release of information in BC happened in a press conference and was not made available

ahead of time to school leaders. Since school leaders, and the general public, all received the

same information at the same time, there was little opportunity for leaders to examine new

regulations before they were being published. Furthermore, as some families were watching

the press conferences very carefully, there was often an expectation that school leaders would

be following along and adapting instantaneously, regardless of what other commitments

leaders might have outside of school hours.

The focus on internal communication before broader community messaging was likely

an attempt to control the official messaging, and to help provide the facts to the staff, who

would then be relaying information to community members through student and parent

interactions. Alex highlighted that there were issues with determining what information applied

in different situations or how best to share new information:

[the website] gave us the opportunity to have a consistent place for the things that I

would consider not the high-high priority, because those we would send by email… but

a lot of that other stuff where we said "this applies to school" and it applies to school

life and I think that's the other part that we really tried to disseminate what applies to

school life? And that's a tricky question because those lines are very blurry right now.

(Alex)

Keeping staff well informed ensured that the leaders were able to have the whole

school communicating the same message with external community members and to provide

consistency and continuity in messaging from leadership. Further to this point, Pollock (2020)

discusses how the job of school principal now requires them to become experts in COVID from

a medical perspective, and in prevention regulations from a public health perspective; it also

requires them to communicate all this information to the correct agency or stakeholders, all

while asking them to operate "in a media environment permeated with misinformation, in

which they must sort and filter information to find the most up-to-date and accurate

information as new details about the disease are discovered rapidly" (Pollock, 2020, p. 39).

Impact of Communication

I also tried to focus my, even just general communications about pandemic response

and learning in a pandemic and online learning, all that, in a way that would help settle

people. Help them feel some comfort that the school is going to be there, they could

count on in. Whether their kids are going to be at home or at school. (Colin)

Find as middle ground as you can because you're never going to satisfy everybody so it

can't be the goal at all but you've got to be able to explain why you're doing what your

doing, you've got to be able to have it make sense to people. (Alex)

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Leaders identified the need to consider the impact, both intended and unintentional, of the communication that was being sent out. Since there were so many contradictory sources of information available to the public, school leaders were very focused on having a specific impact on the people in their communities. Leaders identified that people in their sphere of influence were stressed and worried, and schools wanted to relieve these feelings the best they could.

One of the main impacts that was identified was that leaders wanted to reassure their communities that they were in control and that they cared about the learners they served. This reoccurring message of reassurance was also tied to a message of calmness and control. Five of the participants discussed wanting to convey a calm presence and demonstrate that they were not panicking. One participant used the mantra of "calm, confident, caring" (Earl), as a guiding principle when crafting communication with their community.

There were certain pragmatic ways in which leaders ensured their community received messages that were reassuring. The first was to make sure that all members of the community were able to access their communications easily. Three of the six participants indicated that they had key messages translated into Mandarin to ensure they were interpreted correctly. Another way that school leaders could make the impact of messaging more effective for their community was to have scheduled and regular communication which allowed families to feel connected to what was happening around school. The idea of clearly scheduled communication follows the example found in other studies which attempted to create a sense of normalcy for the broader community during crisis (Mutch, 2014, pp. 12-13; Potter et al., 2021, p. 98).

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Focusing on the impact messages could have or the reaction that messages could cause was very important to leaders and was something that caused a great deal of stress for many of them. This was likely due to many personal factors, but a main concern was that leaders did not want to be misunderstood. In a few cases, leaders discussed instances where parents contacted them with feelings of frustration or anger over messages that had been read incorrectly. In a time of stress and conflict, leaders were likely attempting to be as clear and candid with their communities as possible, but were also avoiding conflict with community members.

Opportunities and Limitations

When I had a key message to get out, I would usually put the key content into a memo and then I would also kind of reiterate it in a video, that was a little bit more informal and personal. (Fiona)

Full school communication that was really, really important was done through Google Meet recordings. Then emails, emails, emails, emails. I don't know how many emails I go like, inbox exhaustion… Google Meet exhaustion was happening. (Danielle)

There were certain aspects of school structures that school leaders identified as being either very helpful or representing major drawbacks in their communication response to the pandemic. Technology was a topic that came up frequently in the interviews, regarding either the difficulties it would cause or the benefits that it could yield. Several leaders highlighted that, in the one or two year period before COVID, they had updated their communication technology and were able to have a single mode of communication that was well known to all stakeholders

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by March 2020. Vice versa, there were some leaders who were discussing how the majority of

their teachers were attempting to learn the use of new technology as the crisis was unfolding

which slowed their response. Schools typically did not shift away from their main

communication platforms during the initial stages of the pandemic. Many schools

acknowledged that they did not have a strong presence on platforms such as Google

Classroom, but began using them more consistently as became necessary.

A significant concern of school leaders during the pandemic has been the widening gaps

which have appeared in education between learners, especially in relation to access to

technology or socio-economic indicators (Dempsey & Burke, 2020; Mazzuchi, 2020; Pollock,

2020, p. 43). While independent schools often serve a more financially secure population, their

communities are not immune to socio-economic challenges, especially when schools rely on

tuition and families may have been affected by changes to their jobs. The discussions with

school leaders also revealed that there is a difference from school to school, in the level of

preparedness and the platforms available to leaders.

Independent school systems have been found to widen gaps and inequalities between

students (Atkinson et al., 2006; Burgess et al., 2020). Communication during the COVID-19

pandemic may be an example of the opportunities that independent schools provide their

communities over those of the public schools. Independent schools, and especially those with

communications departments, likely had more resources, both financial and human, to draw on

to effectively communicate with their communities.

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An important concept that came out of the analysis of this theme was the idea of

layering multiple media of communication to ensure that the message was received clearly but

also personally. This was, again, often enacted in the form of virtual town hall meetings that

happened after classroom outbreaks or changes in the health regulations. These virtual

synchronous meetings allowed leaders to be seen as more human and approachable, at a time

where many people were unable to see or meet those around them. One leader mentioned

that COVID normalized the use of video conferencing software in the profession, which has

allowed for greater interactions with parents and professionals who might otherwise be unable

to interact with the school.

Modes and Methods of Communication

That's just crisis communication strategy anyways: communicate often, communicate a

little. (Bonnie)

We tried to really maintain our culture through those communications, while still

highlighting what people needed to know. (Alex)

I think, for me, it's confirmed that I need to keep saying that stuff, maybe in different

ways, but it's easy to feel like… just saying the same thing over and over again. But in

terms of communication, I think people do need to keep hearing the same core message

over and over again, maybe reframed in fresh ways. (Colin)

Email was the main method of communication mentioned by these school leaders, and

all interviews highlighted how powerful tool it could be. With one exception, all leaders used

emails to communicate critical information with internal and external community members.

The emails were even more impactful when they came from a leader who was seen as the head

of the organization. Heads of school, superintendents and principals had high open and click

through rates on messages that had a clear subject line explaining it was about COVID policy or

regulations. Open rates refer to the number of emails that are opened or left unopened,

similarly, click through rates are the number of times a link is clicked on in an email that directs

to another webpage or attachment. This highlights the power dynamics of communication, and

how leaders need to consider the source of information that is being used to send information

in order to fully leverage their organizational structure. The pandemic has increased the

importance of recognizing the innate hierarchies that exist in schools and the importance of the

organizational status of leaders. Community members had expectations that the leadership of

their school would keep them informed of critical facts. This crisis has shown the inherent

layers of hierarchy that exist within schools and the need for the top leader to be aware of the

power they have at their disposal. Bonnie was a deputy head who was responsible for writing

messages which would be signed and delivered by the head of school. This again shows that

there is an internal hierarchy, but also that the school leadership seeks to maintain this

structure so that it seems the overall leader "looks like [they're] everywhere at the same time"

(Bonnie)

Memos, newsletter articles, and prerecorded videos were all useful tools that leaders

adapted to their own contexts and had success with to keep their communities informed and

involved. These tools were most effective when used regularly and in a way that was accessible

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to their community. As an example, various Learning Management Systems (LMSs) were used

to send out information to community members that were customized for the school. These

LMSs were exclusive to the school community and was used by all staff regularly so that

external community members knew where and when communication was going to take place.

Social media was sometimes used by school leaders for this reason in particular reason; short

format video was highlighted by of several participants as a tool they used for this purpose.

Several leaders had very specific and clear schedules, formats, and techniques when

communicating with their communities. These were usually centered around being regular -

often weekly - and brief - often one page.

Sustainability and Future Considerations

Let's think, let's delegate, let's prioritize, let's draft, let's review. (Fiona)

In a legal kind of way if I was writing to a parent about a topic; that in 40 years I want

the school to be able to go back and see the director of the senior school told you this,

they're going to find that message, it's not going to disappear with me. (Bonnie)

Our principal has this philosophy of leadership, where he says 'deflect the noise.' His job

as a leader is to deflect as much noise as possible. So that his teachers, his directors can

do the jobs that they signed up for. (Danielle)

Several of the leaders interviewed were concerned with future access to past

communications. These leaders wanted to ensure that there was a place where one might

access important information at a future date, should the pandemic continue or occur again.

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Other leaders explained that there existed in their school a fear that there was a portion of

public opinion opposed to the existence of independent schools; their messaging during the

pandemic therefore needed to be made with the long-term success of the school in mind in

order not to create discourse which could later be used against the vision and mission of the

school. This meant that leaders carefully crafted public messages in ways that would show the

school in a positive light and would not reveal the school doing something that could later be

interpreted in a negative way. One school created a series of videos which showed how the

school was cleaned throughout the day to help parents understand what happened while they

were not allowed in the building. This is also an example of how independent schools were

careful to show that there was compliance with all restrictions and to ensure that they could

not later become the target of opponents to independent schools.

Because the schools that were involved in this study were all independent schools, they

all were also concerned with their economic future and financial sustainability. The messages

that were being sent out, through digital methods, would likely exist forever in some form or

other on the internet. Schools were aware of this and wanted to ensure that the

communication they sent out could not be used against them as the pandemic evolved and

updated information came to light. There was also an effort by some leaders to ensure that

their pandemic information was always up-to-date and evidenced the changes that were

occurring over time. This information was used mostly by internal staff for planning and

informational purposes. Regularly updated and maintained policies were not the norm among

participants. Only one school that participated in this study had a pandemic plan as part of its

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preparedness policy and this was due to the leader's past experience with the SARS outbreak in

2003. This leader was also the one who had the greatest focus on the need to share the clearest

and most current information.

Teamwork was also evident among leaders, within the text of the interviews, especially

in ensuring that certain persons were always responsible for communication to the broader

community, while others had specific roles to play in logistics, risk management, and student

moral. Maintaining a clear division of labor allowed teams to leverage a broader range of skills,

while also avoiding burnout. These leaders also often had identified teachers or staff who could

be delegated to, or collaborated with, within the wider strategy for effective communication; in

this sense the teams were diverse and included all levels within the hierarchy.

Communication as Branding

Always on brand with messaging, wouldn't open up fully. (Interviewer notes)

School leaders interviewed were concerned with remaining true to their values, but

were also worried about identifying branding strategy. Four of the six schools had

communication departments who were concerned with standardizing the appearance and

format of all communication, including emails and social media posts. Social media was also

identified by five of the school leaders interviewed as being part of a wider marketing strategy.

and not as much a part of the formal communication structure of the school. This focus on

marketing and branding is an area that exemplifies a significant difference between the public

and independent school systems.

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Independent schools in BC depend, in part, on tuition payments as well as per capita

government grants. This means that schools are interested in attracting a sustained flow of

families and students to attend their schools. They are also focused on development and the

growth in the volume of applications for sustainability. This, in turn, makes communications

and branding much more crucial to independent schools. Having at their disposal a marketing

department, and group of employees that are focused on communication, conceivably means

that the school is able to communicate more effectively than schools without such resources.

The gap between schools with resources and those without is then widened by events such as

this global health crisis; during this period, some schools were able to effectively reach their

communities, while others may have struggled to go beyond the basic actions mandated by

public health authorities.

School leaders were often not the ones who were directly concerned with implementing

the branding strategy, and there was, as a result, a sort of ambivalence in their attitudes

towards communication strategies. On one hand they were very concerned with maintaining a

clear, on brand, message of calm; on the other hand, they were attempting to communicate

critical safety information that was crucial for students and families to understand. While

school leaders did not identify branding as something that inhibited communication, it was still

discussed at greater length than the safety messaging in most interviews. Branding was

sometimes a barrier when attempting to authentically discuss communication strategies with

participants; they often preferred to default back to branded talking points that didn't reflect

on the ground realities.

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The need for schools to remain on-brand, and their focus on maintaining a particular image, is another indicator of the neoliberal space which schools now occupy. Schools, both public and independent, are now very concerned with attracting students and families to their organization. This then creates competition between schools and therefore a need to be perceived in a specific way. Having a clear brand, which people can see and recognize, is important for the continued enrollment of students and therefore takes up a great deal of time and effort for school leaders.

Themes Across Codes

The previous codes were themes that were found within each interview, they may, or may not, have been a part of each interview. The following themes were ones that were not any single code but were found across the interviews. In some cases, the following themes were generated from multiple codes.

Guiding Principles for Communication

Rituals and routines for communicating with people because I believe what ISM [Independent School Management] says about independent schools. The success comes from consistency and predictability, and you build that in some ways through your communication strategy. (Bonnie)

I wanted the community to just sense that, although the world seemed to be falling apart around them, and many people are in states of high anxiety and panic, we weren't panicking, we were projecting calm. (Colin)

The most discussed theme, during the interviews, centered on the guiding principles for

communications that needed to delineate the messages that leaders sent out to the

community. These were the overall rationale and the specific practices that leaders used to

communicate effectively. These often boiled down to several slogans or mottos that leaders

could keep coming back to such as "calm, confident, caring," (Earl) or "communicate a little and

communicate often" (Bonnie). These were often focused on the format of the message as much

as on the information being relayed. Leaders had a clear preference for brief and easily

readable messages. Within these, there was also an acknowledgement that messages need to

be tailored to the needs of the community in which they operated.

The context and culture of the community was a determining factor in terms of what

information was communicated, but also how it was conveyed. Many discussed the informal

channels in their community that they watched out for, to best respond to anxieties and

rumors. One leader summed up their decision-making process for communicating with their

community as "reasonable common sense," (Colin) while this is an undefinable term it is an

indicator of the understanding that Colin had of the culture of their respective community. This

is important, as it emerges that schools saw themselves through this crisis not just as a conduit

for factual information but also as a culturally appropriate agent for the adaptation of

information to various contexts where culture plays a role.

Leaders did not describe the government protocols as being overly difficult to pass on to

communities, since these were set rules which could not be changed or negotiated. These rules

simply needed to be shared and enforced. School leaders were much more concerned with

ensuring that the information was received in a way that the community would be receptive to,

and which would maintain the tone and feel that the school wished to maintain with its

supporters. This led to a diversity of styles of communication from leader to leader. While some

had documents that were regularly updated, complete with date stamps, highlighted updates,

and searchable tabs, others relied on single stand-alone emails which were sent out as needed.

Each school leader found a medium and process that fit the needs of their community.

Controversy and Misinformation

So much of this information was so divisive and people were in one camp or the other,

so how do you as a school kind of walk that middle ground; being respectful of people's

personal choices and what we did was we continually brought it back to our values. We

continually brought it back to 'how are we being respectful', 'how are we being

inclusive', how are we considering other cultures, other perspectives. (Alex)

Being clear helped because I know other families would then comment on the

misinformation in the WhatsApp group and say 'Actually [superintendent] wrote a letter

and said this.' And so they were helping me by conveying the correct, accurate

information. (Colin)

There were some hard conversations about this thing. But what a chance to speak into

people's lives and to provide some leadership and guidance to families during a time of

hardship. (Earl)

Crisis Communication by School Leaders

While these school leaders were asked directly about misinformation during the interviews, they were often hesitant to use the term and instead leaned towards other terms such as controversy. There was often a nervousness around the topic, and most leaders gave some indication that there were significant issues that they had faced with individuals in their community who had a distrust of regulations or mandates. Leaders relied on a diversity of ways to address controversies around vaccines, mandates, masks, and other regulations.

Some leaders chose to meet controversy head on and to have open and honest conversations about these issues, while others chose to avoid certain issues all together. This was an area where there was a significant degree of discrepancy and divergence amid the participants' reactions to community concerns. One leader discussed how their school outlined for community members what would and would not be discussed in the classroom around vaccines. A different leader discussed how they contacted certain members of the community before new regulations were published so that they could head off any dissent before it began. Vaccines and masks were the two topics that were most reoccurring within the interviews; however, the Freedom Convoy (Ireton, 2022) was occurring during initial interviews and came up as being another issue that leaders had to react to.

Controversy and misinformation point to the position that schools occupy in the broader community. Larger societal issues are bound to be discussed in schools as these institutions draw students from all areas of the community at large. Furthermore, as Pollock (2020) points out, "principals, along with teachers, are now part of the public health effort to prevent the spread of disease" (pp. 39-40). Students are typically encouraged to discuss topics

Crisis Communication by School Leaders

about which they have questions, and teachers are therefore often on the front-line of when it comes to discussing and questioning topics they are hearing about outside of school. School staff then found themselves in a difficult position where they needed to ensure that there was a clear and inclusive message offered to the members of their communities while also ensuring that they followed all government regulations. One way that leaders ensured that their community members felt included and welcomed at their school was a focus on the school's core values and beliefs during difficult conversations.

Top-Down Leadership

Somebody who's a central point of contact and who is authoritative on those decisions, that's been huge. [In the] early days it was really a lot of communication. (Alex)

When our parents saw his name or the school's name in their thing [inbox]. They know it's going to be important. (Danielle)

All leaders in this study explained that their communication during the pandemic needed to originate from whoever held the highest status in terms of leadership, whether it be a principal, head of schools or superintendent. Messages from these leaders, and in particular emails, had some of the highest read and response rates of any other communication. These leaders with explicit status often represented the sole source of information in communication to both internal and external members of the community. These leaders became spokespersons for their school's response and when they spoke, people listened.

Crisis Communication by School Leaders

During the pandemic, leaders needed to walk the line between autocratic leadership and transformational leadership (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Leaders sought to maintain control over operations and policy, while also maintaining relationship with internal and external communities and inspiring others into action. Leaders sought to be a central figure, or figures, who could demonstrate that they were in control of the situation. However, while presenting a clear message and remaining in control, these same leaders wanted to ensure that their communities understood they had the best interest for their students at heart. This compassionate message is often at odds with an autocratic style of leadership. Furthermore, the school leadership needed community members to also understand and comply with protocols, rules, and strict policies around COVID-19; this meant inspiring them to action, a process which some will argue required a more transformational style.

This tug of war between inspirational and autocratic leadership styles was something that school leaders needed to consider in the way that their messages were presented. Some leaders attempted to humanize their messaging through video and audio rather than text which allowed for tone and intonation to make messages more personal. Most leaders discussed the effectiveness of more interactive and visual platforms, especially when an issue might be at all controversial or divisive.

Synchronous Communication

If it was a whole class being shut down then I'd have a zoom meeting with all those parents… I felt like any isolation or classroom closure, parents needed a face to face, you know, conference, not an email. (Earl)

Crisis Communication by School Leaders

True face-to-face communication was often not possible during the pandemic, but leaders found that video conferences, town halls, and recorded videos were some of the most effective tools that they had to address concerns of their communities. Town hall meetings, in particular, proved to be a very effective way of engaging community members and ease tension and anxiety.

Developing video strategies as the pandemic was ongoing highlights the lack of crisis planning that was done in advance of the pandemic. Only one participant referred to having a strategic plan in place on how to react to the pandemic. All other participants discussed how they began to learn and implement new strategies to reach their communities in the moment. Leaders were seeking ways to meet the needs of their communities but, in most cases, simply defaulted to virtual versions of strategies they were already using. If platforms and plans were in place there would perhaps have been space for further innovation. Although, as Alex points out, "we've got great platforms that are well recognized, why shift somebody's attention to something else at this point if we can leverage what we have." Alex goes on to point out that there was so much flux in the early days of the pandemic, that they felt it was not the time to make big changes and further complicate the lives of community members. So, while innovation could have improved communication it was also risky to make a change and lose contact with the community at those crucial conjunctures.

These findings are also in line with other recent studies which explore how leaders sought to make as many personal connections as possible, either verbal or visual, with their community members (Argyropoulou et al., 2021). Bonnie identified the benefits of increased

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use of Zoom and other technologies, and stressed how they continue to be used even as some

restrictions were lifting at the time of the interview. They also identified Zoom as a tool that

was underused before the pandemic, but was used nearly every day throughout the pandemic.

Missing Themes

There were some issues that were missing from all interviews, that may have been

overlooked by interviewer or participants. Issues around social justice, in particular and the

needs of difficult to reach families were never mentioned. None of the leaders interviewed

highlighted conversations with people who were not responsive to messaging either because

they did not receive messages, or because these were sent in a manner they could not receive

due to barriers such as absence of technology or time constraints. This is likely an issue that

would be more prevalent in public school situations where socioeconomic status may be more

varied and a greater concern for schools. Within the area of social justice one might have

expected to perhaps hear from interviewees about the impact of the pandemic on pressing

priorities such as the TRC calls for action (Government of Canada, 2018), but this was not the

case. It must be noted that interviews were focused on positive practices that were helpful and

could be replicated in the future, and not on the areas where there were failures or

unmanageable issues, which may have been a reason why inequalities were not brought up by

participants within the study.

Crisis Communication by School Leaders
Chapter 6: Discussion

Four main findings have arisen from the interviews and subsequent reflection on the available data. They are: the continued supremacy of email as the most effective mode of communication, a desire for a single, respected, highly visible spokesperson, a focus on the wellbeing of community members, and the significance of shared values.

The Supremacy of Email

One of the most significant outcomes of this study is that email is the most effective ways in which leaders can get their message out. Other platforms may not be as accessible to staff, community or students. Alex pointed out that "[high priority messages] had to go by email, we just couldn't rely on the timing and the urgency that would come across the newsletter". Furthermore, when a sender and subject line clearly convey the importance of the message, people are likely to open and read those emails. The issue with email during the pandemic has been that it was often also the primary communication tool of teachers and students, especially within online learning. This resulted in what one participant referred to as "inbox exhaustion," (Danielle), a situation in which emails began to be read less frequently the more they were sent. This also echoes more global examples where email usage in the early pandemic days jumped by close to 14% during the early months of the pandemic (Dempsey & Burke, 2020, p.68). Furthermore, 69% of leaders in the UK identified that they were receiving too much information in general during the first three months of the pandemic (Fotheringham et al., 2022, p. 212). This again highlights the need for effective, useful communication instead of increased frequency in messaging.

Crisis Communication by School Leaders

One solution to the issue of email overuse, was to set up a more consistent schedule for communicating and to select using different media for less pressing messages, such as video. While no leaders interviewed discussed the amount of time that they spent communicating by email, it is already known that before 2020 school leaders in BC were spending an average of nine hours a week on this task (Wang & Pollock, 2020, p. 17). This study again highlights the need for better use of email as a mode of communication in crisis, so that it can retain its power instead of being overused.

Top-Down Crisis Response

The need for a central point of contact and information was highlighted as being a critical part of most responses. The literature also highlights the effectiveness of a spokesperson for the school (Estep, 2013) as something that can streamline a crisis response and keep the message clear. It may also be reassuring for some staff members to know that there was someone who knew the regulations and was able to answer questions about issues that came up. This also highlights how the role of school staff and leadership are elevated during a crisis. "If the disaster hits while schools are in session, principals, and teachers become first responders, rescuing, evacuating, calming, and caring for children." (Mutch, 2022, p. 166) The leaders in this study were successful because of how they reacted to the factors described in Table 1 (Mutch, 2015). The dispositional, relational, and situational capacities of the leaders interviewed was what allowed them to be effective and transformational leaders. Bonnie and Fiona particularly led from a place of experience, having long-term background in the school they were in. They were able to leverage the skills that they had gathered over a longer career,

better than others. Bonnie was also fortunate to have experienced the SARS outbreak in

Toronto (Low, 2004) and was able to use documentation related to pandemic planning to

inform her response. Colin was very new to their school during the pandemic and did not have

a relationship with their school community; however, they understood the importance of those

connections and ensured that they were building trust and collaboration with their community.

Earl already was a part of their community and so was able to identify and target particular

members of the community who needed extra attention in order to come into compliance with

regulations or feel safe in an in-person school setting. Neither Alex nor Danielle were the head

of their respective schools but brought a strong desire for situational innovation. They both

adapted programs and found creative ways to support their communities and ensure that

communication was clear and accessible.

While it is critical that a central figure be responsible for being perceived as the the

visible spokesperson for the school it is also important that this person not be alone or function

without help. As Harris and Jones (2015) point out,

> through absolute necessity… effective school leadership is now connected,
>
> collaborative, creative and responsive. Most school leaders will be running on empty
>
> given the myriad of challenges that COVID19 has created for them, so distributed
>
> leadership is a necessity to survive. (p. 246)

Focus on Your People

Knowing the climate and context within which messages are occurring is critical to their

reception and effect. The leaders in this study underlined the importance of working together

to utilize their respective strengths and consider how a message will impact their staff or

community. Messages were also identified as being more effective when sent in such a way

that they are clear and understandable to those receiving it. Translating documents into other

languages was, for example, one process way that many leaders found important.

Knowing the strengths of the members of a school's internal community can help

leaders to delegate tasks so that they are handled more effectively. The internal community

made up of staff can also be used to ensure that school leaders do not make critical mistakes in

communicating with the external members of the school. The need for collaboration among

leadership teams and school stakeholders was a major finding in a large-scale study in the UK

by Fotheringham (2022) which found that "school policy development requires clear

communication, that effective policy relies on collaboration between school stakeholders" (p.

220).

Independent school leaders had an instinctive desire to revert to their values and

principles. Independent schools are founded for a specific group or belief system, and so

retreating to a foundational point during crisis ensured that they knew what unified their

community during this time. It also showed to the people outside the immediate community

who they were and what they stood for. The school leaders interviewed all were unified in their

attempts to project care to their communities in whatever way was most needed for their

context. School leaders needed the founding values of their schools to unify community

members when so many issues were divisive and controversial.

Crisis Communication by School Leaders

Culture within the external community is another consideration when developing communications. Leaders discussed finding key people to aid in communicating beyond internal staff. Colin was very new to the school community during the pandemic and needed to learn the ways that the community received and understood information that was sent home. In order to make sure their messaging was effective, Colin had all broad communications read by members of the school board or specific community members who were highlighted as having a good understanding of the feelings of the wider community.

Understanding the platforms and channels that spread and amplify misinformation, rumors, or controversies is another area that was identified as important by some participants. Colin highlighted that, by focusing on these platforms, community members began to diffuse misinformation on a parent WhatsApp group using official messages. Earl understood that controversies around regulations would come from certain community members and targeted them with personal phone calls in addition to the more general messages. One participant also identified that their community tended to be very anxious about case numbers and so, to ease tensions, this leader broke with official health authority protocol and posted the number of cases in the school every week. By using clear statistics this leader eliminated many rumors about who might be sick or away from school, when in fact the reason for their absence might have nothing to do with COVID.

Internal and external communities have lives that are distinct from the school and are also navigating the crisis in their own ways (Hauseman et al., 2020; Ho & Tay, 2020; Kaul et al., 2020; Mutch, 2022. P. 166; VanLeeuwen et al., 2021. P. 1313). The literature reminds leaders to

remain sensitive to the needs and wellbeing of the members of their schools and be flexible to

meet the demands of their unique situations. In this study, Alex identified that some staff

members were caring for family members during the early days of the pandemic and needed

relief from duties; their school made a commitment that no staff were going to lose their jobs

because of the pandemic.

Know What You Stand For

Being clear as to the values and mission of a school is an area that was identified by all

leaders as being key to successful communication. When these values were internalized by

leaders, their communication became a tool that furthered these beliefs, even when the topic

of the message was not connected to the values. School leaders who were able to stay rooted

in their values found it easier to have difficult conversations with community members,

because there was a set of agreed upon values which functioned as a starting point for

discussions. The values of the school also provided a firm foundation for working towards a

compromise when it was needed, since both parties had an agreed upon mission to work

towards. While it is likely that, due to marketing, independent schools focus more on clearly

communicating their values, public schools have also reported in other studies that looking to

the school's values was important when caring for their communities (Mutch, 2021. p. 79). A

concern over the wellbeing of children has also been found to be the major driver in the

communication of school leaders' elsewhere in the world. In Ireland, one report explained that

76.9% of contact with parents, in the early months of the pandemic, was directly related to the

wellbeing of children and connected to the school (Dempsey & Burke, 2020, p. 50).

Crisis Communication by School Leaders

When one discusses values and mission with independent school leaders, there is a sort of ambivalence which emerges in the way they experience these values. On one hand the core values of all schools in this study is to care for children. On the other hand, leaders were very aware of the public perception of their school. The schools examined in this study were very concerned with ensuring that the communications they sent out showed that they cared for the children that were in their charge. School leaders wanted to send messages that reassured families that their school cared for their children. However, in the case of independent schools, there is also a pressing need to ensure that they express their values in order to guarantee to ensure that the school maintains a positive public image. One school leader identified that their school was very cautious with social media due to a fear of outsiders who might not want the school to exist. However, the dichotomy of caring for children, while also promoting the school in commercial terms, was something that did not seem to worry school leaders. All leaders identified a focus on their values as a positive thing that helped them to better serve their families who, presumably, shared these values.

School leaders are caught in a difficult space where the communication of health and safety information is tied to the advertising and promotion of their school. While this is amplified in an independent school situation, where tuition is required for a school to operate, it is likely also common in public school situations. Parent confidence and student perceptions may affect if one school is seen as more desirable than another leading to increased enrollment and budget increases. This ambivalence falls within a larger conversation about neoliberalism in the field of education, which was an unexpected part of this research and as such does not

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appear in the literature review. Neoliberalism in education refers to the increased focus of a

business model approach to school manageent. Schools, as a result, are highly aware of

competition in an open market where families and students have increasing options in terms of

choice of school (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Neoliberalism seeks to connect the wellbeing and

happiness of learners to the free market economy (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2021). Where

students and families have a choice between schools, there is then a greater competition

between schools for students, who are the source of funding. This creates a greater focus

within schools on economics and marketing, which may detract from the attention on learning

and teaching practices.

Future Research Considerations

This study has begun to explore the experiences of leaders in BC during the COVID-19

crisis, which may in fact be similar to the experiences of school leaders in other contexts.

Schools and leaders have had a vastly different experience throughout the COVID-19 pandemic

and will have unique stories to share. This study sought to understand what it was like for

leaders to communicate during the COVID-19 pandemic and shares some introductory findings

regarding their experiences. This study has attempted to focus on positive, actionable practices

that may inform leaders when they tackle future crisis mitigation. The exclusive look at

independent schools is both a strength and limitation of this study. While the schools studied

may not have been affected by some of the broader issues that public schools may have faced,

they also had many opportunities and resources that public schools may not have had.

Future research should continue to gather the lived experiences of leaders who were developing communications plans and strategies during a time of immense stress. The reflective process itself of being interviewed for research may be helpful for leaders when it comes to navigating future crises. Future pertinent steps in research in this area would be to now interview public school leaders about their experiences. These schools have a very different structure with regard to administration but also to finances. The results of research carried out within public schools may be more universal and transferable on a national scale. As Harris and Jones (2020) point out,

> it would be a mistake to simply re-configure or re-badge what was relevant before COVID19, as much of this training and development may no longer fit for purpose. New programmes will be required that fully and adequately encompass the leadership skills, practices and actions suited to the current, and potentially ongoing, COVID19 situation (p. 245)

This research does not indicate how well leaders succeeded at their goal of living and communicating their values. Future research might include an attempt to determine the thoughts and perceptions of community members on how well the school was able to showcase their beliefs. Since this has been an identified focus of leaders in this study, it would be valuable to know what leaders were best at communicating these beliefs to their communities, and what practices were most effective.

Future research should also focus on the stratification of schools caused by COVID-19. Stratification is the process where society, and school systems, are categorized into layers

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based on factors such as socio-economic status, race, or power (Higgins, 2019). It is likely that

socio-economic gaps between schools and between communities have widened during the

pandemic. Access to resources for the purpose of communication, and the effectiveness of the

messaging coming from schools, has likely widened but the extent to which it has grown will

not fully be known until it is studied.

Considering the amount of time that administrators spent discussing values, beliefs,

missions, and visions for their schools and communities it may be worthwhile to determine how

these values were chosen. It may also be helpful to determine how these values are practiced

within the school. Are they simply a marketing tool or are they lived out in the daily life of

schools? Some of the school leaders interviewed spoke about their values in similar terms to a

hidden curriculum or set of unspoken values and norms that are taught in schools (Gunawan et

al., 2018), that may need to be examined for effect on students.

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Appendix A

Bank of potential interview questions for the semi-directive interviews

Initial ice breaker/ general demographics
- How long have you been in a position of leadership in schools?
- Can you tell me a little about the size of your school, its history, its culture?

Communication strategies before the pandemic
- What did community communications look like for you before the pandemic started in March 2020?
- Did you have a communication framework or guiding strategy for normal communication
- What were your go-to strategies and tools?
- What communication tools were you using before the pandemic? (tools like Google Classroom, School apps, social media platforms, newsletters etc.) How frequently did these things go out to community?
- Are there models or frameworks for communication that you relied on before the pandemic?
- Where there challenges in relation to communication that preoccupied you before the pandemic?

Navigating the communication challenges during the pandemic
- What was it like in March 2020 when you realized that the pandemic was going to begin affecting the everyday operation of your school?
- How did you react in those early days when news began coming through about just how serious the situation was?
- Take me back to the early days of the pandemic in March 2020, as you gained access to more information, how did you decide to communicate and what information did you think was most important to transmit?
- As things moved on to March and April of 2020 what kinds of things changed for you and your organization in relation to communication?
- How have your own processes and thoughts around communication changed as you worked your way through the pandemic?

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- How did you organize and disseminate different messages that were maybe high or low priority? Did you use different tools for different messages and how did you make that decision?

Different types of challenges

- Were challenges different in relation to internal communication versus communication with community?
- The pandemic highlighted the challenge of misinformation. What have been your experiences with navigating misinformation in your communities?

Lessons learnt through these experiences

- Are there any particular lessons that you learned from the pandemic that you have used or put in place to better communicate during crisis?
- Over the last two years what have you found that works when communicating with your community?
- How do you know these strategies have been working?
- How have your own experiences offered you a specific path in relation to communication where existing frameworks and tools were ineffective?
  What tools and platforms did you add or subtract or modify since the pandemic began?