SCHOOL LEADERS' EXPERIENCES LEADING AFTER A TRUAMATIC EVENT: A POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore school leaders' experiences of posttraumatic growth following a traumatic event in their schools. Traumatic events sometimes impact schools because of natural and human-made disasters, and various kinds of violence (Webber & Mascari, 2018) and school leaders (principals and vice/assistant principals) are pivotal responders when traumatic events are connected to their schools. They are the *known entity* in the school building, and necessarily move between responding to district or medical directives, and parent, student, and community needs after an event occurs. While it is expected that principals will experience some negative impacts because of a traumatic event in their school (Brown, 2018, Tarrant, 2011a & 2011b), it was not known whether a *positive legacy of trauma* (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013) may also arise for some after a traumatic event.

This study used a *posttraumatic growth* perspective which suggests that some individuals will experience growth after they experience a crisis or traumatic event. The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) has been used with numerous populations, and after a variety of traumatic events. It has five factors which are, an appreciation for life, a changed sense of priorities, more meaningful relationships, a recognition of new paths or life possibilities, and spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

This study used an interpretive description approach (Thorne, 2016). Phase one of the study involved an online survey that was sent to approximately 11,000 individuals across Canada and the United States through the North American Centre for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR). On their distribution list were 375 "school administrators". Based on the demographic questions completed by survey participants, it appeared all who completed the survey were, or had been, school administrators. One-hundred-nineteen participants began the

survey, and 96 completed most of the survey. The nine demographic questions were analyzed using SPSS, and the PTGI (21-items in the survey) was summed for an overall score. It was determined that this sample of school leaders indicated limited posttraumatic growth after the traumatic event they identified for the survey. This sample indicated their posttraumatic growth falling between: *I experienced this change to a very small degree as a result of my crisis*, and *I experienced this change to a small degree as a result of my crisis*. Phase two of the study involved ten one-on-one interviews with school leaders (five principals and five vice/assistant principals). The participant volunteers were drawn from the survey participants. All interviews were with Canadian school leaders from four provinces in Canada. Interview participants indicated areas of stress and strain, and growth or change as a result of the traumatic event they identified. The interview data were analysed through an in-depth, immersive, interpretive process. Three domains were described: 1) personal and professional transformations, 2) relationship transformations, and 3) school district impacts on school leaders.

The study's findings provide valuable insights into the realities of school leaders' experiences leading through traumatic events and the personal and professional toll on them in the aftermath. It also provides insight into how leaders may see themselves grow through adversity. Further, it offers understanding about the resources school leaders may depend on to manage through a traumatic event connected to their school.

Participants offered recommendations for districts about how they might support school leaders during and after a traumatic event. They also provided recommendations for school leaders who lead through a traumatic event. Findings from this study may assist districts, unions, schools of educational leadership, and those who provide professional development to consider how crisis management, trauma-informed and posttraumatic growth awareness information, and

burnout mitigation skills may build capacity in school leaders who are likely to experience a crisis or traumatic event at some point during their administrative career.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Traumatic events such as crime, accidents causing death, natural disasters, man-made disasters, and the like are considered common occurrences **(**Norris, et al., 2002). Educational institutions have frequently experienced the effects of traumatic events, and school leaders are often called upon to respond (Kolski et al., 2012; Webber & Mascari, 2018). While these events occur with relative frequency (Norris, et al., 2002), the actual event, impact zones (Cameron, 2019), and recovery are variable (Liou, 2014). This study focuses on the human and system (school or district) impact of traumatic events and how school leaders fare in recovery phases post-event.

In North America, the terrorist attacks in New York City, Virginia, and Pennsylvania had a profound effect on individuals' feelings of safety and security from threats of serious violence (Hoff et al., 2009). While broad scale traumatic events like the 9/11 terrorist attacks occur, more concentrated acts of violence such as the Virginia Tech massacre resulting in 33 deaths (Hoff et al., 2009; Lucas & Lamphere, 2020) also happen. Sadly, post-secondary institutions are not the only places where acts of violence occur. On April 28, 1999, in Tabor Alberta, Canada, a school shooting took place. It was considered a first random-style high profile school shooting in Canada (Cameron, 2001). More recently, on January 22 of 2016, a shooter in La Loche, Saskatchewan, Canada shot and killed four individuals and injured seven others (*A Look at Events in the La Loche School Shooting in Northern Saskatchewan*, 2020).

Not all traumatic events are acts of violence. For example, Mutch (2015a) described how the New Zealand earthquakes affected schools within the impact zone. Tarrant (2011a, 2011b) described how a school principal responded when Australian high school students died during a

school-sponsored canoe trip. Gouwens and Lander (2008) explored how Hurricane Katrina impacted schools and superintendents in Mississippi in the aftermath of the hurricane.

As indicated by some of the examples, schools are not immune from traumatic events. Students and families, teachers, school leaders, and those at higher levels in school districts are impacted. Communities are also affected when traumatic events occur (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010). While many of the individuals who experience a traumatic event do not develop a diagnosable trauma-related condition, most experience negative consequences because of the event, at least for a time (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013).

After traumatic events that impact schools, there are predictable periods of time identified as critical periods (Cameron, 2019) that result in greater stress for schools and districts. Five critical periods are described in the Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response (TES; Cameron, 2019). The first critical period is the timeframe two weeks after a traumatic event, or two weeks following the decline of media attention about the event. Immediately after an event, schools and districts frequently acquire additional support such as external guidance from consultants, extra counselling staff, even additional administrative assistance to buttress capacity, and at times, morale (Webber & Mascari, 2018). Many school staff also seem to have the energy to be attentive and on high alert, contributing to reasonable levels of functioning despite the event.

In the timeframe after the traumatic event and when additional supports leave, school leaders are often guided to identify and meet needs, evaluate possible changes required in the school or schools because of the event, and assure individuals involved that the system or district is working toward a measure of normalcy (Brown, 2018). The assurance of normalcy is not to minimize or evade the impact. Rather, it is to help the school and individuals within it avoid

becoming immobilized in the aftermath or developing a lack of productivity because of it (Cameron, 2019). While leaders are periodically overwhelmed, they often appear to rally and seek the systems' well-being above their own (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010).

As indicated, between the event and the first critical period, school leaders often have additional assistance from the larger school district and sometimes other community agencies, providing guidance and a variety of supports (Cameron, 2019; Kolski, et al., 2014; Webber & Mascari, 2018). However, at some point, this assistance is reduced and eventually eliminated. In this study, I wanted to understand processes for recovery and potential posttraumatic growth after these resources were reduced, and schools moved towards self-sufficiency following the altering of their assumptive world (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). The purpose of this research was to learn from school leaders, both principals and vice principals, about what might contribute to posttraumatic growth as they led through a traumatic event and beyond, that predictably increased stress for themselves and others (Cameron, 2019; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013).

In this chapter, I discuss the context and background of the problem I studied. I then describe the purpose and significance of the study. Subsequently, I explore my research questions, provide a description of the study, and identify limitations and delimitations. In the final sections I present pertinent definitions and offer my stance as a researcher. I conclude with an overview of the dissertation.

Context for the Study

This study focused on exploring school leaders' experiences in the aftermath of traumatic events that affected schools, districts and sometimes communities from a posttraumatic growth standpoint (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). I used a survey, and semi-structured interviews to explore experiences. School leaders have a relationship within the community as well as the

school or district in which they serve. Schools and communities frequently have a symbiotic relationship. With schools being in centers of population, whether large and small, a disaster affecting a community predictably impacts local schools (Tarrant, 2011a, 2011b; Mutch, 2015a, 2015b, 2016). When schools are site of tragedies, such as shootings, bombings, and natural disasters (Cameron, 2018; Brown, 2015; Lucas & Lamphere, 2020; Mutch, 2015a; Mutch 2015b), these traumatic events in turn affect the community (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010). School leaders are sometimes tasked with providing encouragement and support beyond their school walls, right into the community (Tarrant, 2011b).

Because traumatic events are unpredictable and variable, contingencies are not always considered or planned. Since traumatic events are not everyday happenings, designing response plans, policies, and practice guidelines are often contemplated only after an event (Cameron, 2019). However, because traumatic events can have destructive power on human life, emotional and mental wellbeing, as well as property, and material goods (Gouwens & Lander, 2008; Kolski et al., 2012; Mutch, 2016) understanding how school leaders experience traumatic event recovery is necessary and valuable.

Schools have clear hierarchical structures of leadership (Young et al., 2014). During and after traumatic events, principals, vice principals, and other school leaders are often tasked with responsibilities that involve innovative administrative practices and strategies to respond and support an individual school or district (Brown, 2018; Cameron, 2019; Tarrant, 2011a). School-based leaders are often caught in the aftermath of a traumatic event that has no leadership map, codebook or set of instructions by which to support a school, especially after additional resources such as extra school counsellors, and practical responses have dissipated. Given the unique role a school leader occupies in schools and districts, studying their experiences was considered

valuable for gaining perspectives on how to appropriately navigate the aftermath of these tragedies, and query what posttraumatic growth possibilities exist.

In my experiences in schools, I observed that schools and districts operated adequately immediately after the event, even with duties and routines altered to accommodate the aftermath and subsequent realities, such as funerals. However, when resources (e.g., district office staff, additional counsellors) were pulled back and the school was operating with the complement of staff and students they had before the event, reports of distress and lack of clarity about how to proceed under the circumstances were common.

When I began this study, I hypothesized several possible explanations for why adequate school operations occurred immediately after the event. The first was that schools were afforded additional and, frequently, outside support to assist with organizing responses, as well as to assess and meet needs that surfaced in the aftermath. The second was that school leaders retained the energy required to respond with some effectiveness for that period. Baranowski and Gentry (2010) acknowledged that people in crisis situations are often able to maintain energy, focus, and attention for a time before they became tired or fatigued. The third was that the traumatic event was the primary focus of considerable activity and attention. This attention was directed to the formal response and facilitating the school or district return to a measure of routine (Cameron, 2019). Fourth, the role of school leaders was heavily emphasized immediately after the event and before the critical periods began. They were often given explicit directions and support about how to respond to the event, subsequent plans, and decisions (Cameron, 2019).

My research interest came out of a desire to understand more about the possible role of posttraumatic growth in school leaders, and the relationship between the school or district, and the leader during the critical periods after a traumatic event. As indicated, I observed that

immediately following the event, leaders received clear direction from superiors, keeping them connected to the larger organization by stipulating specific tasks and even methods of responding to the event. However, once classes resumed, and external supports, such as additional counsellors, were re-deployed, it appeared the school or community felt abandoned. There seemed to be less unsolicited guidance and clarity about how to carry on as a school leader following a directive to return to customary school practices. While there was tactical guidance about returning to a school routine, it appeared that stress and fear percolated in the aftermath for leaders and affected their personal and professional functioning.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore school leaders' experiences following a traumatic event connected to their school or district and understand what contributes to posttraumatic growth. In addition, I was seeking to understand how personal, situational, and organizational factors affected school leaders' understanding of their leadership. Key informants for this study were school leaders who identified being involved in a traumatic event and provided leadership during and afterward.

The frequency of tragedies and disasters in the world (Norris, et al., 2002), led me to believe that schools and school leaders would continue to be exposed to trauma. Part of my interest was to understand through leader experiences what supports might be effective when traumatic events affected schools and school districts. At the current time, there are a few studies about the relationship between school leaders and their systems post-event (Brown, 2018; Gouwens & Lander, 2008; Tarrant, 2011a, 2011b); however, of those found, none examined school leader experiences from a posttraumatic growth lens.

The significance of the study highlights the importance of school leaders as central figures in the operations of schools, districts, and communities (Young, et al., 2014). Typical training for school leaders does not include crisis management but focuses on standards and competencies that school leaders should enact (Robinson, 2010; Shaked, 2021). Standards and competencies are considered *the work* of school leaders (Riveros & Wei, 2019). It is unclear how current standards and competencies assist a principal manage a crisis or trauma that impacts the school they work in. This study may add to knowledge about *the work* of school leaders, expanding perspectives beyond the current competencies and standards of practice. School leaders are a definable group, who play a unique role in the functioning and recovery of schools and districts after traumatic events (Cameron, 2019). Schools will continue to experience traumatic events. Thus, some school leaders will continue to face adversity in their workplace owing to disasters, tragedies, and traumatic events.

It seems reasonable that school leaders may require more support that they typically acquire after traumatic events (Brown, 2018; Tarrant, 2011b). Unlike child welfare workers (Hazen, et al., 2020), counsellors (Manning-Jones, et al., 2017), lawyers, and mental health workers (Maguire & Byrne, 2016) who are identified as professionals who may experience professional burnout and compassion fatigue because of their exposure to vicarious trauma, school leaders are not typically considered at risk. However, there may be personal, social, emotional, professional, and other costs when leaders are called upon to focus their attention on a crisis response.

Finally, districts may benefit learning from school leaders' experiences about what supports would meaningfully assist in the aftermath of a traumatic event. The relationship between leaders and their districts seems pertinent because of the emphasis placed on leaders'

roles during the event and during recovery (Cameron, 2019; Gouwens & Lander, 2008; Tarrant, 2011a; Tarrant, 2011b). Educational institutions may understand better how to train future administrators given the likelihood that school leaders will encounter crises and perhaps even trauma in their administrative careers.

My clinical experience in working with individuals who have experienced personal and system trauma is expected to impact how I understand traumatic events and interpret the data collected. My experience working with and in schools is also expected to influence how I understand the data collected from school leaders. Because of my positioning as a registered psychologist, my methodological choice of interpretive description means that I expect other clinicians will be able to make sense of my findings. Interpretive description was designed for "clinician researchers" (Thorne, 2016, p. 25). Insights uncovered should be viable and defensible to other clinician readers who are familiar with the education context (Thorne, 2016).

The Research Question

As indicated, traumatic events impact schools (Brown, 2018; Cameron, 2019; (Elbedour et al., 2020; Kolski, et al., 2014; Mutch, 2015a, 215b, 2016, 2018; Tarrant, 2011a, 2011b; Webber & Mascari, 2018). While it is expected there will be a personal toll on school personnel like school leaders, it is possible that some school leaders will also experience what has been called, *posttraumatic growth* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; 2004). Posttraumatic growth is the notion that growth for certain individuals can occur out of adversity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). This study explored in what ways school leaders experienced growth following a traumatic event where they were in a key leadership role.

The research was guided by the following main question. In what ways do school principals (vice/assistant principals and principals) experience posttraumatic growth after a traumatic event in their school community? Additional questions include:

- How do school leaders draw on personal, professional, and school system resources to manage through the first year after a traumatic event in their system?
- How does leading through a traumatic event affect principals' (vice/assistant principals and principals) approach to leadership or their understanding about themselves as a leader?

Description of the Study

This study fits within the qualitative domain of research. It incorporated two phases. The first phase involved the distribution of an online survey including the original version of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) to school leaders. Dissemination of the survey occurred through the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR), an organization that trains school personnel in violence prevention and trauma response and consults with schools in the aftermath of traumatic events. The results of the anonymous inventory are shared in chapter four. Results of the PTGI had some influence on the second phase of my research. The last survey question asked for one-on-one interview participant volunteers.

As described above, phase two participants were accessed through the phase one group. A separate question at the end of the online inventory invited interested participants to volunteer for one-on-one interviews. Inventory responses were be separated from individuals who volunteered to participate in interviews. The inventory and personal contact information were disconnected in the survey.

The overarching research methodology used for this study is interpretive description (Thorne, 2016). *Interpretive description* became popularized in the nursing field by Thorne and colleagues (Thorne, et al., 1997). An interpretive description design is logical but flexible; it is pragmatic and highly contextualized for the identified population under study and the discipline of the researcher. Interpretive description draws out participant experiences for the purpose of developing interpretive conclusions that translate back into applied settings (Kahlke, 2014).

Interpretive description frequently uses semi-structure interviews to access information about participant experiences (Thorne, 2016). For phase two, I interviewed ten school leaders about their experiences following a traumatic event that affected their school (five vice/assistant principals, and five principals). Results from the survey are described in chapter four, school leader stories in chapter five, and analysis around the domain, *personal and professional transformations* in chapter six. Chapter seven provides my analysis about the domain *relationship transformations*, and chapter eight my analysis for the domain *school district impacts on school leaders*. Chapter nine is my discussion chapter, and chapter ten describes the study's implications and conclusions.

Delimitations of the Study

There are a few delimitations for this study. I was initially seeking participants from publicly funded K-12 schools who encountered a traumatic event that affected their school between 1-6 years ago. I did not explore experiences of school leaders from First Nations, private, charter, or parochial schools because the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response provides training and support to mostly provincially and state funded school districts. I did not explore leader experiences in post-secondary contexts. I did not recruit school leaders who spoke a language other than English or were situated outside of North

America. While Covid-19 isolation occurred during the writing of my proposal, I did not intentionally seek school leaders who identified Covid-19 as a core traumatic event. I explain my rational for this later in my dissertation.

The second delimitation is also related to participants who were recruited through the NACTATR. School leaders were from school districts where the TES has been delivered as professional development, possibly resulting in a traumatic response perspective that is model-driven. Upon the recommendation of the NACTATR, school districts who participate in TES training target school principals (including vice and assistant principals) and other school leaders (i.e., coordinators, consultants, superintendents, directors).

I attempted to delimit the time frame around the traumatic event school leaders reflected on especially for the interview (phase two) portion of this study. I did not want school leaders to be embroiled in the response, so screened out volunteers who were still in the response stage. Through the survey, I attempted to delimit how long ago the event occurred. However, I received volunteers for interviews from individuals who led through traumatic events beyond six years past. I spoke with my supervisor and made the decision to include all available volunteers who met the criteria of leading through an event approximately one year past and beyond.

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation to this study was how survey and interview participants interpreted the term “trauma”. The results from my interviews seemed to indicate that individuals interpreted it in a variety of ways. Given Covid-19 occurred during the study, it was not possible to know whether survey participants considered Covid-19 to be the traumatic event (though long-standing) when they completed the survey. Covid-19 was considered “traumatic” for some interview participants. While no participant used Covid-19 as their target event for discussion,

school leaders did refer to it as having a negative impact on schools, if they were still working in education. Further, it was difficult to know if the pandemic had an impact on how school leaders understood the concept of posttraumatic growth.

The second limitation was that I did not have control over the email distribution list from the NACTATR. While they claimed to have 11,000 individuals on their list, with 375 "school administrators", I could not control whether those contacts were intact, or their emails were correct. Also, their list did not desegrated between vice/assistant principals and principals. Further, because of the broad range of professionals in the NACTATR's list, there was the possibility that individuals who were not school administrators may have filled out the survey. While it did not appear that occurred because of how participants completed the first nine questions about demographics, this was a potential limitation to my study.

Definitions Used in the Study

Assumptive World: A phrase used to describe the beliefs and assumptions people have about their world before a traumatic event. These assumptions influence individuals' actions and assist them to make sense of causes, and reasons for happenings that occur. When the assumptive world is challenged after a traumatic event, individuals' perspectives are often destabilized because their new reality is deeply unsettling (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013).

Crisis: From a Traumatic Events Systems of Trauma Response perspective, a crisis and a traumatic event are different. Crises are contained physically and psychologically in the place where they originate. In crises there are expected to be sufficient supports in the school to respond effectively. Crisis situations are not unexpected, and it is predictable who will be impacted (Cameron, 2019).

Critical Periods: Are described in the Traumatic Events Systems Model of Trauma Response (Cameron, 2019). The first critical period is two-weeks after a traumatic event, or, two weeks after the decline of media attention. The second critical period is the month before any major school break. The third critical period involves anniversaries of any past high-profile traumatic events, typically resulting in anniversary reactions. The fourth critical period is when an external high-profile traumatic event occurs and has elements like the traumatic event in the system of focus. The fifth critical period is distinctive to each school or district and is an outcome of that schools' history. Some schools and districts experience multiple tragedies, producing anniversary reactions typically confined to their locale and unique to them (Cameron, 2019). These critical periods are not necessarily linear, but predictably impact functioning of schools. Critical periods necessitate school staff to be alert and attentive to needs that surface during these timeframes.

Disaster Mental Health (DMH): Includes a variety of disasters, including natural calamities and violence (North, 2013). These disasters are largely unexpected, with little ability to sufficiently prepare in advance. They are distressing and overwhelming, including the loss of life, property, or threats to loss of life (Baranowski, 2010).

Posttraumatic Growth: An experience that involves positive change because of the struggle through an extremely challenging life crisis, loss, or tragedy (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004): "Posttraumatic growth occurs concomitantly with the attempts to adapt to highly negative sets of circumstances that can engender high levels of psychological distress" (p. 2).

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: A psychological scale devised by psychologists Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun (1996). This measure was factor analyzed, identifying five factors in the 21-item inventory. The five factors are, an appreciation for life, a changed

sense of priorities, more meaningful relationships, a recognition of new paths or life possibilities, and spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): A psychiatric diagnosis conferred by a mental health professional licensed to do so. PTSD is identified in the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic Standards Manual, V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). PTSD may occur when an individual is exposed to a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, accident, terrorist act, war or combat, rape, or violent personal assault. Symptoms involve some measure of intrusive thoughts, avoiding reminders of the event, negative thoughts or feelings, and arousal or reactive symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While PTSD is not a focus of this research, Disaster Mental Health frequently sites this diagnosis when describing responses to traumatic events (Webber & Mascari, 2018).

Psychological First Aid (PFA-S): A process devised by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and identified as,

> [a] promising practice for disaster behavioral health response and recovery…the intervention strategies are intended for use with children, adolescents, parents and caretakers, families, and adults who are survivors or witnesses exposed to disaster or terrorism. *PFA*…can also be provided to first responders and other disaster relief workers. (Peterson, 2017)

School Leaders: For the purpose of this research, school leaders are vice/assistant principals and principals who have led through a traumatic event.

School District: Refers to school divisions or districts. Apart from participant interview data, the term *district* is used for this research, as it is generally accepted across English speaking continents.

Seismic Event: A distressing event that upsets one's assumptive world (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013)

School System: For this research, the term system refers to a publicly funded school district or division.

Traumatic Event: Involves exposure to an unexpected, distressing, and overwhelming situation that involves loss of life, or threats to loss of life (Norris, Friedman & Watson, 2002). Further, the emotional impact can spread to multiple community systems, and, in high profile situations can be intensified by media (Cameron, 2019). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) also call a traumatic event a seismic event that disrupts an individual's assumptive world.

Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response (TES): A theoretical and applied process to respond to traumatic events that impact systems, developed by J. Kevin Cameron (2019).

Acronyms

NACTATR: North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response

PFA: Psychological First Aid

PFA-S: Psychological First Aid for Schools

PTG: Posttraumatic Growth

PTGI: Posttraumatic Growth Inventory

TES: Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response

The Researcher

I am a registered psychologist in Saskatchewan and have a clinical perspective on traumatic events that impact individuals and school systems. I have training and experience to support individuals who have been impacted by traumatic events. I have also worked in a K-12

school system and have an educational perspective on traumatic events that affect schools and school leaders. My training and experiences may affect how I see the problem as defined, and, how I interact with participants and the data. When working in schools, I observed that schools and school leaders appeared to feel supported immediately after a traumatic event because additional resources were focused on the formal school leaders, and on the school. However, once the supports left the school, it appeared that leaders were less sure about how to respond because of the vacuum that existed when supports departed. They appeared to experience stress, in part because they did not know how to integrate the reality of loss with the day to day functioning of school-life. They questioned themselves frequently, and often appeared unsure about whether they should be asking for additional help. Further, they often appeared depleted emotionally and sometimes physically because of the strain of their role.

My clinical lens has not shielded me from sympathizing with the anguish and feelings of being overwhelmed when schools and school leaders are affected by a traumatic event. I am deeply interested in understanding what resources school leaders depend on during and after a traumatic event, and how posttraumatic growth develops if it indeed does (Calhoun et al., 2014). As a registered psychologist I have been involved in supporting schools that have experienced losses, crises, and traumatic events. I have witnessed school leaders' shoulder multiple demands beyond their usual tasks to assist staff and students who are affected by these events. This study is influenced by these experiences.

Responding to crises and traumatic events in schools spawned my interest to understand more about leaders, and their potential personal growth coming out of the event. I wondered how leaders fared after loss and upheaval because of the emphasis and even prominence of the leader-role immediately after the event (Cameron, 2019).

Current Consideration

During the writing of this dissertation, Covid-19 isolation and some school restrictions were occurring. For many school leaders, the period of school shutdown and reopening was highly stressful.

> …school leaders are caught in the unfavourable position of being the pinch point in the system. They are reliant on guidance about COVID-19 responses, processes, procedures, and protocols from above. These can change, almost overnight, depending on how the virus develops. Simultaneously, school leaders are dealing with fluid and changing staffing situations meaning they are having to do much more with less. The social distancing of staff and students means extra work and extra pressure on those staff who can return to work. Every expectation either from above or below asks more of school leaders professionally and personally. (Harris & Jones, 2020)

It is understandable that some school leaders and districts see Covid-19 as a traumatic event or set of events. My intention was to seek interview participants who administrated through a traumatic event prior to Covid-19, and that the primary event is not Covid-related. For interview participants who were still school leaders, Covid-19, became part of the interview discussions. In some cases, participants connected the pandemic with a school-based traumatic event from the past. Because I took an interpretive approach to this research, Covid-19 was acknowledged as part of principal's current reality and explored when raised in interviews.

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter one introduces the study which involves two phases: a) the distribution of the survey, including the PTGI, and b) interviews that explored school leaders' knowledge and experience as they pertained to traumatic events in their schools during and after the initial response. The background section provides a brief overview of traumatic events. The research question and purpose follow background information. Subsequently, are the description of the study, delimitations, and limitations. The final sections of chapter one include definitions used in the study and the positioning of the researcher.

The focus for chapter two is a literature review summarizing the research on the types of traumatic events (individual and collective), the concept of posttraumatic growth, literature from Disaster Mental Health (DMH) with a school focus, and school leaders.

Chapter three focusses on a methodological framework suited for this study and explains the two phases of this research in more detail. Phase one involved the distribution of the survey, and phase two involved conducting semi-structured interviews with school leaders who volunteered from the phase one participant group. Interpretive description, a generic qualitative method used in clinical fields will be described (Kahlke, 2014) and framed for use as the overarching methodology for this study.

Chapter four provides an analysis of my survey findings. Chapter five includes the ten participant stories that came out of the interviews. Chapter six provides my analysis from the domain *personal and professional transformations* and overviews the themes. Chapter seven explores the themes and analysis from the domain *relationship transformation.* Chapter eight offers the themes and analysis of the domain *school district impacts on school leaders.* Chapter nine is my discussion about my research findings. Chapter ten is an overview of implications from this study and my concluding thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This dissertation explored school leaders' experiences following a traumatic event and examined what elements contributed to posttraumatic growth. Further, it explored how personal, situational, and organizational factors played into school leaders' understanding of their leadership after the event. The research was guided by the following main question. In what ways do school leaders experience posttraumatic growth after a traumatic event in their school community? Further questions included: a) how do leaders draw on personal, professional, and school system resources to manage through the first year after a traumatic event in their system? And b) how does leading through a traumatic event affect school leaders' approach to leadership or their understanding about themselves as a leader?

While growth was a key concept for exploration, some cautions were issued by the authors of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; 2004). Focusing on the possibilities for growth may result in,

> the erroneous conclusion that by trying to understand the positive, investigators are ignoring the negative. They are not. Negative events tend to produce, for most persons, consequences that are negative. But, paradoxically, the data indicate that for many persons the encounter with very negative events can also produce positive psychological change. (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006, p. 4)

While not insensitive to losses and pain associated with traumatic events, growth is considered one of many possible outcomes following a traumatic event that impacts a school community and its leaders, and therefore was deemed a reasonable area to query in this study.

School principal experiences following a traumatic event finds a backdrop in three primary areas of literature. The first is Posttraumatic Growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) which describes the growth outcome some people experience after a crisis, trauma, or adversity. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) do not require a mental health diagnosis for individuals to experience posttraumatic growth. Their use of "trauma" is an identifiable subjective experience after a distressing event. Study in posttraumatic growth is extensive, including investigations with diverse cultures and geographical regions (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; 2013). Investigations point to PTG occurring both in the shorter term (two-weeks to two-months; Paton, 2006) and over the longer term (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Edited books and peer-reviewed journal articles are easily accessible about PTG. While traumatic events can cause mild to severe symptoms in some people, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) also discovered that it can result in growth-oriented development for certain people. Further, they indicated that the process of struggling through the crisis may produce a transformative experience where individuals express some measure of enhanced well-being (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

The second area of literature is disaster mental health, including how it has been applied in school settings (Kataoka et al., 2009; Kolski et al., 2012; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Disaster mental health has been well-studied from an individual psychiatric perspective (North, 2013), community perspective (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010), and schools' perspective (Brymer, et al., 2009). Overall, disaster mental health focuses on immediacy and developing psychological safety with individuals affected by the event (Webber & Mascari, 2018). It addresses the urgent emotional, cognitive, and psychological needs of individuals. Psychological triage is a primary concept in disaster mental health.

The third area of literature is about school leaders who have led through a traumatic event (Brown, 2018; McAdams & Foster, 2008; Tarrant, 2011b). There appear to be fewer studies related to traumatic events and school leaders (Gouwens & Lander, 2008) than there are posttraumatic growth and disaster mental health. As far as I can tell, there are no studies exploring the experiences of school leaders after a traumatic event, from a posttraumatic growth standpoint.

The Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response (TES; Cameron, 2019) has been used in the North American context and frequently mentions the role of school leadership, including the school leaders when discussing practical responses to traumatic events. However, the TES has not, currently, been the subject of academic scrutiny. Mentioning the TES is relevant because my sample was individuals who had some exposure to the model, as I recruited school leaders through the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR), the developer of the TES.

Posttraumatic Growth

Posttraumatic growth appeared to gain its footing in the mid-1990's following researchers' interests in understanding whether positive change could occur after a distressing event. Concurrently, psychological measures were being developed that addressed growth after trauma. These coincided with a movement called positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), where posttraumatic growth seemed to find a field in which to reside (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). While there are several related perspectives on growth, for this research, Calhoun and Tedeschi's posttraumatic growth model will be used as it is considered the dominant model (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014). According to the posttraumatic growth perspective, personal struggle through a significant life-challenge may produce benefits or

growth in five possible areas: 1) relating to others, 2) new possibilities, 3) personal strength, 4) spiritual change, and 5) appreciation of life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1996).

While it was uncertain whether all participants involved in this study experienced the five factors identified in the PTGI, it was expected that some factors, or parts of some would surface. As Patton (2006) noted:

> Tedeschi and Calhoun (2003) define as significant beneficial changes in cognitive and emotional life beyond levels of adaptation, psychological functioning, or life awareness that occur in the aftermath of psychological traumas that challenge previously existing assumptions about self, others, and the future. Its (PTG) appearance on the traumatic stress landscape has significant implications not only for conceptualising traumatic stress, but also for how traumatic experiences are managed. (p. 226)

As mentioned, posttraumatic growth is not intended to gloss over distress, crisis, or loss. Rather, it allows for growth despite tragedy and trauma. Further, individuals may experience growth in areas other than those identified in the research (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

Posttraumatic growth occurs for some when a traumatic or “seismic” event transpires, and an individual’s assumptive beliefs are affected (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Not everyone who encounters a crisis or distressing event experiences growth as described in the posttraumatic growth progression. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) noted that while PTG is not uncommon, it certainly is not something everyone experiences. According to the process illuminated by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013), for posttraumatic growth to occur, one’s assumptive beliefs are either challenged, or provide context for the event, resulting in a cascading effect of responses. In their most recent book, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) provided a flow-chart to illustrate the

process of growth. The flowchart demonstrated a variety of pathways that individuals navigate to ultimately achieve a sense of well-being and adjustment after a seismic event.

Posttraumatic growth has been studied in multiple contexts, with a variety of demographics and in many geographical centers (Steffens & Andrykowski, 2016). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) cautioned that posttraumatic growth may unpack itself uniquely given an individual's culture, gender, perspective, and life experiences. To assist with understanding context, the authors recommend learning about an individual's "primary reference group" (p. 44) when using posttraumatic growth as a framework. Considering an individual's primary reference group highlights some flexibility with the posttraumatic growth construct, and it is useful for understanding and helping to develop growth in individuals after a crisis, trauma, or seismic event.

Cognitive processing and rumination about the event can result in beneficial changes in the understanding of the self and the world, enhance perceived capability to deal with adversity, promote engagement in previously unconsidered or untried activities, and lead survivors to perceive a subjective sense of growth. Paradoxically, these benefits result from loss or suffering (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). For example, personal factors, interpretive factors, information, and decision making, team and interagency operations, and the organizational context are noted as critical during traumatic event responses in emergency work (Paton, 2006).

While school leaders are not trained emergency responders, when a crisis occurs, out of necessity, they become responders even without the job title or experience (Cameron, 2019). When a seismic event occurs, a central PTG concept is that growth happens when individual's schemas "develop through interaction with a traumatic event" (Paton, 2006).

According to Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013), sociocultural influences play a role in the post traumatic growth process. Schools and districts are influenced in unique ways by the effect of sociocultural realities. School leaders are often central figures in traumatic events (Brown, 2018; Tarrant, 2011a). When a traumatic event happens in relation to a school, on-site leadership is required. School leaders often guide, manage, support, encourage and provide timely information when leading through a traumatic event (Tarrant, 2011a). It is expected that a school's history, climate and culture, collective beliefs, and assumptions, in conjunction with personal assumptions and beliefs will influence how school leaders experience PTG following a traumatic event.

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory

Calhoun and Tedeschi's PTG research uncovered five PTG factors: personal strength, relating to others, new possibilities, appreciation of life and spirituality using the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory. From these five factors, three conceptual categories were described: a changed sense of self, a changed sense of relationships with others, and an altered philosophy about life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Tedeschi and Calhoun indicate that experiencing trauma does produce growth for some, at the same time it may result in deep pain (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). These changes do not discount negative reactions that arise with emotional pain and distress.

The PTGI has been determined to have good to excellent test-retest reliability. Further, it does not appear that social desirability is a factor when responding to the PTGI. Finally, self-reports of PTG using the inventory have been corroborated by others who witnessed individuals' responses in life, identifying consistency (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Park & Lechner, 2006). While the PTGI is considered reliable and valid, there remains ongoing research interest about its

applicability across cultures, with diverse demographics and ages. Longitudinal studies are in development. Park and Lechner (2006) indicated that prospective studies would assist with understanding the potential change that occurs coming out of a traumatic event. However, given that most traumatic events are unpredictable, prospective studies are difficult to develop (Smith & Cook, 2004).

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been used when exploring PTG. Park and Lechner (2006), described two different ways qualitative investigations occurred. The first was to generally explore what kinds of changes happened after the specified traumatic event, often uncovering growth experiences. The second was to specifically question what positive growth or benefits had occurred following the event.

The posttraumatic growth inventory has enjoyed several iterations and developments over time (Blackie et al., 2017; Steffens & Andrykowski, 2016), and has been used with a variety of populations (Rao, 2006; Ogińska-Bulik & Kobylarczyk, 2015). An ongoing question about assessing for posttraumatic growth is whether PTG is a unitary construct or a multidimensional one (Park & Lechner, 2006). Smith and Cook (2004) looked at whether reports of PTG were positively biased. Their conclusion was that the PTGI may underestimate growth as individuals may be wary of attaching growth to a traumatic experience.

Summary of Posttraumatic Growth

PTG indicates that some people experience growth in at least one of five areas after they have encountered a seismic event. PTG is the psychological change, or transformation that individuals experience after the event. The strength of PTG is that it fosters the possibility of hope after disappointment, tragedy, or loss. When PTG happens, meaning reconstruction occurs and losses tend to be seen in a new light (Neimeyer, 2006). Janoff-Bullman (2006) noted that

growth is a surprising and intriguing reality in the face of trauma. Growth highlights how humans adapt and cope despite pain and suffering, which warrants onoging investigation. PTG speaks about the other side of loss and boasts over three-hundred studies using the PTGI (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

The weaknesses of PTG are that individuals who have suffered may feel as though their suffering is being minimized, and that PTG is a strategy to superficially gloss over the event with positive thinking (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Further, while the PTGI has been used with reportedly good reliability and validity, questions about measurement related to the term PTG continue. Part of the measurement issue is that the PTGI allows for respondents to determine the central event for completing the measure. This event might be stressful, upsetting, or traumatic in the sense that an individual may have met criteria for a DSM-V diagnosis (Christiansen, et al., 2016). It is fair to say that while the concept of PTG has been met with support and interest from those in the positive psychology community (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013), there remain questions and controversies as the inventory and construct mature.

Disaster Mental Health

Disaster mental health is the study of how people function from a mental health standpoint after disasters. Baranowski and Gentry (2010) provided a comprehensive list of key concepts from disaster mental health. First, those who witness a disaster are not left untouched by the event. Second, there is both individual and collective trauma when disasters occur. Third, most people come together and function adequately after the disaster, although typically their effectiveness is lessened. Fourth, grief reactions are a typical response after a calamitous occurrence. Fifth, survivors often struggle emotionally because of the difficulties (i.e., loss of property, destruction in the community) directly related to the disaster itself. Finally, disaster

mental health concentrates on community-focused, practical support immediately after the event. Individuals at highest risk for psychological concerns are triaged and supported by mental health professionals.Survivors frequently resist mental health support unless mental health workers are actively interested and demonstrate concern. Traditional mental health models are deemed less effective in disaster settings. For individuals and their communities to recover, adaptive support systems are necessary (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010).

Baranowski and Gentry (2010) indicated that there are two types of disaster-related trauma. The first is individual, where people are overwhelmed with the destructive power of the event, and where grief and stress reactions are personally experienced. The second is collective trauma, where the ties that unite individuals are impacted, and at times, leave relationships fractured, destroying networks in the community. Disaster can disrupt almost every area of functioning in a community. For responders, it is important to facilitate community adhesion and reconnection as it is one of the most effective means of adjusting after disasters, trauma, and loss.

Individual Trauma

Within disaster mental health, discourse about individual trauma reactions is frequent (North & Pfefferbaum, 2013). Meeting criteria for a mental health disorder is a factor in how victims are triaged after a traumatic event. Diagnostic systems determine the severity, frequency and intensity of pathological symptoms that occur for some individuals after they experience a single traumatic event, and at times multiple traumatic events (Kolski, et al., 2012). Diagnostic systems have utility in managed care environments where resources and supports are limited. The rationale for including a diagnostic clarification about trauma-related disorders is because the literature about traumatic events, particularly disaster mental health often refers to strategies

and treatment used to provide tiered responses to survivors. Attending to serious injuries and those meeting criteria for mental health diagnoses are identified as priorities following an event (North & Pfefferbaum, 2013).

The American Psychiatric Association (2013) explained that trauma was an unpredictable occurrence that involved actual or threatened loss of life, serious injury, sexual violence to self, family or close friends, or repeated exposure. Symptoms included re-experiencing the event, avoidance, negative cognitions and mood, and arousal.

Traumatic events across the globe are not uncommon (Blanco, 2011; Norris, Friedman, Watson, Bryne, et al., 2002), and are shockingly unpredictable. Traumatic events such as natural disasters, accidents causing mass casualties, and violence are deeply impactful occurrences (Norris, Friedman, & Watson, 2002). These events tend to be sudden, leaving people in various states of physical harm, shock, fear, distress or diagnosed trauma conditions (Boals, 2018). Baranoski and Gentry (2010) discussed that trauma is a normal response to abnormal and highly distressing events. At the same time, they caution that not everyone caught in an unpredictable and highly distressing event will experience a trauma related diagnosis. However, grief responses are expected to occur, and these are a normal part of loss.

Medical and mental health supports after a disaster are often focused solely on individuals (Hoff, et al., 2009; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Injuries and acute distress are obvious and need to be tended to as soon as possible. However, more is being understood about collective trauma and the need to support communities into help individuals heal (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010; Cameron, 2019). Psychological First Aid is frequently used to meet individual needs immediately after a disaster or event. It has also been used in places where collective trauma occurs, such as schools (Brymer, et al., 2009).

Psychological First Aid. Psychological First Aid (PFA) is distinctly different from psychotherapy. PFA is not designed to facilitate change in an individual like psychotherapy**.** It is intended to normalise responses, assist with an adaptive response to the disaster, help individuals return to normal functioning, enlist self-help, neighbor-help, and self-efficacy in recovery. It seeks to provide psychoeducation around unexpected losses, provide practical coping skills and offer a supportive presence in the immediate aftermath (Webber & Mascari, 2018).

PFA was developed to alleviate the individual impact of acute stress and trauma as well as aid those in crisis, so they can cope more effectively with the adverse event. Webber and Mascari (2018) note that most individuals exposed to a disaster require immediate assistance. Thus, PFA should be considered an urgent response to those in need. Rao (2016) indicated that PFA had the potential to reduce psychiatric conditions and is now considered a central intervention strategy immediately following a disaster. Disaster mental health takes a triage approach to responding to disaster and frequently cites PFA as a best practice intervention immediately after a disaster (Snider, et al., 2011).

Psychological First Aid in Schools (PFA-S; Brymer et. al., 2009) has been described as a set of specific skills that trained supports provide following a school disaster or traumatic event. With PFA support, most students and school staff receive what they need and can return to a semblance of normalcy. Key features or core actions in PFA-S are a) contact and engagement; b) safety and comfort; c) stabilization (if needed); d) information gathering—current needs and concerns; e) practical assistance; f) connection with social supports; g) information on coping; and h) linkage with collaborative services (Webber & Mascari, p. 218). If individuals appear to require more assistance than PFA can offer, core action seven allows for disaster mental health

trained counsellors specialized in assessment and psychological intervention to become involved (Brymer, et.al., 2009).

Psychological first aid is considered a promising practice for disaster response and recovery (Peterson, 2017). Using PFA means that trained volunteers and professionals assess the psychological responses of victims, and provide targeted resources based at the level of assessed need. Fox et al. (2012) indicated that PFA should be categorized as an evidence-informed approach rather than an evidence-based approach; nevertheless, it is used frequently as part of a disaster response.

While PFA has strong advocacy in the field of disaster mental health, it is not without criticism. McCabe et al. (2014) identified a dearth of PFA models, and a lack of consensus on core competencies, intervention principles and training programs. Given the variety of PFA models available to choose from, McCabe et al. (2014) offered a logic model to lay supports and public health groups that is considered a promising framework based on a "consensus derived, empirically supported, competency-based training model" (p. 621). Because of the variety of content and training, current PFA models are not easily compared nor are their outcomes comparable.

Collective Trauma

Collective trauma (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010) can have a profound impact on communities, including school communities when a disastrous event occurs. Frequently, routines, patterns, and habits of the community are disrupted; sometimes permanently. Often, social ties are severed, resulting in compromised relationships with typical supports unavailable. While most mental health clinicians are trained in intervening with individuals, it has been noted that individuals are less likely to heal if their communities remain in tatters following a disaster.

Communities often attempt to come together immediately after a disaster, but their effectiveness is diminished because of the numerous stressors inherent in recovering from trauma (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010).

In collective trauma the need for resources outside the immediate community is required (Cameron, 2019). According to Rao (2006), when a disaster occurs, having a centralized administrative arm to manage responses is essential. While well-meaning groups and organizations are prone to attend ground zero after a traumatic event, without a coordinated approach to responding, chaos often ensues. Developing administrative clarity and clearly identifying roles and responsibilities results in responses being more coordinated and effectively addressing the needs of those with the highest needs first.

While the events will vary, the frequency and intensity of events affecting communities is noted by Norris, Friedman, Watson, and Byrne, et al. (2002):

> On average, a disaster occurs somewhere in the world each day. It may be a flood, hurricane, or earthquake, a nuclear, industrial or transportation accident, a shooting spree or peacetime terrorist attack. What these various events share in common is their potential to affect many persons simultaneously and to engender an array of stressors, including the threat to one's own life and physical integrity, exposure to the dead and dying, bereavement, profound loss, social and community disruption, and ongoing hardship. As a result of both the high prevalence and high stressfulness of disasters, the question of whether they impact mental health has been of interest for decades. (p. 207)

Events that bear a collective toll remind us that individuals are parts of communities. For individuals to find their healing, communities must also be restored.

Summary of Disaster Mental Health

A disaster mental health perspective has numerous strengths. It has been explained and applied clinically, studied both quantitatively (Webber & Mascari, 2018; Norris, Friedman, Watson, et al., 2002) and qualitatively (Boals, 2018). It identifies both individual (North & Pfefferbaum, 2013) and collective impacts from a disaster (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010). It has been explored from several discipline frameworks, including psychiatry (North et al., 2011), education (Kataoka et al., 2009; Lai et al., 2016; Osofsky et al., 2009) and psychology (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010; Nadeem et al., 2011). At its core, disaster mental health is practical, seeking to assess and address needs from a priority standpoint (whose needs are most extreme first), coordinating the resources available and efficiently targeting those resources to meet the identified needs.

One of the biggest practical challenges when implementing a disaster mental health approach is having an already designed infrastructure to guide the response (Kolski, et al., 2014; Rao, 2006; Webber & Mascari, 2018). In addition, accessing trained professionals and volunteers to respond in a coordinated fashion following a traumatic event can be difficult. Disaster mental health is focused primarily on the immediate period following a traumatic event. While literature often identifies the need for recovery after a disaster or traumatic event, disaster mental health is focused on the urgent. This means that sometimes, individuals and communities are left without what they need after the event has passed and must seek out necessary resources to recover after responders have departed (Kolski, et al., 2014).

Disaster Mental Health in Schools

Disaster mental health in schools is related to the disaster mental health field, and, in the United States, was combined with emergency management plans recommended by the Federal

Emergency Management Agency (FEMA; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Tragically schools have been the focus of intended violence (Brown, 2018; Lucas & Lamphere, 2020), as well as disasters that have affected school buildings, students, and communities (Gouwens & Lander, 2008; Mutch, 2018). Because of traumatic events that have impacted schools, strategies have been developed to assist schools manage in the wake of a disaster.

For my research, a traumatic event that impacts schools: a) is not contained psychologically in the location where it occurred but affects multiple systems (families, schools and communities); b) is where the school does not have the school or system-based resources necessary to respond; c) has such a level of impact that it is not possible to predict who will be affected psychologically; and, d) is unexpected and destructive (Cameron, 2019). Traumatic events involve actual or threatened loss of life, serious injury, or repeated exposure to trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Three models will be overviewed in some detail, as they pertain specifically to schools, and school leaders may have been exposed to one or more models.

Promising trauma response models for schools include the: Children's Disaster Mental Health Concept of Operations (CONOPS) (Schreiber et al. 2014), the Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response (TES) (Cameron, 2019), and the Interactive Systems Framework (ISF) for School Mental Health (SMH) (Taylor et al, 2012). These models have some theoretical backing and professional attention focussed on their use. The approaches are available alternatives to begin to address trauma response in schools and inform the policy analysis process.

The CONOPS. The CONOPS is a children's disaster mental health strategy that is triage-driven and designed to offer smooth preparedness, response, and recovery (Schreiber, Shields, et al., 2014). It is considered to hold promise to assist with response and recovery. Identified goals include using the PsySTART triage system, developing a child-focused incident action plan (IAP), and creating a continuum of risk stepped-care interventions. The PsySTART system (Schreiber, Yin, et al. 2014) was utilized following Superstorm Sandy as a mental health triage tool to determine individuals most at risk for PTSD.

The positive aspects of the CONOPS included the PsySTART system, which has been used effectively in disasters. Further, it is a coordinated and flexible response, able to triage individuals with mental health concerns ranging from a mild to severe (Schreiber, Shields, et al., 2014). It incorporates evidence-based practices in its stepped care approach. The downside is that the CONOPS is decidedly hierarchical with operations flowing from health care. While schools may be included in its scope, the model does not identify schools as being primary sources for collaboration or intervention.

Webber and Mascari (2018) propose an incident command structure for creating school disaster preparedness plans that is in line with the CONOPS. With this approach there is a clear reporting structure, processes and practices that fall in line with FEMA. This structure can respond to multiple types of school crises, disasters, or traumatic events. Responses can be scalable, with an all-hazards approach based on risk, threat, and vulnerability assessments for specific schools, potential crises, and pertinent factors. The school incident command structure advocates the use of Psychological First Aid to assist those involved in a traumatic incident return to normal as quickly as possible.

The Traumatic Events System (TES) Model of Crisis and Trauma Response.

The TES was developed following the W.R. Myers fatal school-shooting in Taber, AB, Canada, April 28, 1999. At that time, Mr. Kevin Cameron was the lead responder for the school-based team. Shortly after the shooting, Mr. Cameron was seconded to the Alberta government to investigate preventative measures for school-based violence. Out of his study and consultations, Mr. Cameron developed two models which work interchangeably to address needs in systems that have encountered significant disruption. The first is Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA), which is an evaluative team-based process used to determine the veracity of threats and respond effectively to mitigate such (Cameron, 2018). The second is the Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response (TES) which has the goal of helping systems (mostly schools and districts) recover after high-profile traumatic events (Cameron, 2019). It has been used in Canada following traumatic events. Rather than having an individual focus, the TES considers trauma from a collective-impact perspective (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010).

After a school shooting in La Loche, SK, Canada, Cameron provided on-site assistance and was quoted, "even those not directly affected by the tragedy can be traumatized (sic)…especially during a high-profile trauma, people's personal histories of grief, loss, and trauma from the past have a way of converging as the current loss feels like the reliving of the past" (Charlton & Deibert, 2016, para. 17). After five youth suicides in North Battleford, SK, Canada, the Living Sky School Division, asked for support. They requested, "Kevin Cameron…develop a trauma protocol, similar to the work he did in La Loche, Sask" (Baxter, 2018, para. 4). The TES has been utilized to provide systems (school, district, and some community) interventions following traumatic events with young people.

Like many models, the TES is evolving owing to its application in the field (Cameron, personal communication, 2019). It is largely based on a review of pertinent literature, and numerous consultations with schools and communities following traumatic events in North America. It is out of these experiences that Mr. Cameron theorized five critical periods following an event.

The current iteration of the TES serves as a reasonable framework to understand how organizational systems may respond to high-level-stressors like traumatic events. While the TES initially focused on events that impacted schools, the latest edition of the manual (Cameron, 2019) considers the impacts on communities as well. The TES supports the use of Psychological First Aid for Schools (Brymer, et al., 2006) during the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event, and into the first critical period if required.

The TES has several positive aspects. It considers how systems, rather than individuals alone respond to traumatic events. It assesses open and closed systems and queries how open and closed leaders' interface with that system. The TES has been utilized in Canada, and training has occurred in many provinces (https://www.nactatr.com/training.html). It was designed specifically for use in schools following traumatic events. TES training is a full two-days, and the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR) provides support for schools to ensure effective use of the model (https://www.nactatr.com/tes.html; see also Nadeem, et al., 2013). A downside is that the manual is predominantly conceptual and theoretical (Cameron, 2019). Further, the TES does not appear to have been used after natural disasters; thus, its effectiveness with disasters is unclear. Furthermore, the TES seems to assume that counsellors and other responders are already skilled in Evidence Based Practices (EBP) after a

traumatic event and can adjust for the populations they serve (Ngo et al. 2008). Finally, there are limitations with consensus-derived models despite support from the field (McCabe et al., 2014).

The ISF. Another child and youth focussed model identified as having the potential for schools' post-disaster is the Interactive Systems Framework (ISF) for school mental health services (Taylor et al., 2012). This model indicated preliminary evidence in building school mental health capacity in one State in the United States. Like the TES, it is mostly conceptual, yet the authors proposed that the ISF may offer assistance to link the divide between practice and research through multisystem capacity development. An advantage of ISF was that it is situated within the school context. Its design has potential for connecting and building capacity between numerous systems that serve children. A down-side of the ISF is that it is somewhat theoretical and has not been applied broadly.

Promising Models Discussion

There are several similarities and some differences between the models overviewed above. As with TES (Cameron, 2019), Taylor et al. (2012) promoted collaboration with key stakeholders to develop a systematic response after a disaster. School leadership including school leaders were key in systematic responding (Cameron, 2019). Interagency cooperation was considered vital to provide effective interventions for children. Partnership and cooperation allowed students to be appropriately triaged and connected with agencies and institutions that can best meet their needs in the short and longer term. Without collaboration, it may be challenging to learn if needs were met and to what degree; thus, leaving already vulnerable students in precarious and unsupported situations.

In contrast to the ISF, the TES manual (Cameron, 2019) did not address EBP's in responding to traumatic events. As indicated, the TES appeared to assume that schools were

already adept and prepared to respond after students were suitably triaged following a traumatic event. In the ISF, Taylor et al. (2012), identified that counselling staff needed to be trained in trauma-focused EBP's for the model to be useful following a disaster.

Unlike the TES (Cameron, 2018) and ISF (Taylor et al., 2012), the CONOPS model is solidly placed in the realm of emergency medical care for children. While the service integration appears strong within the context of medicine, the CONOPS did not clearly promote inter-agency collaboration to support children and youth across the continuum, as do TES (Cameron, 2018) and ISF (Taylor et al., 2012). Thus, schools may become disconnected from the more significant responses if the CONOPS is utilized in a community setting.

As alternatives for schools, the above models require consideration about suitability and resource capacity in communities. Schreiber, Shields, et al. (2014) stated, that there was enough promising evidence that when EBP’s are used with children immediately following a disaster, these protocols can reduce or even prevent PTSD. Thus, it is incumbent upon school districts to consider how they might insert EBT protocols into their contexts to address a variety of concerns, including the reduction of mental health symptoms in students following a traumatic event.

School Leaders

In the following section, I overview the policy context for school leaders, current leadership competency frameworks, and the labor context for school leaders. I then describe the literature on the work of school leaders and discuss the emotional demands that leaders face. Finally, I discuss the challenges that school leaders encounter in the complex world of school leadership.

Literature on the Work of School Leaders

Bush (2010) stated that leadership is highly practical. School leaders manage schools in practical ways. They supervise staff, provide instructional or, curriculum guidance, and oversee fiscal management in their schools. However, according to Young et al., (2014), a managerial role does not adequately describe the complexities that exist in being a principal in public education in Canada. School leaders engage in a wide variety of activities that extend beyond simple school management. For example, according to Pollock et al. (2019) school leaders investigated harassment in their schools when evidence of bullying was present and helped with the resolution of these offences. They were responsible for monitoring and eventually submitting enrollment numbers which impacted staffing allotments. They modelled instructional leadership for teachers, managed the school from an organizational standpoint, and contributed to professional development. School leaders oversaw and delegated vice principal work, which, at times filled the gaps that school leaders were not able to accomplish operationally, or instructionally (Lim & Pollock, 2019).

Tasks of school leaders necessarily depend on the context of the school and community (Mills & Neische, 2014). For school districts, ministries, or departments of education that have developed leadership frameworks or structures for school leaders, tasks should fall solidly in line with the dimensions, capacities, or practices of school leaders (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Referring to Bush (2010) who indicated that leadership was practical in nature, school leaders respond to the needs of students and teachers in front of them, all while attempting to follow the vision and mission of their districts.

School leaders are charged with a variety of objectives to develop a viable school community. While there are practical tasks that must be undertaken, in this section I will describe theoretical objectives that school leaders seek to attain to set the climate and culture of

the school (Sun & Leithwood, 2015). In the next section, I will discuss some of the tasks that school leaders undertake and finally will overview how the complexity of the role may result in emotional demands that have an impact on principal functioning and may lead to burnout or a desire to resign from principalships (Fernett, 2011; Skaalvik, 2020).

Active leadership, direct instruction, visibility, and creating a positive climate are all touted as elements of strong leadership in school leaders. However, Sun and Leithwood (2015) also indicated that a variety of leadership styles and strategies are required depending on the location, student and community demographics, size, teacher composition, philosophy (i.e., shared leadership) amongst other elements. The authors also highlighted that part of a school leader's capacity depends on external circumstances that are sometimes beyond a principal's control. This may include budgetary restrictions, staff, and teacher allocations, and in the case of this study, crises that may result in a major disruption in the school community and the expected role of a principal (Young et al., 2014).

Leithwood and Sun (2012) indicated that there were only a few "leadership behaviours or practices" that increased the commitment and effort of teachers and other school staff toward the shared goals set for the school. Leaders who engaged in behaviours that supported these objectives appeared to have teachers who felt more empowered, experienced teacher-efficacy, and enhanced citizenship behavior that positively affected the school climate and the learning agenda (Sun & Leithwood, 2015).

Direction setting, shared visioning, and meaning about the work in schools, staff goal consensus, and fostering optimism about the future were key objectives for Sun and Leithwood's (2015) meta-analysis review on the successful principal. However, they indicated that competent school-based leadership was an interaction between transformational qualities and behaviours in

the principal *and* competent instructional leadership. While the climate and culture of schools were considered vital for academic successes to occur, developing learners academically was also indicated as essential in the principal role.

Mills and Niesche (2013) described a school principal's experience leading in a vulnerable, impoverished community. The objectives this principal felt obliged to meet were primarily from a social justice lens because of the enormous needs in the community. At times, this necessitated veering from the path of the state leadership guidelines, functioning more intuitively and depending on emotional intelligence rather than pure rationality. This case study identified the importance of context and situational elements that impacted how a school principal enacted successful school leadership and direction setting in their role.

The importance of context was also highlighted in a case study by Jutras et, al. (2020) where the authors described the experience of a teaching principal in a small school in a Canadian prairie province. This case demonstrated the numerous changes the principal faced because of reduced enrollment, staff, and administrative time. The fact that the principal had responsibilities as both teacher and school leader increased the demands as changes occurred in the school. This case example highlighted how for some school leaders work intensification is a significant barrier to wellness. The authors used the words, *overwhelmed*, and *exhausted* to describe how the teaching principal experienced her role.

The Policy Context for the Work of School Leaders

While my survey was sent out to individuals on the NACTATR email distribution list who were Canadians and Americans, I only had Canadians volunteer for my interviews. I am not certain whether any Americans completed the survey as I did not ask specifically about what

country they resided in. Because the survey was sent to individuals from both Canada and the United States, I have provided some policy context from both countries.

Provinces in Canada are responsible for education. Canada does not have a federal ministry or department of education. In Saskatchewan, the *Education Act* (1995) has specific duties outlined for school leaders. School leaders are ultimately responsible for the oversight and running of individual schools (Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation, 2015). Therefore, they become key personnel when a traumatic event or disaster impacts a school directly. Typically, they are a part of a larger group of leaders responding in the aftermath of a traumatic event (Cameron, 2019). However, school leaders are the *known entity* in the school community (Mills & Niesche, 2014), making their involvement in trauma response leadership, imperative.

In the United States of America, a Federal Department of Education exists. The department's objectives are to: a) establish policies on federal financial funding for education; b) distribute and manage the money; c) collect data on American schools and circulate research; d) focus attention on educational issues; and e) ban discrimination and safeguard access to education for all (Overview and Mission Statement | U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Within the framework of these objectives, school leaders lead within the context of their individual schools. U.S. school leaders are ultimately responsible for every aspect of schooling including managerial, organizational, and instructional elements (Nielsen & Lavigne, 2020).

There has been a movement of education reform in the U.S., and principal accountabilities have been elevated resulting in mandatory evaluations for school leaders. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) and commensurate Federal funding is tied in part, to principal effectiveness. Currently, however, principal evaluation measures are not uniform across the United States. Principal accountabilities in both Canada (Lim & Pollock, 2019) and the

United States (Nielsen & Lavigne, 2020) are vast, some being articulated in statutes and others being measured for the purpose of determining role effectiveness (Riveros, et al., 2016).

Leadership Competency Frameworks

According to Riveros and Wei (2019), there has been a move to develop a global understanding about school leadership competencies as part of education reform. School leaders are identified as pivotal characters in the reform process as they oversee student achievement and influence the effectiveness of schools. Riveros et al. (n.d.), developed the Global Observatory of Leadership Standards (GOLS) which provides "researchers, practitioners and policy makers a consolidated source of policy documents and research literature on leadership standards and competency frameworks" (About Us). The GOLS offers a repository of school leadership standards and research that spans the globe.

In Alberta, Canada, the province's Commission on Learning (Alberta Education, 2003) developed ninety-five recommendations for enhanced academic outcomes for students. One of those recommendations indicated the requirement of designing a quality of practice standards and to ascertain the knowledge, skills, and traits necessary for school leaders. From that single recommendation, seven leadership dimensions were developed. These included: a) "fostering effective relationships"; b) "embodying visionary leadership"; c) "leading a learning community"; d) "providing instructional leadership"; e) "developing and facilitating leadership"; f) "managing school operations and resources"; and g) "understanding and responding to the larger societal context" (pp. 4-6). Within these dimensions, characteristics and tasks were outlined for Alberta school leaders. Later, Alberta devised leadership quality standards for school leaders and other leaders within school districts. The leaders identified included those with teaching certificates who worked from a centralized school district space. The school leaders and

other leaders identified in this document did not include the superintendent or chief deputy superintendent. There were nine competencies outlined. The quality standards included leadership that: models effective relationships with the community, school staff and students, promotes professional development that is reflective and career-long, elevates collaborative and visionary leadership that is engaged and focussed on the intellectual and emotional wellbeing of students, is inclusive, facilitating First Nations, Metis and Inuit knowledge, is instructional, builds leadership capacity and is able to actively respond to the social and political context schools are situated in (Alberta Education, n.d.; Alberta Education, 2009).

In Ontario, Canada, the Ministry of Education outlined five key capacities for school leaders (Ontario Leadership Strategy, 2012-2013). The first was, “setting goals” that lead to enhanced teaching and learning. The second was, “aligning resources with priorities”. The third was “promoting collaborative learning cultures”. The fourth was “using data”, and the fifth was, “engaging in courageous conversations” (p. 1). Within each capacity, there were processes and practices outlined that reportedly assist with the embodiment of these capacities, which are intended to develop increased student achievement, reduce gaps in achievement, and increase the public’s confidence in public education (Ontario Leadership Strategy, 2012-2013).

The Ontario Leadership Framework (The Institute for Education Leadership, 2015) was first introduced in 2006. However, it was revised based on educational research, and the evolving practice of school leaders. The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) is considered a “leadership roadmap” (p. 3). It was designed to help Ontario school administrators understand the qualities of an effective school leader, identify the qualities of an effective organization, and develop a consistent language about leadership. The framework included key aspects such as “school-level

leadership", "K-12 school effectiveness framework", "system-level leadership", and "district effectiveness framework" (p. 7).

Criticisms of the standards of practice imperative for school leaders exist (English, 2006; 2012). Riveros et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study about how the Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) was expressed in practice by Ontario school leaders. They noted two themes in their analysis. The first was that the leadership standards were used largely to supervise, govern, and assess school administrators, while the OLF was initially developed to provide direction and assistance for school leaders in their roles. The second theme was that the OLF was not depended on by school leaders to guide their daily work. Although it was regarded as comprehensive in nature by school leaders, it was not deemed detailed enough to assist them in the tasks they engaged in every day. Further, the OLF appeared to run counter to some of the practice's school leaders prioritized, such as working to address social inequities affecting the lives of students and communities.

In 2015, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders were developed by the U.S.A. National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA). The document explained the reason the standards were developed, which, was in part, due to the changing landscape of education, the students, communities, and family's that schools serve. Further, the standards defined outcomes that leaders must enact for student success in their unique contexts and communities. The document overviewed ten standards, including: a) "mission, vision and core values" (p. 9); b) "ethics and professional norms" (p. 10); c) "equity and cultural responsiveness" (p. 11); d) "curriculum, instruction, and assessment" (p. 12); e) "community of care and support for students" (p. 13); f) "professional capacity of school personnel" (p. 14); g) "professional community for teachers and staff" (p. 16); h) "meaningful engagement of families and

community" (p. 16); i) "operations and management"; and, j) "school improvement" (NPBEA, 2015). While these standards appear encompassing, it is difficult to imagine that one person would be able to embody all these standards in a fulsome and seamless manner.

The Labour Context for School Leaders

School leaders in this study had significantly different contexts for leadership depending on whether they were included as members of the teachers bargaining unit (in scope), members of a principals unionized bargaining units, or were non-unionized. For the most part, the school leaders in phase two of this study were part of teachers' unions (Alberta, Saskatchewan, and New Brunswick). However, the phase two interview participant who was formerly a principal in Ontario would not have been part of a teacher's union.

School leaders in Saskatchewan, Canada, are teaching professionals and part of the Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation. (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2015). School leaders in Alberta are part of the Alberta Teacher's Association (https://www.teachers.ab.ca/Public%20Education/CollectiveAgreements/Pages/Almadina-School-Society-(2019-2022).aspx). In New Brunswick, vice/assistant principals and principals are also in scope of the New Brunswick Teacher's Federation (https://nbtffenb.ca/useful-information-for-school-administrators-september-3-2020/). Principals in Ontario are not unionized, but may choose to become a part of the Ontario Principals' Council, the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario, or, L'Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO) (http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teacher/director.html).

Interview participants who were in-scope employees of the school district, had supervisory responsibilities over teachers, but ultimate disciplinary authority rested with the school districts. School leaders and teachers were in-effect peers, even though school leaders had

an all-inclusive responsibility for all that happened schools, resulting in a far greater responsibility than teachers (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2015). The same situation was true in Alberta and New Brunswick.

School leaders in the United States are not uniformly unionized. According to a report in September of 2019, there were approximately 15,500 principal, and 5,000 retired members of The American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA) compared to approximately 90,000 total principals in the United States. Small, local unions also exist in certain jurisdictions. Most school leaders are involved in associations that offer professional learning and support policies that impact school leaders, but only a portion were actively involved in collective bargaining (Superville, 2019). According to the AFSA, they are "the exclusive national labor union for administrators, professionals and supervisors advocating for excellence and equity in all of our schools, workplaces and communities" (American Federation of School Administrators, About Us). At the current time there is a move to solicit more American principals to the AFSA.

Emotional Demands of School Leaders

Both the capabilities and the tasks of school leaders in North America are immense. It is not surprising then, that emotional demands that precede burnout or a desire to leave the profession, occur for some (Fernett, 2010; Skaalvik, 2020). It is expected that when school leaders lead through traumatic events, the complexity and scope of necessary capabilities and tasks expand.

Emotional demands (Maxwell & Riley, 2016) and emotion work (Fein & Isaacson, 2009) are terms used to describe the emotional expenditure that school leaders extend in their daily work. According to Maxwell and Riley (2016), when 1320 principals were compared with the general population, they indicated higher scores on emotional demands in their work and

concerning burnout. The authors indicated that in the last twenty years, the accountabilities for school leaders have increased, and the demands of the role have done so as well. If this is the relative norm for school leaders, adding a traumatic event that significantly impacts the school and community is expected to elevate demands.

Slaalvik (2020) found that time pressure and parents who were demanding produced emotional exhaustion and the desire to leave the profession for certain principals. Principal tasks were identified as complex and taxing. While these school leaders were formally responsible for all things that occur inside the school, it appeared that it was the principal's perception of demands that contributed to emotional exhaustion. Perception also appeared to play a role in certain principals who experienced their responsibilities as stimulating and positively challenging. For those principals who experienced the pressures of school leadership as stimulating, higher job satisfaction and lower emotional exhaustion were evident.

Slaalvik (2020) cited the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model which is a theoretical model that may be applied to a variety of occupations. This model has been utilized to evaluate burnout and employee engagement in several sectors, including those within the human services, such as education (Bakker, et al., 2014). Simply put, job demands that may lead a professional to emotional exhaustion and burnout include, role ambiguity, conflict and stress, stressful events, and workload pressures. Sonnetag (2017) indicated that professionals who were found to be in a state of burnout struggled with executive functioning, attention, and memory. Further, these individuals were prone to address their daily tasks in a less productive way than those who were engaged at work. At times, they showed evidence of self-sabotaging behaviour, creating more mistakes in their role, as well as having more interpersonal conflicts. Job resources that lead to employee engagement included organizational elements that enhanced the physical,

psychological, and social aspects of the job. Role clarity, applicable professional learning and development, supervisory coaching, and feedback, some level of autonomy, as well as high-quality relationships within the organization tended to buttress employee engagement (Slaalvik, 2020).

When school leaders experience emotional exhaustion and burnout in their roles and encounter a traumatic event, they will likely struggle to embody instructional leadership and transformational qualities, let alone effectively tackle the practical tasks that face them. According to Bakker et al., (2014), burnout results in poorer performance for professionals. Given there is some evidence that some school leaders face higher degrees of burnout than the general population, considering their state before a traumatic event in their school is reasonable (Maxwell & Riley, 2016). It is also reasonable to consider that some school leaders may find their role both stimulating and positively challenging before a traumatic event (Bakker, 2014; Slaalvik, 2020). It is expected that the states of emotional exhaustion, burnout, or work engagement will affect how school leaders respond after a traumatic event, and how they report their experiences.

Lim and Pollock (2019) indicated that the role of school principals has significantly intensified. With the capacity to be connected by email, and respond to mobile phone and text messages, workdays have lengthened substantially. “A consistent finding is the increased workload due to emphasis on instructional leadership, proliferation in and complexity of operational tasks, and the growing challenge to meet students’ social, emotional, and academic needs” (p. 81). They noted a study where secondary principals in Ontario Canada worked 58.7 hours a week on average and cited concerns about principal personal wellness given the demands. Pollack, et al. (2019) described that school principals often face emotional exhaustion,

challenges with personal wellbeing and difficulties with work-life balance owing to the intensification of their roles.

School Leaders and Critical Incidents

Over time, principals have had to expand their skill set to address concerns that may have been historically unimaginable. Webber and Mascari (2018) indicated that K-12 schools are vulnerable locations where traumatic events can have grave impact. They indicated that school planning for crisis needed to be at the forefront of work in schools. School violence, threats of violence, natural and man-made disasters, and emergencies all account for situations where principals require additional managerial, communication, decision making and intervention skills (Brown, 2018; Mutch, 2016; Tarrant, 2011a; Tarrant, 2014; Webber & Mascari, 2018).

School leadership and crises have been explored in the literature. Case studies (Brown, 2018; Tarrant 2011a; 2011b), dissertations, (Adams, 2016; Brown, 2015) a collective case study (Fein & Isaacson, 2009), a mixed-methods study (Tippler, et al., 2018), and, in the case of Mutch's (2016a) approach, a research design that was "sensitive, flexible, facilitative and participatory" (p. 120) was identified. School shootings (Brown, 2018; Fein & Isaacson, 2009), natural disasters (Gouwens & Lander, 2008; Mutch, 2016b) and school-based tragedies (Tarrant, 2011a; Tarrant 2011b) were noted. These studies were conducted with school principals. There is little research on vice or assistant principals, let alone research about vice/assistant principals' involvement in leading through traumatic events.

The role of the school leaders was noted to be taxing because of the array of capacities and behaviours expected, in addition to daily workload pressures. Leithwood and Sun (2012) indicated that school leaders have a significant influence on the conditions of schools because of their focus on a shared vision and established organizational goals. Leaders who embody high

expectations and encourage employees fortify practices that improve the culture and climate of the school and enhance collaboration in the organization. While these attributes are noble, the realities of accomplishing these kinds of goals, within situations where workloads are increasing (Jutras, et al., 2020) have been described as challenging.

The career of the school leader was identified as one where emotional demands (Maxwell & Riley, 2016; Mills & Neische, 2014), and burnout (Skaalvik, 2020) were a distinct possibility. Further, school leaders periodically considered discontinuing in the profession (Fernet, 2011) because of the emotional exhaustion and work pressures they experienced (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). As indicated, while burnout is a possibility, some principals experienced the challenges as stimulating and had school district supports that enhanced their practices, making the role of the school leadership appealing (Fernet, 2011).

School Shootings. Brown (2018) provided a case study about leadership after a fatal school shooting in a small middle school in the United States. He described how the school principal had both applicable teaching and leading experience prior to the event, but nothing could have prepared her for the loss and injuries that ensued. The author commented, “Principals should not have to experience a violent incident at their schools in order to learn ways of responding” (p. 4). Should school administrators lead through a school shooting, Brown (2018) highlighted the school principal’s recommendations: a) have an established crisis plan prior to a critical event; b) develop a list of predictable stages throughout an event where critical decisions need to be made; c) make judgements about the veracity of available resources post incident.

Fein and Isaacson (2009) explored how school administrators engaged in emotion work after school shootings in seven sites over a nine-year timeframe. They found that principals acted in ways that reflected their own perceptions of leadership. They indicated that the description of

the job school administrators had before the crisis, changed afterward. They noted that the aftermath of the events resulted in “a load they had neither expected nor felt prepared to carry” (p. 1339). The authors indicated that school administrators paid a significant personal toll following a school shooting, and their assumptive world was changed. Prior to the shootings in their schools, leaders tended to be of the mind that such violence would not occur in their schools. However, after the denial and shock wore off, they realized that violence could happen and the sense of safety in a place that should offer security could be violated.

Disasters Affecting Schools. Mutch (2015b; 2016) interviewed principals, among others, up to three years after New Zealand earthquakes that impacted schools in and around Christchurch in New Zealand. Even up to three years after the earthquakes, anxiety and stress were prevalent. Mutch (2015b) noted a significant shortage of research that explored the roles of schools following disasters, and in particular, the lack of research about the expectations placed on school leaders to assist students, school-based employees and often the broader community after disasters. School leaders and teachers were still addressing their own practical concerns like securing housing, personal and family health, in addition to supporting students and their families for an extended period following the earthquakes. Mutch (2016) indicated that while intervention resources were in place, given the scope of the disasters, not all contingencies could be prepared for in advance.

Traumatic events periodically impact schools; therefore, students, teachers, administrators, division or district staff, parents, families, and at times, communities are affected (Tarrant, 2011a; Tarrant, 2011b). Not only might schools be affected by a natural disaster along with the rest of the community, but they are often the site of school-centred tragedies, such as shootings or bombings (Brown, 2018; Mutch, 2015). Because traumatic events are unpredictable

and variable, contingencies are not always considered or planned for in advance of events. Further, because they are not everyday happenings, response plans are sometimes contemplated only after an event (Cameron, 2019). However, because traumatic events can have a destructive power on human life, emotional and mental wellbeing, as well as property and material goods (Gouwens & Lander, 2008; Norris et al., 2002a), planning for such possibilities in the education sector is necessary and advantageous.

Educational mandates are vast (Alexander, 2013), and the pressure to achieve outcomes is substantial (Fowler, 2013). Devising and implementing traumatic event plans about possible, difficult to forecast occurrences may be low on a district's list of priorities. Nevertheless, it is the sudden, bewildering, and destructive nature of traumatic events affecting schools that pose a strong reason to consider devising applicable trauma response plans (Hede, 2016). For school principals who are tasked with broad leadership mandates within a given school, trauma response plans are likely to assist them in a field they do not have training in, help them feel more confident to respond, and predictably assist their school and even community in recovery.

Synthesis

The overarching question for this study was, in what ways do leaders experience posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) because of their struggle after a traumatic event in their school community? Leaders in this study were school vice/assistant principals and principals. It has been noted in the literature that the role of a school leader is complex, having many facets from teacher supervision to managing buildings and school finances, to navigating district demands (Young et al., 2014). This study explored how adding a traumatic event to the already complex school leadership role affected school administrators.

In general, the role of school leader is considered taxing. Maxwell and Riley (2016) argued that emotional demands may affect school leader wellbeing, job satisfaction, and potentially result in burnout. Traumatic events in schools contributed to even more challenges in the school leader role. Fein and Isaacson (2009) identified the emotional work of school administrators after school shootings indicating that a high personal cost was paid by school leaders following the shootings. Brown (2018) identified that school leaders needed to be prepared to help their schools return to a semblance of normalcy after a school shooting. Brown highlighted pivotal decisions that school leaders made to move toward returning compassionately and effectively to normal. McAdams and Foster (2008) when referring to school leaders indicated that, "many professionals' experience high and potentially problematic or "'clinical' levels of stress" when asked about their perceptions on student violence (p. 101). Tarrant (2011b) described the array of decisions a school leader had to make after the tragic loss of students and a staff member on a school-sponsored canoe trip. Tarrant also highlighted the personal toll for the school leader and the arduous process of school recovery. Cameron (2019) discussed how a system (school or district) can affect the recovery of a school or district and how a school leader intersects with that recovery. While there is limited research about vice/assistant principals, especially concerning traumatic events, these school leaders are likely to be involved in many responses as well.

Traumatic events in schools leave tragic aftermath. Loss, pain, and grief are not minimized when standing adjacent to the possibilities of growth after suffering (Calhoun et al., 2014). Further, according to Chen et al., (2015), growth may assist in reducing longer-term post-traumatic stress symptoms in some individuals. Posttraumatic growth has gained influence as researchers have paid attention to growth through tragedies (Johnson & Boals, 2015). The PTGI

(Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) was developed to assess positive outcomes by individuals who have encountered traumatic events. The PTGI has been used with paramedics (Ogińska-Bulik & Kobylarczyk, 2015), individuals with chronic disease (Purc-Stephenson, 2014), in disaster exposed organizations (Brooks et al., 2018), with flood affected individuals in Pakistan (Aslam & Kamal, 2019), after forced relocation in Israel (Nuttman-Shwartz et al., 2010), and after the Wenchuan earthquake in China (Chen et al., 2015).

Disaster mental health (Norris, Friedman, & Watson, 2002) is an umbrella term that addresses theoretical (Cameron, 2019), empirical (Norris, Friedman, Watson, Bryne, et al., 2002), and practical (Hoff et al., 2009; Kolski et al., 2014; Webber & Mascari, 2018) responses to traumatic events and disasters. Disaster mental health in schools is not a formal term but captures how schools respond to disasters and traumatic events. School responses include psychological first aid (Brymer et al., 2009), system responses (Cameron, 2019), as well as a variety of disaster strategies for schools (Taylor et al., 2012).

Summary

This chapter overviewed PTG, the PTGI, disaster mental health, disaster mental health in schools, as well as the role and context of school leaders. In the next chapter, I will explain my methodology and methods as they pertain to exploring the ways in which leaders experience posttraumatic growth because of their struggle after a traumatic event in their school community and in the ways systems affect this growth.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Schools have been affected by traumatic events, from school shootings (Brown, 2018; Cameron, 2019) to accidents (Tarrant, 2011a) to natural disasters (Gouwens & Lander, 2008; Mutch, 2015). May main research question was, in what ways do school leaders experience posttraumatic growth after a traumatic event in their school community? School leaders are often pivotal leaders during and after traumatic events (Lucas & Lamphere, 2020). Their experiences were explored using a posttraumatic growth perspective. The methodology for this study was interpretive description.

What follows, is a description about the overall design to investigate my research questions. I introduce my epistemology, my theoretical, and discipline perspectives, methodology, purpose, and methods. I will describe my data analysis approach, integration of findings, trustworthiness and ethical matters related to the research.

Epistemology

Interpretive description situates itself as a naturalistic and pragmatic approach (Oliver, 2012; Thorne et al., 2004). It is deemed constructionist and loosely built upon Symbolic Interactionism (Oliver, 2012; Thorne, 2016). Symbolic Interactionism is not deterministic but focuses on how individuals interpret life situations, and deliberately choose courses of action. Interpretation of events and situations occur constantly, and action is based on these interpretations. In line with qualitative knowledge exploration, interpretive description is expectedly interpretivistic, seeking to understand the social world and subjective experiences. It attempts to comprehend the subjective experience, using personal frames of reference, shared meanings, and understandings about the essence of the social world (Thorne, 2016). My interest

in this research was to explore elements of personal meaning and experience in the lives of school leaders who led through a traumatic event that impacted their school.

Interpretive description has the capacity to answer research questions in an ethical and responsible manner (Thorne, 2016). I developed a flexible interpretive description design that was accomplished by conscientiously thinking through my epistemological and theoretical perspective considering the research questions. Interpretive description was used to thoughtfully determine methods that are in line with my epistemology for congruence (Brewster, et al., 2014). Despite interpretive description landing in the qualitative domain, Thorne advocated including quantitative studies in one's literature review (2016) if deemed reasonable. Quantitative research frequently factors into how applied disciplines are practiced, and are included in my literature review (Thorne, et al., 2004).

As a qualitative methodology, I believe interpretive description was useful in helping me explore the complexity of experience following traumatic events that impacted school leaders. There were three main perspectives that influenced my understanding about trauma for this study. The first was Posttraumatic Growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1996; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013), and the second was disaster mental health in schools (North, 2013; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Included under the umbrellas of disaster mental health in schools was the Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response (TES) in which I have been trained and have experienced using after traumatic events. The third was the role that school leaders have in leading schools, particularly when faced with destructive events that are tragic or traumatic in nature.

Theoretical and Discipline Perspective

Interpretive description assumes that a practitioner-researcher will have a theoretical and discipline-perspective as well as a practical understanding about the field within which they research (Thorne, 2016). Given my practice-focused research, it is logical then for my interpretive description study to exist within a scholarly and discipline-focused framework (Thorne, 2016). I am a registered psychologist (Saskatchewan) and have worked with individuals, and in schools after a traumatic event. I took a psychological and educational perspective for this study.

Interpretive description acknowledges that a complete bracketing of my knowledge and experience is not possible (Thorne et al., 2004); nevertheless, it was necessary for me to be open and willing to observe with as little practice-based influence as possible and engage with participants as a researcher rather than a clinician. In the next section, I describe more about interpretive description and the perspectives that helped me deepen my understanding about myself as a researcher and the research topic.

Methodology

The methodological approach for my research is interpretive description, which is considered a generic qualitative approach (Kahlke, 2014). Interpretive description appealed to me because it is focused on practice-based research questions. My research focus was to study the experiences of school leaders who have led through a traumatic event which has directly impacted their school or system. As indicated in chapter one, the first phase of my research involved distributing the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory to school leaders. The second phase involved one-on-one interviews with voluntary participants from the phase one group.

Background of Interpretive Description

Interpretive description appears to have been popularized into a formal qualitative methodology by Sally Thorne (Thorne et al.,1997) where a need for applied research came out of ongoing clinical conundrums. Sally Thorne (2016) indicated that while there was much value in established methodologies such as ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology, there were differences between the reasons these traditional qualitative methods were developed, and those of a more applied field. The ability to investigate from an applied standpoint brought research and practice together in an appealing manner for me.

The interpretive description approach indicates no loyalty to a methodological camp (Kalkhe, 2014) and has been called a "non-categorical method of research" (Thorne et al., 2004, p. 3). It allowed a practical flexibility for me to answer practice-related questions. Interpretive description has been used to answer questions where an established methodology was determined to be an imprecise fit, and where the questions "lie in-between methodologies" (Kahlke, 2014, p. 48). Kahlke advocated for a deliberate alignment between the research framework and questions to allow the researcher to "answer novel questions", and to potentially "open new ground" in a field or area of practice (p. 48).

Interpretive Description Lens on School Leaders

As indicated, interpretive description is a flexible approach that was developed to help illuminate a real practice goal in a particular field (Thorne, 2016). One of my research goals was to understand personal experiences of school leaders after additional resources leave a school or school system following a traumatic event. These accounts were expected to provide awareness, insight, and understanding about the impact of leading through traumatic events and illuminate

possible ways to support leaders. A key area of inquiry is how leaders experienced posttraumatic growth after a traumatic event.

The flexibility of interpretive description allowed for participants' context, culture, as well as the research questions to inform the methods. When considering schools and school districts, the elements of context and culture are crucial and were expected to influence how a leader is impacted by a traumatic event. The need for contextual understanding about schools and trauma response was deemed both pertinent and timely. Interpretive description is naturalistic and acknowledges the socially constructed engagement between the participant and the researcher.

Interpretive description is an approach that requires an integrity of purpose deriving from three sources: a) an actual real-world question; b) an understanding of what we do and do not know based on all available empirical evidence; and c) an appreciation for the conceptual and contextual realm within which a target audience is positioned to receive the answer we generate. It constitutes a methodological direction that generates questions from applied disciplinary grounding, pushes one into the *field* in a logical, systematic, and defensible manner, and creates the context in which engagement with the data extends the interpretive mind beyond the self-evident—including both accumulated knowledge (such as clinical wisdom) and what has already been established (through empirical means) — to see what else might be appreciated through the experiences (Thorne, 2016).

Thorne (2016) was largely speaking to clinician-researcher audiences when she espoused the strategy of putting-aside one's clinical positioning to take on the outlook of a researcher, to remain intensely curious, humble, and open. This advice appears to have some contradictory elements. Thorne expected researchers to be grounded and rooted in the knowledge about their

field. At the same time, she expected open curiosity, not overly constrained by empirical knowledge or professional experience. It is my perspective that this paradox was part of uncovering the richness in the inquiry process of the clinician researcher.

My Lens on Schools

As stated earlier, I have both a psychological and educational perspective. I have been a registered psychologist (SK #638) since 2005. I have studied the effects of trauma, undergone professional supervision when supporting individuals suffering from traumatic effects and engaged in professional development on the topic. Further, I have worked in a publicly funded K-12 school district and have been exposed to its culture, language, assumptions, and beliefs (Thorne, 2016). Thorne (2016) stated, "the ultimate reason one does research within an applied profession or discipline is disciplinary knowledge development. Thus, recognizing the influence of disciplinary orientation becomes a fundamental component of the research for structure and grounding within the applied fields" (p. 73). For this study, I believe that my psychological experiences and my experience working in a school district provided a valuable practitioner framework.

The Researcher Role

Taking on the researcher role required me to acknowledge that I have assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs that have been generated through my training and experiences. Rather than assuming and expecting that I knew the many elements of participant experiences, relational norms, and their emotional landscape, I needed to listen as though it was my first time engaging with a school leader who experienced a traumatic event connected to their school. Thorne (2016) used the term, "curious learner" to describe the researcher's positioning of "humility and reflexivity" (p. 140). She advocated that a researcher functions as "…an encouraging and

judgementally neutral facilitator so that individuals can explain themselves as fully as possible" (p.140).

I also attuned my focus to the unique context, culture, relationships, and experiences shared by each participant to hear their story. While I believe my ability to ask questions about difficult subject matter in a straightforward and compassionate manner aided me in interviewing participants, I continually oriented myself back to the role of researcher through intention and careful reflection, utilizing my research journal to challenge how I was listening and engaging with participants. I believed it was ethical to let participants know about my clinical background, but I focussed on my function as a researcher, asking questions with open curiosity and care for participant's well-being as there were times when questions evoked difficult memories.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Interpretive Description

As indicated, the strengths of interpretive description include its practice, or clinically oriented positioning. In the hands of a researcher, it is concerned with human experience in complex situations and acknowledge the practitioner's field knowledge and experience. Because of the practical flexibility of interpretive description, the researcher is positioned to use some creative adaptiveness rather that intensely following a methodological rule book (Kahlke, 2018). The rules refer to traditional qualitative methodologies, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnography (Thorne, 2016). Interpretive description is intended to flow from the researcher's epistemology to their theoretical perspective, to their methods considering the research questions (Kahlke, 2014; Crotty, 2015). Finally, the applied approach means there should be helpful insights revealed in findings that benefit the disciplines in which the study situates itself.

While a strength of interpretive description includes a lack of a formal methodological rule book, this can also be seen as a potential weakness (Kahlke, 2018; Thorne, et al., 2004). Researchers are responsible for carefully constructing their study, and it is designed to fit with the research questions rather than following a specific guideline. A successful study depends on a researcher's ability to describe, comprehend, synthesize, theorize, and recontextualize data (Thorne et al., 2004). Thus, the researcher is held responsible for the interpretive outcome. Based on the interpretive description approach, a researcher without practical knowledge about a particular field of study is less able to delve deeply into the research questions.

Methods

The methods for this study included a survey and semi-structured interviews. There were two phases to this study. The first phase involved distributing a survey which included the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) to North American school leaders. The second phase involved semi-structured interviews with volunteers from the phase one group. The North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR) agreed to send out my survey to their email distribution list. I have known members of the NACTATR for approximately ten years owing to my work as a leader during my health and public education roles. Because of these roles I have had opportunity to train with and build relationships with members of the organization.

When the survey was sent, the NACTATR had approximately 11,000 individuals on their email list. There were 375 individuals who identified themselves as "school administrators". Their list also included former school administrators who were still connected to the organization but held a different role. Other public service employees were on their distribution list as well.

To my knowledge, the NACTATR had the most connections with North American school leaders who administrated through a trauma response in their schools.

The Survey

The survey, including the PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) was sent to individuals on the NACTATR email distribution list, some of whom were current or former school leaders. The PTGI is a 21-item scale that has been factor analyzed with 5 factors identified. The survey was utilized as a mechanism to collect information from a broad group of school leaders. I used the concept of growth to refine my semi-structured interview guide and in my interviews with my participants. To my knowledge, this measure has not been used with school leaders who have led through a traumatic response.

Semi-structured Interviews

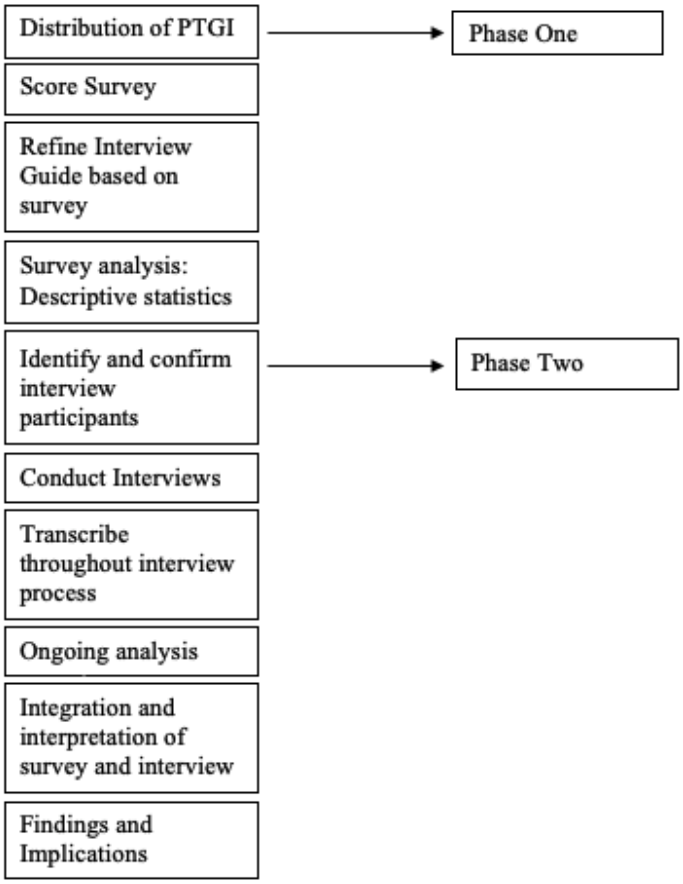
From the survey, 22 volunteers self-identified their interest in being interviewed. From those volunteers, ten participants were interviewed. More information about the selection process will be discussed in the overview of phases section. The concept of growth served as a point of discussion in the interviews. I transcribed the interviews and used my research journal to identify pertinent concepts through the transcribing and interviewing process. I provided interview transcripts to participants for member checking. I used an interpretive frame to explain the survey and interview results in my findings, discussion, and implications.

Thorne and colleagues suggested that “the researcher constantly explores such questions as: Why is this here? Why not something else? And what does it mean?” (2004, p. 7). In later work, Thorne (2016) supported the use of research integration which was defined as “moving beyond the qualitative and quantitative labels toward a focus on distinct kinds of research questions as drivers of epistemologically distinct forms of knowledge, all of which are relevant

for comprehensive understanding" (p. 275). Researchers using the interpretive description approach frequently use semi-structured interviews or focus groups (Brewer et al., 2014) to excavate personal experience and meaning.

Figure 3.1

Flow Chart of Design



Overview of Phases

Phase One. The first phase of this research involved the distribution of the survey including the PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) to individuals on the NACTATR email distribution list. All those who participated in the survey indicated they were school leaders. An email request was made to the authors of the PTGI to use the inventory for doctoral research. Permission was granted from the authors to use the scale on February 13, 2020. The authors indicated there was no charge to reproduce the scale when it is used for research.

Recommendations for structuring the PTGI for specific research purposes were provided by Steffens and Andrykowski (2016). They recommended tailoring the inventory to one's sample and traumatic event. They proposed three steps for using the PTGI in research. First, they suggested deciding whether to use the full PTGI or the short form (Cann, et al., 2010). While the short form has been determined to have acceptable internal reliability and have comparable essential factor-structure to the PTGI (Cann, et al., 2010), Steffens and Androykowski (2016) recommended using the full version. They cited almost three hundred PTGI empirical studies at the time of their writing, and proposed there was greater ability to compare data with other research using the PTGI rather than the PTGI-SF. Furthermore, the full scale with twenty-one items, is not considered onerous for participants to complete.

The second step that Steffens and Androykowski (2016) proposed, was to determine what kind of sample would be chosen. For this study, the sample itself was expected to be somewhat homogeneous, especially with respect to vocation and English language speakers in North America; however, the event itself, although school-connected, was likely to be varied. This study recruited school leaders who held an administrator role (vice/assistant, or principal) during and after a traumatic event. Instructions for the PTGI portion of the survey were based on a stump statement in the Steffens and Andrykowski chapter. For each of the 21-PTGI items,

respondents were asked to rate, *the degree to which the change reflected in the question is true in your life as a result of*, the school-based traumatic event (p. 2216). The final step Steffens and Andrykowski (2016) proposed was to score the five subscales of the PTGI and calculate the total score once surveys have been received. The PTGI total score was used in a descriptive manner.

Online surveys as data collection methods have grown in usage and sophistication (Evans & Mathur, 2018) in large part due to the numerous advantages of the method. Surveys are convenient and can be sent out to potential respondents in an efficient manner. Cohen et al., (2018) described online survey advantages, including the lessened environmental impact, design flexibility, the ability to response-check and provide a progress bar for participants, the ability to efficiently export data to analysis software, and the possibility that online surveys are experienced as more anonymous because of the perceived distance between the researcher and the respondent.

One of the downsides to using online surveys is what is called survey fatigue. Surveys are common and individuals are sometimes inundated with them, resulting in less interest in participating. Survey fatigue is associated with lower response rates (Cohen et al., 2018). As indicated in chapter one, Covid-19 has substantially influenced schools and communities. Online surveys are being distributed from a variety of places to query mental health, physical health, financial health, employment, and other matters.

I attempted to maximize survey responses by engaging the following methods: writing and affixing an introductory letter to the survey; assuring anonymity; advising of the relatively short length of the survey; using a survey style that enhances readability (e.g., larger font); and, advising a timeframe for the survey's completion (Cohen et al., 2018). While I had hoped to have the survey sent out more than one time in a three-week period, I was informed by the

NACTATR that it was a difficult process to re-send the survey to their email distribution list. Thus, it was only sent out one time.

Survey Development and Distribution. I developed an online version of the PTGI and delivered it via Survey Monkey, as licensed by the University of Saskatchewan. I included the following optional questions for the survey. It is not clear how vice/assistant principals interpreted some of the demographic questions because I used the encompassing term *principal* to make the questions shorter. However, that may have resulted in less clarity for some. It may have been clearer to use both terms – vice/assistant principal, and principal.

- How long were you a school principal (in total) before the traumatic event?
- How long ago was the event?
- How long were you a principal in the school before the traumatic event occurred?
- How long did you remain in the school after the traumatic event occurred?
- What was your leadership role at the time of the traumatic event in your school?
- How would you identify the community in which you served as a principal during the traumatic event?
- What grades were taught in your school during the time of the traumatic event?
- What was your age at the time of the traumatic event?
- How do you identify your gender?

On April 13, 2021, an email was sent through the NACTATR with a brief explanation of the study and the survey link (which included an introductory letter). At the time of distribution, there were approximately 375 vice/assistant principals and principals on the NACTATR's email large distribution list of approximately 11,000 email addresses. Mr. Rivard, who was my main contact with the organization for the survey distribution indicated in an email to me that, with

"the new spam laws have these emails redirected to our colleague's spam folders. I do not have any concrete data to demonstrate how many opened the emails. We are estimating that it is around 40 -50 % "(August 4, 2021).

The email had the following elements (Appendix B): a) a brief description of the study, including Behavioural Ethics Approval; b) the parameters of the study including an invitation to school principals, former principals, assistant, or vice principals to participate in the survey. Additional parameters included the researcher's distinction from the NACTATR. The NACTATR's involvement was solely to assist with participant recruitment and did not otherwise impact data collection; c) an explanation about the process including the completion of the PTGI and possible interviews with school leaders; d) contact information for the researchers and the researcher's supervisor; e) the survey itself along with demographic questions.

A question at the end of the online survey invited interested participants to volunteer for one-on-one interviews with the researcher. The participants who indicated interest in participating, filled out a separate portion of the survey with their name and contact information.

There were both positive aspects and limitations to my sampling strategy. A positive rationale for working with the NACTATR was that they have broad North American contacts with school systems that have encountered traumatic events. Cohen et al. (2018) indicated that one way to increase response rates is to attempt to access the largest sample possible. To my knowledge, there was no other Canada-based organization with the kinds of connections to meet my phase one and two participant recruitment goals. A downside to the NACTATR bridging connections for me was the potential for organizational biases or personal perspectives that influenced which respondents participated. Given that the NACTATR sent the survey to their entire email list (11,000 email addresses), it was possible that I could have had non-

administrators participate in the survey and offer to be involved in interviews. However, all participants who completed the survey indicated they were (or had been) school administrators (vice/assistant principals or principals).

Phase One Recruitment. My overall recruitment strategy involved finding an initial sample of North American, school leaders who self-identified as leading through a traumatic event. I had initially planned to include only those leaders who had experienced a traumatic event between 1-6 years ago. However, this parameter changed for the interviews as I did not have enough interview volunteers to meet my minimum requirement. I spoke with my supervisor and decided to extend my timeline parameters. I interviewed all volunteers who were able to participate. Further, it is likely that school leaders who lead through a traumatic event outside of the 1-6 years participated in the survey. I believe this occurred because several my interview participants described events beyond 6 years ago.

I recruited English-speaking school leaders (Christiansen et al., 2016). PTG studies have used the PTGI less than 6 months after a traumatic event as well as more than 6 months after a traumatic event (Christiansen et al., 2006). I determined that conducting research with participants sooner than 1 year after a traumatic event may result in individuals being immersed in the aftermath and critical periods. Further, because their focus would likely continue to be on the impact, they may have less ability to access the "positive legacy of trauma" (Steffens & Andrykowski, 2016, p. 2214) identified in the original construct espoused by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996).

As indicated, recruitment of participants and dissemination of the survey was through the NACTRATR. I initially contacted Mr. Kevin Cameron, Executive Director of NACTATR to request their assistance in participant recruitment for this study. Mr. Cameron confirmed they

would contact school districts with whom they have worked on my behalf. After behavioural ethics approval, I sent a formal letter to the NACTATR requesting they invite volunteers to participate in this study (Appendix B). Ongoing contact around the research and data collection processes was with Mr. Pat Rivard, of the NACTATR.

Phase Two. When surveys were sent to participants, an additional question beyond the PTGI asked participants to consider engaging in a 60-90-minute online interview with the researcher. This constituted my phase two recruitment process. No demographics that could identify individuals were collected and there was no attempt to track electronic identifiers such as IP addresses or user ID's.

Interviews were conducted and recorded through Webex as licensed through the University of Saskatchewan. Webex is considered secure for the purpose of research. The need for confidentiality and protecting data is considered critical and ethical in qualitative research (Thorne, 2016). Further, Webex had a scheduling function that allowed the me and the participant to schedule at convenient times for both, considering time-zones.

Participant interviews were recorded and uploaded to Otter (otter.ai) for transcription. Otter was approved by USask's Behavioural Ethics as a secure means of transcribing interview data. I then listened to the interviews and reviewed the Otter transcription for accuracy. I then cleaned and sanitized (removal of names, organizations, geographic and some demographic information) the transcriptions and sent them to my participants for member checking. Original transcriptions were separated from sanitized copies in digital folders on my personal, secure, and encrypted laptop. Long-term storage will be the responsibility of my supervisor.

Phase two recruitment. As indicated, my phase two participants self-identified from the phase one survey. An initial question queried what happened during the traumatic event that

participants wanted to speak about for the interview. This question resulted in the participant stories found in chapter five. The bulk of the interview questions intentionally focused on participants' experiences after the timeframe when additional supports left the school or school system after the traumatic event. Parameters included that the participant encountered a school-based traumatic event (although may not have experienced their own personal trauma), and that the event occurred at least one year ago. My initial design, as seen in question two of my survey, was to interview those participants who led through a traumatic event between one to six years prior to the survey's distribution. However, I did not meet the minimum threshold (six) of volunteers available to participate within those parameters. After speaking with my supervisor, I make the decision to extend the timeline parameters and interviewed all those available to participate, apart from one individual because the event was very recent. The interview questions assumed that a traumatic school-event initially had a negative personal impact on the leader, and that the impact resulted in a personal struggle which may have resulted in some kind of growth for some participants (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Given the iterative and immersive nature of interpretive description, patterns and interpretations that move beyond the five factors of the PTGI were expected.

As indicated, 22 individuals volunteered to participate in interviews. Two volunteers were told by their school division they could not participate. Two volunteers indicated they had personal matters arise, so they were not able to participate, and one individual indicated they were off work in part, owing to the traumatic event. This individual was thanked for offering to participate, but because of the event's recency was not included in the interviews. Seven initial volunteers did not get back to me about scheduling an interview. Ten individuals were interviewed for this study (five vice/assistant principals and five principals). I sought participants

who had remembrance of the event, context, and social experiences that occurred within their school or system and if interviewed, could explain their personal experience following the event.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were based on the research questions and were intentionally open-ended (Appendix C). They were devised based on the PTG perspective (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1996), a system understanding of trauma. They were also devised based on the unique role school leaders tend to play in school tragedies (Cameron, 2019; Tarrant, 2011a, 2011b; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Because responses to the questions resulted in unexpected and unexplored areas of the school leaders' personal experience, the researcher asked additional or clarifying questions. Semi-structured interviews allowed for judicious exploration of events, thoughts, and emotions to discover more about research participants' experiences. The guide assisted me stay within predetermined margins, and at the same time, give participants opportunities to express what was meaningful to them (Cohen et al, 2018).

Given the population under study, acknowledging that a traumatic event may have contributed to ongoing psychological distress was a possibility. Thus, I was mindful that some participants might be impacted because of re-visiting the memories. While I knew it was possible some participants may have chosen to discontinue an interview because of distress, that did not occur. Two participants indicated some mild distress during the interview. When I asked if they wanted to continue, they both expressed feeling comfortable continuing to the end. Both described strategies they would use to address the distress so that it would not become overwhelming. A couple of individuals indicated the experience of revisiting the event and what occurred afterward was cathartic.

Data analysis

According to Thorne (2016), data collection and analysis often co-occur when using interpretive description. The first phase added some understanding about how North American school leaders experience PTG after a traumatic event. The second phased provided depth to understanding PTG.

Phase One Analysis

Data analysis for phase one began once the three-week window for survey completion ended. At the end of the three weeks, I began organizing for phase two. I included all surveys submitted and took into consideration the completion rate in my final analysis.

Survey analysis involved scoring the PTGI for each anonymous participant and gaining an overall score. Results are reported using calculations of central tendency for the overall score. The overall score reflected how the sample group of leaders experienced posttraumatic growth as assessed by the PTGI.

Phase Two Analysis

I used Otter.ai to assist with transcribing my interviews. Otter.ai provided a preliminary transcript and I reviewed the audio and the Otter.ai transcript and made changes to the transcript based on the audio of the interviews. Transcription was an ongoing process during phase two. The interviews were based on the semi-structured guide. However, I was flexible and open to pursue other fruitful or clarifying avenues in subsequent interviews. Insights allowed me to refine the interview guide as I proceeded with the interviews. Data analysis involved an iterative process aimed at uncovering what was relevant to the ways in which school leaders and systems (schools or districts) enabled post-traumatic growth after a traumatic event.

I entered my research with some pre-set ideas based on my literature review, my experiences in schools, and with traumatic events. These pre-set ideas were related to posttraumatic growth (relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation for life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013), emotional demands when working in schools (Maxwell & Riley, 2016; Mills & Neische, 2013), human responses to experiences of trauma, crisis or suffering, and, organizational influences when top-down processes are required to stabilize systems (Cameron, 2019; Kolski, et al., 2014; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Pre-set ideas associated with the school leaders included instructional leadership (supporting, enhancing, and maintaining teacher instructional work), establishing and maintaining shared goals and decision making, enhancing the organizational culture, finding meaning and purpose in shared leadership, effective relationships, and managing resources and operations within the school (Alberta Education, n.d.; Leithwood & Sun, 2012, Sun & Leithwood, 2015).

I was open to concepts other than those identified but acknowledged that I had some pre-set ideas coming into this research. I sought to be open to new knowledge by identifying concepts that emerged frequently and commonalities that showed themselves between the data. Both commonalities and variations between respondents were be identified, giving a broad sense of experiences and personal meaning (Thorne, 2016).

I took intensive notes during my interviews. From the interview data (my notes, the audios, and the transcripts), I began with broad-based preliminary and descriptive concepts prior to determining domains and codes. These arose from my transcripts, experiences with participants, my participant observation field notes, and research journal. As interviews and thematic identification continued, I looked for and identified patterns to categorize them (Saldana, 2009). Thorne stated, “in interpretive description, because the objective is rarely at the

fine-tuned level of words and expressions but far more often in the realm of thematic patterns and recurring ideas, it is quite important not to be derailed by excessive precision in your early coding" (p. 160). I sought to avoid early coding. Thorne's use of the term "early coding" foretold a warning that if codes are not held loosely in the beginning, they can become strangle-holds, resulting in the researcher feeling obliged to retain the code because of the time and intensity focused on it. Thorne (2016) encouraged broad-based codes to begin with, and then later to investigate potentially related concepts and patterns, and their possible association to the broad-based codes. Thorne suggested a tactile, direct, whole-brain and immersive strategies for coding. These kinds of strategies are considered pre-coding and are data connections that spark the researcher's interest for a variety of reasons (Saldana, 2009). I initially used much re-reading, and re-listening to the audios of the interviews. I used physical and online highlighters to identify concepts, play with potential codes, sort, flag, and explore possible patterns in my initial iterative process.

Codes were identified from the concepts and patterns which emerged from my experiences with the participants and transcribing our interviews. Thorne proposed four strategies that consciously applied to my analysis process. The first was, "know your purpose" (p. 164) to support the analysis process. Thorne stated that techniques used in the analytic process are only instruments and should be used in a manner that supports the researcher's purpose, helping one to think uniquely and enlarge one's viewpoint when considering the disciplinary problem of focus. Continually returning to purpose relates to "why someone from your applied field would want to be studying the phenomenon in the first place" (p. 165). The second strategy was, "knowing your data" (p. 165), and a reasonable rationale for researcher-engaged analysis over software-intensive analysis. Thorne (2016) shared, "by fully engaging in

listening to recordings and reading transcription text (ideally simultaneously) you can develop a "feel" for who your participants are, what their storylines represent, and what the many aspects of their accounts could represent" (p. 167). Thorne suggested that by intensively knowing the data, researchers can appreciate patterns, connections, and relationships at deeper and deeper levels, and notate these in a variety of meaningful ways that enhance understanding at the individual participant, and whole research-purpose levels. I believe my methodical, yet iterative approach assisted me as I sought to understand participant experiences.

The third strategy to support interpretive description analysis is to consider borrowing techniques (Thorne, 2016). I had initially planned to use NVivo software to understand my data further. However, once I became immersed in my participant interviews, I made the decision to continue with the approach I was using; thus, I did not use NVivo for further analysis, nor did I borrow other formal techniques. Thorne (2016), while not denouncing the use of coding tools, issued cautions about software coding programs. This warning was about the internal structures built into electronic coding software which may limit the early possibilities and connections that a researcher identifies. Interpretive description embraces complexity

Thorne's (2016) final strategy termed, "capturing analytic insights" (p. 170), involved a tangible and engrossing process for netting insights related to the research purpose. She suggested analytic notes, a reflective journal, or other mechanisms of written inquiry that capture the way the individual researcher conceptualizes, understands, orders, and organizes thinking about the research and its purpose. I used as Word document as my research journal to capture analytic insights. I also wrote ideas, concepts, considerations, wonders and queries on sticky notes. Some I discarded, some I expanded on and some I incorporated into my analysis. I found that both typing and writing and re-writing offered me interesting and captivating techniques to

understand the data. Capturing analytic insights embodies Thorne's (2016) concept of iterative data analysis at an intimate and ongoing level of detailed exploration and interpretation. Throughout the course of my data exploration, I incorporated the use of a critical friend (my supervisor) to engage in analysis with portions of my data. The use of a critical friend was a means to potentially identify any researcher bias or identify patterns in codes that I may not have seen. I believe this strategy assisted with an overall, credible research product.

After interviews, I journaled thoughts, perspectives, and wonders that came out of the interview. My data analysis, using an immersive, manual process sought to highlight the complexity that emerged from the personal experiences. I sought to understand the meaning making that seemed to arise in the lives of participants who led through a traumatic event in their schools.

Research Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba,1986). Thorne included what she calls "an additional set of ideal criteria associated with…disciplinary orientation" (p. 113). These ideal criteria are: "moral defensibility, disciplinary relevance, pragmatic obligation, contextual awareness, and probable truth" (p. 113) which will be discussed later in this section. As indicated, I kept a research journal during the process to consider possible bias, remain reflexive, and stay on track with my design logic.

Concerning credibility, I provided transcripts to each of my participants for their review to enlist member checking. Regarding transferability, in qualitative research findings are not expected to be replicable; however, they should be consistent with the data collected. Considering dependability and confirmability, applied research like interpretive description

should resonate with those in leadership in education, and clinicians who support schools after traumatic events. Individuals in these fields should find the results helpful and meaningful because of their disciplinary knowledge. Finally, in graduate research the thesis defense is a rigorous process where my supervisor and committee will help to ensure the confirmability and dependability of the findings.

Trustworthiness in interpretive description is closely tied to credibility in the research process and product. Qualitative research has unique philosophical substructures, different from quantitative research; however, offering a trustworthy, confirmable, and dependable study is as important an obligation of the qualitative researcher as it is to the strictly quantitative one. According to Thorne (2016), “in the context of applied qualitative research, we might take that set of obligations one step further, and recognize that our species of new knowledge will be made available to our intended disciplinary audiences in a form that enlightens them about dimensions of the thing we are studying” (pp.111-112). Therefore, considering applied research’s pragmatic relevance involved significant deliberation for me and is discussed in the implications chapter of this dissertation.

Thorne (2016) used the phrase “beyond evaluation” to describe how ethical, applied - researchers should conceive the outcome of their research (p. 236). The first conception is, “moral defensibility”, and intersects with how the research might influence a field of practice. She indicated there needed to be claims that are convincing about the reason the information we acquire from participants is vital, and what the purpose is of obtaining this knowledge. Thorne indicated that applied researchers frequently study individuals who have experienced various kinds of pain or painful experiences; not to re-expose them needlessly, but to create morally defensible shared meanings and understanding that enhance knowledge in the field. In the case

of the current study, my aim was to understand the experiences of leaders after traumatic responses in their schools. I hoped this knowledge would assist in considering the needs, challenges and possibly even strategies to promote recovery and healing after a traumatic event from the lens of the school leader.

The second conception Thorne (2016) described is, “disciplinary relevance” (p. 236). Disciplinary relevance implies that the researcher should conscientiously determine that the research questions are relevant in the field of practice. Traumatic events happen in schools, or impact schools. School leaders are frequently at the forefront of responses by virtue of their position, if not their training (Brown, 2018; Tarrant, 2011a, Tarrant, 2011b). In the area of psychological intervention in education, knowledge generation about how to support leaders is determined to be relevant and beneficial. Further, when leaders are effectively supported, the probability that they can assist their school, district and community heal may be enhanced.

The third conception that Thorne (2016) proposed to enhance credibility is “pragmatic obligation” (p. 237). Pragmatic obligation refers to “the inherent tension within practice realities, in which respect for the uniqueness of individuals creates sympathy for an idealist epistemology at the same time that the moral mandate of a practice discipline requires usable general knowledge” (p. 237). Thus, applied researchers must accept the moral and ethical obligation that their findings and conclusions may influence a real-world setting. Because of the likelihood of this pragmatic rather than theoretical influence, researchers are tasked with generating knowledge that seems “real and valid” and going beyond personal experiences in the field of their applied study (Thorne, 2016, p. 247).

Fourth, Thorne (2016) discussed “contextual awareness” to enhance research credibility (pp. 237-238). She explained that qualitative researchers enter the research sphere with their own

socially constructed thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives. From a disciplinary standpoint, these perspectives and beliefs might be even more pronounced, because of the context and professional culture that discipline resides in. Thorne advised that applied researchers qualify their research within the contextual bounds they exist in, as context necessarily plays a role in how the findings have been generated, and in what settings, circumstances, and environments they might be practically useful.

Finally, "probable truth" is proposed by Thorne (2016) to summarize how moral defensibility, disciplinary relevance, pragmatic obligation, and contextual awareness work together to provide a credible research product. Thorne stated, "we have depicted qualitative research excellence in the context of the purposes for which new knowledge is sought, our orientation toward the actual and potential applications of the ideas we have produced, and our reverence for the complexities of truth claims within the scientific enterprise" (p. 239). Probable truths are not claiming absolute truth, but must demonstrate practice relevance, be coherent, cogent, and convincing within the logic of the research design (Thorne, 2016).

Research Journal

As indicated, I utilized a research journal as part of my analytic process. I used the research journal in two ways. The first was to take note of the practical elements of my phase one and two processes. Examples of elements I notated included, the dates when my survey opened and closed, responses from potential interview participants, and scheduling of interviews. I also took detailed notes of my meetings with my supervisor who functioned as my "critical friend" for the purposes of this research. The second way I used my research journal was to take note of my cognitive processes during the iterative analysis of my phase two domains or categories, and themes. I developed numerous iterations of themes and altered them, merged

them, and shifted them between domains when warranted. I found my research journal to be a helpful tool to keep my phase one and two processes on track, and to assist me analyse my data to help solidify my findings.

Ethics

Concern for participants (Cohen et al., 2018) is central to ethical human research, and informed consent and confidentiality are essential ethical requirements in this study. Tri-Council Policy (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018) indicates that researchers must demonstrate respect for persons, concern for their welfare and engage in just research practices. There is no undue influence on behalf of the researcher impacting voluntary participation in this study. While there was a third party involved in the dissemination of the survey, they did not have any influence on participates in phase one or phase two except through the email they sent on my behalf.

I shared with interview participants my background and applied interest in school leaders' experiences leading through traumatic events. Interpretive description expects that professionals in their own fields will conduct research because of an applied interest. Therefore, declaring researcher bias to participants is less important than that I acknowledged my disciplinary background and positioning as an interventionist within the field of education (Thorne, 2016).

Informed consent was obtained electronically was implied when individuals began and completed the survey. The survey had nine demographic questions, which were optional. There was a technological barrier between the survey and participants inputting personal information to be involved with the phase two interviews, so these were not obviously correlated.

I used consent forms with my interview participants (Appendix E) and asked them verbally before the interview if I had their consent to continue and to record the interview.

In each phase of this study, participants were informed about the nature of the study/phase, and that all responses would remain anonymous. In phase one, a redirect option allowed interested participants to provide contact information if they wished to participate in phase two. The survey was able to be submitted without providing contact information. Participants were advised that could withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey and could withdraw up until the final member checking of their transcripts in phase two.

All participant survey data was accessed from my password protected personal computer and will be stored on my University of Saskatchewan cloud storage. Interview audio recordings were stored on Otter.ai, which is password protected and will be stored on my University of Saskatchewan cloud storage with a pseudonym assigned to each participant. According to University of Saskatchewan guidelines, data will be retained for five years with my supervisor.

As the primary researcher, I confidentially stored names and contact information of interviewees. Personal names, cities, provinces, states, and other identifiable information were and will be disguised to the highest degree possible in the final research and any subsequent research. Individual information will not be connected to participant data, and I will keep all identities confidential. Survey data, interview recordings and transcripts using pseudonyms will be accessible by myself and my supervisor.

Respect for persons refers to minimizing risks and maximizing benefits for participants. I was clear and upfront at the outset, that this study was querying experiences of education leaders administrating through a traumatic event. I provided information for potential participants to volunteer if they felt comfortable doing so. This study was considered low risk. While

participants had experienced a historic event that was upsetting or distressing, the participants were not considered to be part of a vulnerable group. They were members of a professional group in the education sector. While the term “traumatic event” was used for descriptive clarity about the event, it was not intended to imply that school leaders themselves experienced personal trauma.

Potential benefits for involvement in the study were that participants had the opportunity to explore their personal experience through the interview process, and, that school-leader-input may assist education systems support leaders in adaptive ways after a traumatic event. Participants were not compensated for their participation, although they may request a summary of the final report.

Summary Statements

Interpretive description assists in describing and interpreting data collected. It requires pre-established research parameters, and these flowed from my epistemological perspective, disciplinary understanding, and research questions. Interpretive description, while not constrained by boundedness, does not proclaim the ability to generalize, but to describe associations, relationships, and patterns which I have done in this dissertation (Thorne, 2016). As indicated, interpretive description depicts what can be seen through a socially constructed experience between the researcher and the participant. Other clinicians who work with school leaders who have administrated through a traumatic event should find my claims to be relevant, conceivable, and possibly confirm clinical intuition.

CHAPTER FOUR

Survey Findings

This chapter provides the results of the first phase of my study. To open this chapter, I present my purpose of research and my guiding questions. Subsequently, I review my survey data collection process, provide a description of the survey, and discuss findings from the survey, including the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory.

Purpose of Research and Guiding Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore Posttraumatic Growth (PGT) for school leaders (principals and vice/assistant principals) using a survey and semi-structured interview. My intent was to explore school leader's leadership experiences following a traumatic event connected to their school or district and explore what contributed to PTG. In addition, I was seeking to understand how personal, situational, and organizational factors affected school leaders' understanding of their leadership. As indicated, key informants for this study were school leaders (assistant and vice principals as well as principals) who led through a disruptive, crisis or traumatic event.

The research was guided by the following main question. In what ways do principals (school leaders) experience posttraumatic growth after a traumatic event in their school community? Additional questions included:

- How did leaders draw on personal, professional, and school system resources to manage through the first year after a traumatic event in their system?
- How does leading through a traumatic event affect school leaders' approach to leadership or their understanding about themselves as a leader?

The survey was not able to answer the research questions directly. It was used to understand whether PTG was a viable construct for this sample of school leaders. Even more importantly it allowed me to access volunteers for phase two, which aided me in answering my research questions.

Demographic Questions, Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, and Participants

The survey used for this study was created using the University of Saskatchewan's licenced version of SurveyMonkey. It included nine demographic questions, twenty-one questions that encompassed the original version of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), and one question asking for volunteers to participate in a one-one-one interview (Appendix F). On April 13, 2021, the survey which included the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI), and demographic questions was sent to approximately 11,000 individuals across North America by the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR). Their distribution list included Canadian and United States school district employees, employees from post-secondary institutions, public service employees in human services and members of some business communities. The survey was open for 3 weeks (closed on May 4, 2021). While it was possible that I could have had non-administrators complete the survey, it appeared that all were, or had been in school administration.

One-hundred-nineteen individuals completed the survey. In total, there was a 74% completion rate, with 96 participants completing most of the survey. Over 80% of the total participants completed the survey on April 13th, and completions substantially reduced, concluding on April 29, 2021. Fifty-nine percent of the survey sample identified as female, 35% identified as male, 1% identified as two-spirited, and 5% did not indicate their gender. Twenty-two individuals expressed interest in being part of interviews. Two school leaders were denied

participation by their district; two school leaders indicated life circumstances that prohibited them from participating; one individual experienced a traumatic event five weeks prior to volunteering, and was off work, in part owing to the event; and seven school leaders did not respond back to me after the initial offer of volunteering. Ten individuals (five vice/assistant principals and five principals) interviewed with me.

It should be noted that I used the term “principal” for most of my demographic questions. It would have clearer for both principals and vice/assistant principals had I used the term “school leader”. It is possible my use of the term “principal” caused some interpretation challenges for participants. Nevertheless, for the purposes of reporting back, I have used the actual questions when referring to each demographic question.

Frequencies and descriptive statistics were computed for most (Q 1-8) of the demographic questions. While 119 participants began the survey, only 96 completed most of the survey. The following tables and discussion are based on the 96 participants who completed most of the survey.

Completion Rates for the Demographic Questions

Table 4.1 provides a general overview of the completion rate for the nine demographic questions (including question nine that asked for interview participant volunteers). I provide discussion about the completion rates in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Table 4.1

General Statistics Regarding the Completion of Demographic Questions (1-9)

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
N Valid	95	76	95	94	95	95	83	96	93

N Missing	1	20	1	2	1	1	13	0	3

Length of Time as a School Leader Prior to the Traumatic Event

Table 4.2 and 4.3 provide frequencies and descriptive statistics for question one of the survey. A wide range of school leadership experience prior to the traumatic event was identified by participants. While the largest group of school leaders fell into the category for being a school leader between 0-5 years (61.1%), thirty-seven of the ninety-five administrators who answered the question were school leaders between 6 - 20+ years (39%). This indicates that more than a third of the school leaders had some extended leadership experience prior to the traumatic event they were thinking about for the survey.

Table 4.2

Q1 Frequencies: How Long Were You a School Principal (in total) Before the Traumatic Event?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	B/t 0 - 5	58	60.4	61.1	61.1
	B/t 6 – 10	21	21.9	22.1	83.2
	B/t 11 – 15	7	7.3	7.4	90.5
	B/t 16 - 20	5	5.2	5.3	95.8
	20 + years	4	4.2	4.2	100.0
	Total	95	99.0	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.0		
Total		96	100.0		

Table 4.3

Q1 Descriptive Statistics: How Long Were You a School Principal (in total) Before the Traumatic Event?

					95% Confidence Interval for Mean			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Min	Max
B/t 0 - 5	58	38.24	20.580	2.702	32.83	43.65	2	92

B/t 6 – 10 years	21	40.48	20.208	4.410	31.28	49.67	1	77
B/t 11 – 15 years	7	43.86	14.135	5.343	30.78	56.93	20	61
B/t 16 – 20 years	5	54.40	10.262	4.589	41.66	67.14	37	62
20 + years	4	31.00	24.685	12.342	-8.28	70.28	6	56
Total	95	-	-	-	-	-	1	92

The Length of Time Since the Event

Table 4.4 and 4.5 provide frequencies and descriptive statistics for question two of the survey. My initial plan was to seek interview participants who had led through a traumatic event between one and six years ago which is the reason the survey scale was constructed to capture this information. Even though that was my intention, and question two only allowed for participants to indicate between one and six years ago, several individuals volunteered to be interviewed who identified traumatic or crisis events beyond the six years. The way I devised the scale for this question is likely one of the reasons there were twenty participants that did not respond (21% of the 96).

The largest group of participants endorsed that the traumatic event they were thinking of happened approximately one year ago (43.4%). I wondered if some individuals considered Covid-19 for their traumatic event as *approximately one year ago* fit that timeline. The smallest group indicated they were school leaders between 5-6 years ago when the traumatic event occurred (23.7%). In hindsight, providing a question for participants to indicate beyond the six-year mark would have likely given more accurate data because 20 individuals did not complete this question.

After consultation with my supervisor, I made the decision to include all who were able to schedule interviews no matter the length of time that had passed since the event. The only

available volunteer I did not include in interviews was an individual who indicated the event had occurred only five weeks prior, and that individual was away from work, in part, owing to the stress of the event.

Table 4.4

Q2 Frequencies: How Long Ago was the Event?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Approximately 1 years ago	33	34.4	43.4	43.4
	B/t 2-4 years	25	26.0	32.9	76.3
	B/t 5-6 years	18	18.8	23.7	100.0
	Total	76	79.2	100.0	
Missing	System	20	20.8		
Total	96	100.0			

Table 4.5

Q2 Descriptive Statistics: How Long Ago was the Event?

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Min	Max
Approx 1 year ago	33	42.42	17.207	2.995	36.32	48.53	5	74
B/t 2-4 years	25	36.60	20.372	4.074	28.19	45.01	2	63
B/t 5-6 years	18	38.67	23.783	5.606	26.84	50.49	1	92
Total	76	-	-	-	-	-	1	92

Length of Time in the School Before the Traumatic Event Occurred

Table 4.6 and 4.7 provide frequencies and descriptive statistics for question three of the survey. I was interested in understanding how long school leaders were in the school where the crisis or trauma occurred prior to the actual event. Especially once phase two began with

interviews, I was concerned with exploring how the school's climate and culture impacted one's leadership trajectory, as they led through a traumatic event. Almost twenty-three percent (23.2%) stayed less than one year after the event. However, a comparatively significant group stayed between one and five years (61.1%). Interestingly, there were fifteen individuals who stayed between six and eleven plus years (15.6%) after the traumatic event they were thinking about for this survey.

Table 4.6

Q3 Frequencies: How Long Were You a Principal in the School before the Traumatic Event Occurred?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less than 1 year	22	22.9	23.2	23.2
	B/t 1-5 years	58	60.4	61.2	84.2
	B/t 6-10 years	7	7.3	7.4	91.6
	More than 11 years	8	8.3	8.4	100.0
	Total	95	99.0	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.0		
Total		96	100.0		

Table 4.7

Q3 Descriptive Statistics: How Long Were You a Principal in the School before the Traumatic Event Occurred?

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confident Interval for Mean Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Min	Max
Less than 1 year	22	46.05	21.431	4.569	36.54	55.55	16	92
B/t 1-5 years	58	35.62	19.560	2.568	30.48	40.76	1	67

B/t 6-10 years	7	46.14	14.392	5.440	32.83	59.45	23	64
More than 11 years	8	46.13	17.852	6.312	31.20	61.05	6	62
Total	95	-	-	-	-	-	1	92

Length of Time School Leaders Stayed in the School After the Event

Table 4.8 and 4.9 provide frequencies and descriptive statistics for question four of the survey. Most school leaders stayed in the school where the event took place for a period that met or exceeded one year, up to the five-year mark (67.0%). Approximately eighteen percent (18.1%) of school leaders stayed between six and eleven plus years. Almost 15% of school leaders stayed less than one year (14.9 %). Two of the survey participants did not indicate how long they remained in the school after the traumatic event.

Table 4.8

Q4 Frequencies: How Long Did You Remain in the School After the Traumatic Event Occurred?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less than 1 year	14	14.6	14.9	14.9
	B/t 1-5 years	63	65.6	67.0	81.9
	B/t 6-10 years	14	14.6	14.9	96.8
	More than 11 years	3	3.1	3.2	100.0
	Total	94	97.9	100.0	
Missing	System	2	2.1		
Total		96	100.0		

Table 4.9

Q4 Descriptive Statistics: How Long Did You Remain in the School After the Traumatic Event Occurred?

					95% Confident Interval for Mean	

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Min	Max
Less than 1 year	14	43.86	24.435	6.530	29.75	57.97	2	92
B/t 1-5 years	63	39.87	19.430	2.448	34.98	44.77	1	77
B/t 6-10 years	14	37.64	18.740	5.008	26.82	48.46	5	67
More than 11 years	3	34.00	18.735	10.817	-12.54	80.54	19	55
Total	94	-	-	-	-	-	1	92

Leadership Role at the Time of the Traumatic Event

Table 4.10 and 4.11 provide frequencies and descriptive statistics for question five of the survey. Just over sixty percent (61.1%) of the participants in the survey were principals. Almost thirty-nine percent (38.9) were vice or assistant principals. In the final question of the survey, I asked for volunteers to participate in interviews with me. Of the twenty-two volunteers, there were thirteen principals (59%), and nine vice/assistant principals (41%) who expressed initial interest in participating. The final breakdown of interview participants was five principals (50%) and five vice/assistant principals (50%).

Table 4.10

Q5 Frequencies: What was Your Leadership Role at the Time of the Traumatic Event in Your School?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Principal	58	60.4	61.1	61.1
	VP/AP	37	38.5	38.9	100.0
	Total	95	99.0	100.00	
Missing	System	1	1.0		
Total		96	100.0		

Table 4.11

Q5 Descriptive Statistics: What was Your Leadership Role at the Time of the Traumatic Event in Your School?

	Leadership Role	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total Questions	Principal	58	40.53	19.065	2.503
	VP/AP	37	38.38	21.457	3.528

School Community

Table 4.12 and 4.13 provide frequencies and descriptive statistics for question six of the survey. The school communities that survey participants were from, were wide-ranging. The largest group were rural administrators (40.0%). The collection of city participants (inner city, urban, and suburban/bedroom) was just over 30 percent (32.7%). There was also a comparatively high number of administrators who were school leaders in northern communities (27.1%).

Table 4.12

Q6 Frequencies: How Would You Identify the Community in Which You Served as a Principal During the Traumatic Event?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Rural	38	39.6	40.0	40.0
	Northern	26	27.1	27.4	67.4
	Inner City	20	20.8	21.1	88.4
	Urban	7	7.3	7.4	95.8
	Suburban/ Bedroom	4	4.2	4.2	100.0
	Total	95	99.0	100.0	
Missing	System	1	1.0		
Total		96	100.0		

Table 4.13

Q6 Descriptive Statistics: How Would You Identify the Community in Which You Served as a Principal During the Traumatic Event?

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Min	Max
Rural	38	41.42	17.237	2.796	35.76	47.09	11	74
Northern	26	38.31	20.476	4.016	30.04	46.58	3	73
Inner City	20	35.95	26.684	5.967	23.46	48.44	1	92
Urban	7	46.14	16.406	6.201	30.97	61.32	27	67
Suburban/ Bedroom	4	44.25	7.136	3.568	32.90	55.60	34	50
Total	95	-	-	-	-	-	1	92

Grades Taught

Table 4.14 and 4.15 provide frequencies and descriptive statistics for question seven of the survey. There were a variety of grades taught in the schools represented by the school leaders who participated in the survey. The largest grouping was school leaders that administrated in kindergarten to grade 8 schools (43.4%). The second largest group was school leaders that administrated in secondary schools (30.1%). There were relatedly sized groups who indicated they worked in middle/secondary (10.8%), and kindergarten to grade twelve schools (14.5%). There was only one participant who indicated they worked in a middle school (1.2%). It was notable that thirteen participants did not answer this question (13.5%). It is possible that the scale did not fit their administrative situations.

Table 4.14

Q7 Frequencies: What Grades Were Taught in Your School During the Time of the Traumatic Event?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	K-8	36	37.5	43.4	43.4

	Middle 6-8	1	1.0	1.2	44.6
	Middle/ Secondary	9	9.4	10.8	55.4
	Secondary	25	26.0	30.1	85.5
	K-12	12	12.5	14.5	100.0
	Total	83	86.5	100.0	
Missing	System	13	13.5		
Total		96	100.00		

Table 4.15

Q7 Descriptive Statistics: What Grades Were Taught in Your School During the Time of the Traumatic Event?

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95 % Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Min	Max
K-8	36	39.97	20.029	3.338	33.20	46.75	1	73
Middle 6-8	1	16.00					16	16
Middle/ Secondary	9	47.78	17.998	5.999	33.94	61.61	29	77
Secondary	25	40.40	22.635	4.527	31.06	49.74	5	92
K-12	12	42.50	16.523	4.770	32.00	53.00	11	69
Total	83	-	-	-	-	-	1	92

Age at the Time of the Event

Table 4.16 and 4.17 provide frequencies and descriptive statistics for question eight of the survey. Question eight highlighted a wide range of school leader ages at the time of the event. The largest group of school leaders identified being in the 45-54 age range (46.9%) when the event took place. The next largest age band was between 35-44 (32.3%) years. Ten percent were between the 55-65 age bands (10.4%) and, 34 years and under (10.4%) age bands respectively. Unlike some of the other demographic questions, this one was answered by all 96 respondents included in these analyses.

Table 4.16

Q8 Frequencies: What was Your Age at the Time of the Traumatic Event?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-24	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
	25-34	9	9.4	9.4	10.4
	35-44	31	32.3	32.3	42.7
	45-54	45	46.9	46.9	89.0
	55-65	10	10.4	10.4	100.0
	Total	96	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.17

Q8 Descriptive Statistics: What was Your Age at the Time of the Traumatic Event?

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Min	Max
18-24	1	35.00					35	35
25-34	9	44.00	16.993	5.664	30.94	57.06	13	74
35-44	31	36.05	22.390	4.021	27.85	44.28	2	92
45-54	45	41.56	18.722	2.791	35.93	47.18	1	73
55-65	10	40.60	21.261	6.723	25.39	55.81	5	64
Total	96	-	-	-	-	-	1	92

Results of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI)

As indicated, the survey created for this study included demographic questions, the 21-item PTGI (Appendix F), and a question asking for volunteers to complete a face-to-face, online or phone interview. As per Christiansen et al., (2016), I used the overall score from all items, rather than break the scale into factor scores. Christiansen et al. (2016) recommended that for the purposes of research, the overall mean score, rather than the factor scores be used.

Overall, the school leaders in this study indicated somewhat limited posttraumatic growth. The overall mean score for the school leaders in this study (96 who completed the majority of the PTGI) was 1.742. This indicated, that as a group, they identified their

posttraumatic growth as between: *I experienced this change to a very small degree as a result of my crisis (1),* and *I experienced this change to a small degree as a result of my crisis (2).* It must be noted that the lack of comparison samples that have completed the PTGI make it challenging to interpret the degree of growth using the mean score (Stockton, et al., 2011).

There are some possible explanations about the low overall score. First, while the intention of the study was not to explore the effects of Covid-19 on survey participants, it is possible that the participants saw the crisis they identified through the lens of the pandemic (Vigo et al., 2020); or, perhaps they chose to use the pandemic as their target event. Because the pandemic was still ongoing during the data collection portion of the study, it is possible that "post-trauma" was not an accessible concept for some participants.

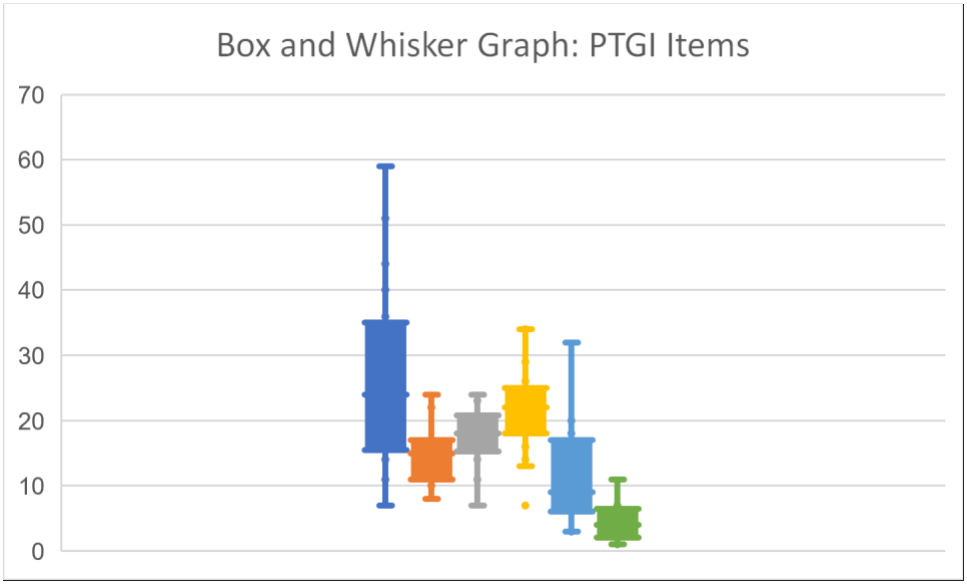
The second explanation for the overall low score may be that some school leaders experienced more than one significantly disruptive event across their tenure in school leadership. Nine out of ten school leaders interviewed for this study shared about multiple losses (school-related deaths by suicides, accidents, and illness), threats, disturbances (school closures, reduced enrollment leading to fractured staffs, unfulfilled expectations), acts of aggression on school property, and other challenges. If some of the survey participants experienced a similar accumulation of disruptive, crisis, or traumatic events, it is possible they found it difficult to discern growth coming out of a single event, when they were inundated with many. Adding to that, the additional emotional labour many school leaders' face (Maxell & Riley, 2016) may have contributed to their perspective being so crowded with work-based challenges, they were unable to see growth beyond the ongoing difficulties.

Figure 4.1 below gives a pictorial depiction of the overall results from the PTGI. As seen in the graph, the box and whisker on the far left reflects responses corresponding to, *I did not*

experience this change as a result of my crisis (0). The second box and whisker moving toward the right refer to, *I experienced this change to a very small degree as a result of my crisis (1).* The third box and whisker correspond with, *I experienced this change to a small degree as a result of my crisis (2).* The fourth to, *I experienced this change to a moderate degree as a result of my crisis (3).* The fifth to, *I experienced this change to a great degree as a result of my crisis (4).* And, the sixth box and whisker refer to, *I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis (5).*

Figure 4.1

Box and Whisker Graph of Posttraumatic Growth Items from the Survey



Chapter Summary

The survey used for this study was created using University of Saskatchewan's licenced version of SurveyMonkey. The survey included nine demographic questions, twenty-one questions from the original Posttraumatic Growth Inventory, and one question asking for volunteers to engage in a one-on-one interview with me. One-hundred-nineteen individuals began the survey. It is unclear the reasons some dropped out part-way through.

Ninety-six males, females and an individual self-identified as two-spirited completed most of the survey. There were slightly more principals than vice/assistant principals that completed it. A significant range of school leadership experience was identified by participants, from 0 – 20 + years. There were more rural and northern school leaders (64) than inner city, urban and suburban/bedroom community-based school leaders (31). There were a range of grades taught in the schools represented by school leaders, from kindergarten to grade eight, middle school, middle and secondary, secondary, and kindergarten to grade twelve. A range of ages were also identified by school leaders. The largest age bands were between the ages of 35-54 (76). There were ten younger school leaders between the ages of 18-34, and ten older school leaders in the 55-65 age group.

Christensen et al. (2016) indicated that prominent perspectives for using the PTGI in research suggest that the total score (of all twenty-one items) be used to determine growth in a particular sample. Considering that, rather than the five factor scores, I used the total score, as suggested. An SPSS analysis was run to find any difference between the survey's demographic variables and the total score of the PTGI. There were no significant differences found.

The PTGI may not have been a particularly beneficial inventory to use with school leaders, in part, owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. Another element may be because many school leaders face routine disruptions, crises, and sometimes traumatic events in their roles as principal, it may have been difficult to discern growth from a single event. What this survey afforded me, was the opportunity to connect with interview participants with ease. Interview participant stories and analyses of interview data will make up the next four chapters in this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

Participant Stories

Introduction

The first section of this chapter overviews interview participant information in a table (Table 5.1). The second section provides all ten participant event stories coming out of the phase two interviews. The end of the chapter closes with a summary.

Table 5.1 below provides a brief overview of the interview participants from phase two of this study. It includes their assigned pseudonym, their position at the time of the traumatic event (principal or, vice/assistant principal), the general time of the event, how they described the event, the type of school where they were administrators, the amount of time they had been in the position, the amount of time they were in the school, and what Canadian province they were from. While the survey used to recruit interview participants was sent to NACTATR email subscribers from both Canada and the United States, no one from the United States volunteered for interviews.

Table 5.1

Interview Participant's Professional Details at the Time of the Traumatic Event

Pseudonym	Position at the time of the event	Time of the event	Type of event	Type of School	Time in the Position	Time in the school	Part of Canada
Elise	Vice principal	2018-2019	Witnessed assault on administrative partner	Urban community school, PreK - 8	7 years	1 year	SK
Rick	Vice principal	2016	Student hit by a vehicle while going to school. resulting in life-altering	Small, urban, ECS to grade 6	3 years	1 year	AB

			injuries. Other students witnessed.				
Katrine	Principal	2017	Bomb threat and school closure	Urban, junior high, grades 7-9	10 years	2 years	AB
Isabella	Vice Principal	2019	High profile student died by suicide. Critical periods extended	Urban middle school, grades 7-9, approximately 370 students	5 years	5 years	SK
Brianne	Principal	2012	Student death and injuries because of an accident that happened in an adjacent school. Students had been in the elementary school the year before. Impacted entire community. Extended first critical period	Small urban elementary (K-5), approx 380 students. Catholic.	1st year, second month	1st year	AB
Maria	Principal	1999	Bomb detonated in school and losses unrelated to bomb	Urban district, outside of city High school	3 days	3 days	ON
Shelly	Vice principal	2013	Suicide attempts by students	Urban High school	A few days	A few days	AB
Lars	Teaching principal	2011	Clear, plausible and direct threat against principal	Rural K-12, less than 100 students	10+ years	10 + years	SK
Jeanette	Principal	2008	Athletics team was in a fatal accident, with 8 lives lost	Small urban high school	10 years	10+ years, was also the VP there	NB
Ruth	Vice Principal and student support	9 years ago, and during Covid-19	Loss of a student in a high-profile family Loss of a student due to alcohol (Covid-19 restrictions made responses complicated	Small urban	9 years	9 years	SK

Participant Stories

This section details the stories that school leaders shared about their experience with a traumatic event in their schools. I made some slight alterations to the stories to protect identities of the participants, the schools, and communities where they served. Because of the high profile of at least one traumatic event, it was not possible to completely anonymize where the event occurred. For the most part, these stories are reported as they were shared with me. I did not alter the essential elements of the stories in any appreciable way and used participants' words whenever possible.

Shelly's Story

Eight years ago, Shelly was one of three vice-principals in a high school in a small city in Alberta. The school had a seasoned vice principal who had been there for close to three decades, another who had been there about three years, and Shelly who was new to the school and the role. The principal was also quite new but had school leadership experience. Prior to Shelly's appointment, the school was downsized, contributing to some internal churn. The school also went through the tragic loss of a student, which had a significant impact on the staff and students. Shelly shared her experience as a new vice principal facing a challenging set of events.

> It was my very first year in administration. The spring previous to my joining the staff, a student died by suicide, which is obviously very traumatic for the community, and for everyone else who was close to that situation.
>
> It was a contributing factor - the year previous to the incident, the school had gone from 1500 students, down to 950 students, because a new high

school opened. The staff had also been ruptured. They were still reeling from that and trying to find their identity and find out who everyone was in these new roles and relationships.

It was my first experience about how we deal with suicide attempts in our community. And I just remember sitting there wondering, what is going on here? And, and how do I help? And what do I do? And what's supposed to be done?

And I remember saying to my principal, like, “Okay, we went to def com five, like boom, here we are.” And then I started to realize the history, and the impact that was having.

What brought it to a head at the school was another student who was struggling with his own mental health had developed an extremely unhealthy obsession with the student who had attempted suicide. And the ripple from that was a lot of blame indicating that his actions had contributed to the attempt.

And he had an impact on the learning community when he was at school. Both of the students – the student who attempted suicide and the one identified by peers as having almost a stalker-like obsession with her were in the French Immersion program. And those cohorts of students are so incredibly tight because they're a small group that usually starts together in kindergarten and stays together all the way through. It quickly rippled throughout the student body and was impacting their

ability to get into school and get learning and it was just coloring everything that was happening at the time.

The vice principal who had been at the school for many years really led the charge through everything. The principal was fairly new to the community. I think it was maybe his second year. But with a great deal of educational leadership behind him, and he was very quick to draw in outside community supports that helped guide us through that process.

The director of counselling was over daily, checking in, offering different ideas, brainstorming, kind of leading. Both being a guide, and just a listener to help us. She teased out parts of our conversations that helped guide us on the path.

The associate superintendent did the same thing. He was as a support and asked questions. You know, "What can we do? How can we help you?" He offered suggestions that maybe we hadn't thought of because our brains were so busy doing other things. From, “should we bring in subs so that these teachers can be released?” to, “should we call Kevin Cameron in?”

The police were also involved. I think their role was mostly information sharing. They would have access to different reports and maybe historic events that we otherwise wouldn't have been aware of and gave us more context and understanding of other events these students were involved

> with. They were able to access information from other organizations that helped us make sure that the kids were safe, and they needed to be.
>
> If I remember correctly, I'm pretty sure they would have done a wellness check or two on some of the students that we were particularly concerned about. And just offering their experience and insight as well, having navigated other traumatic and kind of far-reaching events.

The school leadership worked through the series of events with expert helpers, a diligent team and a student group who extended care to the two struggling students. Both students eventually graduated from high school, which was considered a testament to their resilience and the school leadership's focus on addressing the crises ongoing.

Rick's Participant Story

Rick had been a vice principal for three years in a small to mid-sized community in Alberta. The administrator of 30 years was planning to retire so he was giving Rick as much administrative oversight as possible because he expected Rick to become principal after his retirement. Rick described the traumatic event he was involved with and how it impacted his career and the school.

> One morning my principal and I heard emergency vehicles. They were quite close, and we could see them around the corner, but you don't want to mess with what is going on, so we stayed at the school. One of our grade two students was hit at a crosswalk and six other kids witnessed it. We didn't know what had happened at the time but she was air lifted to the closest city that had a trauma center and a Children's Hospital.

At the time I stayed very calm. The principal was a little more intense and flipping out and organizing. We needed to be calm in the storm. The young teacher [of the injured student] was emotional and lots of people were in tears. I stayed calm during the first two days. The district sent therapists to provide support.

The student survived the accident and spent a lot of time at the Children's Hospital. Medical professionals thought there would be a lot of brain damage.

The student was a new Canadian. She didn't really even know her dad. There was a lot going on with that family.

I had lots of meetings with teachers to make sure they were alright. My wife was a rock for me. In school, I felt I needed to keep calm.

A week later [after the accident], our school schedule was back to normal. The kids were pretty resilient. The teachers took a bit more time.

The student returned a little over a year later, needing some very serious therapy at home and at school. We kept her at grade two with the same teacher. The kids were very good to her for the first few months. Everyone was so sweet and kind to her no matter what she did. "We need to understand she's been in an accident. Let's be kind to her." She had brain effects and was eventually moved into a specialized program.

After that three-month period, however, the other students began saying, “No, I'm not being kind anymore. If she's mean. I'm telling her she's mean”.

The teacher whose class she returned to, was a very young teacher and fairly new. She wore her heart on her sleeve. Those first few months that the injured student was back in the building were very hard on her [the teacher] because she saw her [the student] unable to do the things she used to be able to do. And she [the teacher] really struggled with that.

And I think, honestly, the teachers reacted the same way as the kids. At first, they were all just overjoyed to see her be like, “Oh, you walked with a walker. That's excellent. Good job”.

And they were so sweet. And then it got to a point where they were, “She needs to go to the office because she misbehaved on the playground. You need to deal with her.”

I think she was in the right class because her teacher was such a caring, empathetic teacher. And I think she [the teacher] grew up a ton having to deal with this. But she just became more compassionate if it was even possible.

As far as my career was concerned, the principal the year of the accident had said he couldn't retire until he knew there was someone who could replace him that he trusted to take over his building. His plan was to walk out on the last day of school, hand the keys to me and I would just

> take over and run his building, and it would become my building as I'd worked lots with the staff.
>
> I felt I was positioned very well to do this. I felt the staff respected me, wanted me to be there. And so, I really believed I had the inside track on getting the principalship. When I did interview, unfortunately, they decided to choose somebody else.

Rick identified that the accident was a significant trauma for the school, the students who witnessed the accident and certain teachers who were particularly close to the student. The school experienced a compounded anniversary reaction when the student returned because her injuries were obvious and debilitating.

Rick had a philosophical difference with the superintendent overseeing the division at the time of the accident. Rick believed the emphasis he placed on developing strong relationships with staff and students obstructed his promotion. Rick ended up being in the school as a vice principal for five years in total. After the superintendent retired, Rick moved to a principal position in his district where he has remained for three years.

Katrine's Story

Katrine was a seasoned principal in a large junior-high school of about 700 hundred students in Alberta. Prior to her junior high appointment, she had been a high school principal.

In 2017, Katrine was at an administrators' meeting and returned to the school at the end of the day. She did not always return to the school after administrators' meetings. Given what was to transpire, she was relieved she did. Here is Katrine's story of an event that shook her school community.

It occurred on a day when I was at an administrators' meeting, and I returned to the school after the meeting. Generally, when I would return, I would get a snapshot of the day from our administrator that we left in charge.

And on this particular day, I was met by a student who was rather distraught. He chose not to take the bus home. He was waiting in the school office. And I was glad that I came back to the school. Oftentimes, we don't return to the school. But on this day, I did. And I had a student share with me that he had overheard a group of students saying that they were going to return to our school the following morning with a weapon and in their language, "Shoot up the school".

And this was a grade seven student who obviously was very distraught and felt compelled to come into the office and share this information. It was just myself as my two vice principals were gone for the day. I met with the student and called his mom into the building. Then I took his statement and gathered as much information as I could from him.

I gave him a school book that we have with all the students' photographs to see if he could identify who the boys were that made this threat. Unfortunately, he couldn't identify anybody.

I called the RCMP, and they came in and deemed it to be a viable threat on our school. Generally, in a situation where we have experienced a threat, or a threat of a weapon, or imminent danger to our school, we've

been able to identify who the individuals were fairly quickly. However, in this instance, we were no further ahead.

So, I worked with the RCMP until about eight o'clock that evening. And we had no clue as to who these students were and who this group of boys were that had made this threat.

So, in speaking with our superintendent and the local RCMP, we made the decision to close the school. It was a difficult decision to make because we weren't able to share information as to what the threat was. But we knew if we were to open the school, we could potentially expose ourselves to the threat that had been made. So, we decided to close the school.

Now, this was back in 2017. And at that point in time our communications out to families, to the community, to the public, were not as robust as they are today.

So how we got those messages out was actually quite complicated. I didn't have access to the system-wide-call-out. There was a daycare across the street. We didn't know how to reach them. So, we did our best to communicate school-wide without really having the assurance that we had reached all of the parties.

So, what the RCMP ended up doing was connecting to a local tech system that was able to tap into communications via Facebook, or link to

our school webpage where they could actually see people communicating about the threat.

People were on their social media platforms, saying, "Did you hear the school is closed?"

"Who do you think it is?"

"What do you think it is?"

So, it was just a stream of communications amongst the public, which was fascinating to me, because I wasn't aware that the RCMP could actually access all of that and observe in real time what the public was saying. They were hoping that they would be able to identify who had made the threat or who was involved in it.

So, the night came and went and the next morning I came to the school. No students showed up. My vice principal joined me there, and we were met by the RCMP. And again, we were no further ahead.

And so, the RCMP spent the first few hours questioning if I had any suspects in mind. So literally out of a school of 700 students, my vice principal and I just pulled random names that we felt might have had a vendetta against the school, who might have been in trouble as of late, and were angry. But it was really nothing definitive. We were simply giving names and then the RCMP would drive to these family's homes. Oftentimes, they would get them out of bed and question the student as

to if they were the ones that had made the threat. So that went on for several hours.

I will tell you another part of the story. We had the dogs come in from the RCMP. We were a very large and very old school. So, the layout of the building was very convoluted. Random hallways, corridors that had dead ends, several levels, a basement area, etc. The RCMP asked me a specific question about whether there was any way anybody could have got into the building after hours.

Initially, our superintendent had said, "No, that's impossible, the school is locked". However, that wasn't true, because there was a side door to the gymnasium that a nighttime basketball user group had access to. And oftentimes, it was jacked open with a shoe in the door, so that people wouldn't have to ring the doorbell after hours. It was a very frightening moment when the RCMP recognized that there actually could still be somebody in the building.

At that moment, they let the dogs loose and two dogs ran down to our gym area and started barking in the way that I guess they would if they identified an individual.

In that moment, we were instructed in a frantic tone by the RCMP to get into an office and lock ourselves in while they did this internal search. While my vice principal and I did that, we realized that one of the other side doors into our office was unlocked. So, I ran to that door and

realized I had to lock it from the outside of a hallway, which was very common in the school.

As I was locking it, I could hear footsteps of the RCMP running through the school with the dogs. It took about half an hour for them to do this internal search of this one area. They were not able to locate an individual. So, for the next few hours, we walked with the RCMP hall by hall, classroom by classroom, to search it.

The interesting thing in this process was that I had to lead the way because the RCMP didn't know the layout of our school. And like I said earlier, there were many different areas that they couldn't access or didn't know. The process of following the dogs and having them lead the way with us having to walk a certain way, then stop, and have our hands a certain way so as not to disrupt the job of the canines was quite terrifying. It was also quite enlightening about the significance of having those animals in there. The dogs were trained to identify whether there was a human that they were seeking, a weapon, or drugs.

And so periodically the dogs would stop in certain locations and sniff out a locker, and we would open it to see if any of those things were in there. So that progressed for the whole day, and we were still not able to identify a particular student.

Ironically at one point, I went to the photocopy machine. I found a story that a teacher had sent to the printer from one of his students. It was a

story about a school shooter. So, when we read the story, we thought instantaneously, “This is it”.

This is the student that is involved in this situation. So, the RCMP went to his [the student’s] home, took the student and his family down to the station, and then called me back and said, “It wasn't him”.

So, the day came and went, and we were no further ahead. We were receiving lots of phone calls, and concerned calls from families, wondering what was going on. But we didn't have any further information.

Later that evening, about nine o'clock, I happened to get a random email from a student who said that he overheard his friends, and he thinks that they might be the ones that made this threat.

And so, he gave me the names of some students. I called the RCMP, and those three students admitted to being the ones that made the threats.

The next day involved meeting with those students and their families, to determine if the threat was credible – if they were viable threat makers and if they had access to weapons, what their family situations were, etc.

It was deemed after two days that there was no intent to actually harm. It was words and statements amongst peers. But it was done in such a public forum, that other students heard it.

> So, the situation lasted two days. And on the third day, we reopened the school and brought everybody back. That was pretty much the story in a nutshell. So, it had a good ending. But it was extremely stressful and traumatic in in those first few days.

While no harm from violence occurred, this event had a significant impact on the school community as well as the leadership of the school. In time, Katrine moved to an elementary school principal position in the same community.

Elise's Participant Story

Elise was an elementary (K-8) vice principal in a school of 500 students. Most of her time was spent with her vice principal duties rather than the few teaching duties she was assigned. Her school was designated a community school and located in the downtown, core area of the city. Elise shared that she had a background in behaviour classrooms and has seen and experienced many distressing events in her time as a teacher and administrator. However, the story she shared made a particularly impactful impression in her.

> I spent many years in a structured learning classroom with kids with extreme social-emotional needs, as well as working with kids who were coming out of custody. I spent a number of years in community schools as well. So, there's not been a lot that I haven't seen, or experienced, and even violence against me from kids.
>
> Community schools are designated schools based on their socio-economic status, and their makeup of student population. So, about a third of our kids were First Nations, a third of our kids were new

Canadians, and a third of our kids were probably living just above the poverty line. So, it was a hot community.

I was an administrator in that school division for seven years. And four of those years were in a community school. And three of those years were in a "hot" school.

The one I was thinking of was when I was a vice principal. This event was the first time where trauma affected an adult. It was something I don't know whether people would even consider traumatic. When I think of all the events I've gone through, which have been many, I would say this was one that actually slid under, and most people wouldn't have known occurred. But it's one when I reflect that probably had the most significant impact on me in my role.

As it began, my admin partner and I were meeting with a mom and her daughter about some concerns we had about attendance and behavior. They were a larger family in the school and their older child was really struggling and we asked mom to come in. We had some history with her, she was kind of volatile at times. She cared about her kids but could be reacting a little explosive.

So, we were there together. And as the meeting progressed, it was not going well. They had a bit of a history together my admin partner and her and it wasn't smoothing over.

So, as things were getting heightened, and it was beginning to get more aggressive, my admin partner tried to excuse himself from the meeting, which we thought was best. He was just going to leave, and I would take over.

But as he stood up, she also stood up and picked up a chair, and attacked him with the chair. And, then we got him out of there and got her out of there. And then it erupted into the school more. But of course, nobody really knew what was going on, but the two of us. So, we had to get her out of the school and get her kids out of the school without it being traumatic for them, or any of the other kids or staff in the building.

Then it escalated from there through legalities and restraining orders and she was prohibited from being on school grounds and all of those terrible things.

I chose that event because I've had so many violent and traumatic events at school. But that was the first time I saw somebody I cared about where it was unsafe for them, physically unsafe. And me, I had a kid dislocate my thumb, like sure all that. But that was me. That was the first time it happened to someone else that I was with.

I've had parents yell at me and stuff. But you never think that they're actually going harm you, or put their hands on you or, threaten you in any way. Verbally sure, people get mad, and everybody's had that, but

those are just words. But that was the first time I'd actually had an adult that close to doing something that could have gone sideways really fast.

That was the first time I had felt unsafe and worried about my partner. That was the first time I'd ever really worried about a staff member being unsafe under my care.

Like nobody knew, right? Because it was the two of us, and our superintendent knew. And our support team at the division, but we couldn't even tell anybody else on staff what had happened. So, yeah, both of us were impacted by that.

That day, she's [the mother] like, "I'm pulling everyone out".

So, she grabbed the kids and they left. And we tried really hard to keep them coming. And they eventually started coming back and the kids were fine. I don't know, the older one, I felt really bad because she witnessed what had happened there.

And the police were involved, and their victim services were involved and those types of things. So that wasn't good. But eventually, we could talk to each other, but she was not allowed back on the school property. So, it was ugly, ugly, ugly.

I still struggle with saying people are excluded from the building. Like I really hate to say, "No, I'm sorry, you're no longer welcome there". And

> after that experience, I was like, “You know what? You're no longer welcome here.”
>
> That was a decision made by the division, which they were correct in doing. And I supported it at that time. Whereas other times, especially with students, I would advocate on their behalf. That was not going to happen on this one.
>
> Maybe it was because it wasn't me that the threat was made against. Maybe I'd feel different if it was against me, but I was really upset about what happened to my partner. And so that changed. Sometimes people can't be welcome in your school. And that's following my core values of making everybody safe.

School safety has been a crucial principle for Elise across her career. Although the situation with the parent’s behavioural escalation was speedily managed at the school level, the possible repercussions troubled Elise because of how vulnerable it made her administrative partner.

Jeanette’s Story

Thirteen years ago, Jeanette was an experienced principal in a mid-sized high school on the East coast of Canada. She had been a school administrator for twenty years, and at this high school as principal for ten. She knew the community and families well. One night the unthinkable happened to a senior boy’s athletics team.

> It involved a van carrying twelve players and the coach coming back from a game in the southern part of the province. They were coming over

the hill and were almost home. But before that happened, they went across the road in front of another vehicle. Eight young players were killed. A parent who had traveled with them was also killed. There were four survivors, including the coach, the team's student-manager, and two other players.

That night, I was supposed to go and spend the night with my mother. She had a caregiver during the daytime and my siblings, and I would alternate spending the night with her.

It was a Friday night. And when I came home from work, I was exhausted. I laid on the couch after supper and fell asleep. About 8:30 which would be the time that I would head over to her place, I got up and looked out the window. I just came out of a dead sleep and said, "I can't do it. I can't move."

I laid back down on the couch and fell asleep until the phone rang just after midnight. I was zonked out. It was the police dispatcher. She named the coach and said that he had called in; that there was an accident, and there were fatalities. Basically, that was how I heard, from the police dispatcher.

It would have been within minutes from the time the coach called in. Had I not been at home, I would have been a lot harder to find because people wouldn't know where I was right away. But as it was, I was able to call my superintendent, vice principals and guidance counselors. I

would say I was out the door, where I thought I should be within less than a half hour.

First of all, I told my vice principal that I'd meet him at the high school, because I thought that was where they'd be coming in and when he met me, he said, "No, they go to McDonald's to meet the parents."

So, we drove right to McDonald's which is five minutes away. And when we got there, they told us that the police had told the parents to go to the hospital. So, we went directly to the emergency room.

When I arrived, the parents were there. No ambulances had come in. And we were waiting, and waiting, and waiting, and no ambulances came in.

And they were asking me, "What's happening?"

I couldn't tell them any more. "Basically, I can't tell you anything. I don't know the facts".

I didn't say, "There are fatalities". I didn't know who they were.

And there were a few parents who weren't there because their boys had cars of their own. And their cars were parked at school, and they were going to drive themselves home. And the police were trying to contact them.

A few of those parents came in later. The incident progressed and I had my cell phone with me. So, I was in contact with the police officer on the

scene, who also was our school liaison officer from the police department, a senior veteran police officer.

I had a great working relationship with him. He would call me and tell me what he knew. And basically, he said the same, “Until you can inform the parents, you're not going to say who is deceased and who is not. The parents have to be informed.”

There was only one ambulance that came in. And in that ambulance was the three surviving students, the girl (student-manager) and the two boys. And the coach didn't come in. And I was kind of waiting for him.

At the hospital, one of the nurses said "No, Jeff, that's the coach's name, didn't make it".

I thought, he called the police to tell them about the accident. But anyway, I never said a word, and the injuries for the three that came in were not life threatening.

I think the worst one had a broken femur and a few other things. The other two pretty much overnight. Just the luck of the draw, I guess.

And then eventually, I found out that Jeff was still at the scene being questioned by police officers about what happened. He originally tried to help out as much as he could with the victims who were pretty much beyond help, but he was trying his best.

When the bodies came in, they were coming into the morgue. The police officer called me to say that he was coming into the hospital, and we would inform the parents together.

While I was waiting for him to come in from the scene, one of the nurses from emergency came out, and basically said, "That's it. There are no more ambulances coming in".

And I just looked at her and I thought, “Well, that's one way to do it”.

You know, “So like what do they mean?”

“What does that mean?”

“There are no more survivors,” is basically what I had to tell the parents. Anyway, and I'm still thinking at this time that Jeff is dead, but he's not.

The parents there were being supportive of each other. And those there at that time were looking to me for direction and information. There was a level of trust there. But as some of the later parents came in, the anger came in. And, you know, it was hard.

I was there with them until they all went to identify their sons. And they kind of got together and decided what they were going to do from there. But because word was going around by then, it had gotten out in the community, and some of the kids’ friends showed up at the hospital, and we had to help them out.

And we decided we were going to open the school. We opened the school, and anybody who was there, was invited to come back so that they could be together. And I had staff members who came in, because, of course, they had children the same age. Word got to them, so they automatically came to the school. Guidance counselors were there, the administrators were there. A lot of the teachers ended up there. So, it was just kind of a place to gather.

So, while they were gathering, I had to meet with some kind of a crisis response team. We did do that, and the police officer who was on scene was our liaison. He had two officers with him. We had dealt with them and had a good working relationship with them.

I had my administration staff and my guidance staff. We set out a plan in the staff room that night for what we were going to do for the next 24 hours. That's as far ahead as we could plan. So, the first thing was I went down to inform the public and the students and the staff who had showed up as to who the victims were. Get the facts out. Nothing but the facts.

So, I had to stand in front of, well, probably there wasn't a lot of people there, like it's three o'clock in the morning. There might have been fifty or sixty people there. And I read out the victim’s names, to tell them that they were deceased.

The next thing I had to do was to inform the school in general. So, I sent out a voicemail to all the homes because we had a telephone system,

whereby we could send messages to the homes regularly for different information from the school.

So, we probably stayed with them till about 4:30 or 5:00 in the morning. We opened the school the next day again. It was a Saturday. But everybody came in - staff was there to speak to students, and the public was invited in.

And we pretty much stayed open that day until four o'clock and then I said, “I really have to protect my staff. You understand this. So, we're going to go home, and we're going to try to get some rest and we'll be back tomorrow.”

We had two days, because it was a weekend where we could meet with the kids before they came to school on Monday. There would be a lot of kids who wouldn't have been able to be there in those two days because we cover a fairly large geographical area.

So, the first time they would be coming to the school would be Monday morning on the school bus. So basically, we had another day, and we started to get support from the district. Like, other guidance counselors came in from other schools, from different parts of the district. Retired staff members came in just to supervise at noon hour. They were people that the kids knew and had only retired within the last couple of years. We had people in doing food, sympathy cards, all that kind of stuff that

you would normally do in any traumatic event - of which we've had many - but that was the biggest yet.

We were just about to start semester exams. Everybody was in a panic, you know, "What are we going to do?"

"The thing we're going to do is going to get the kids back in school."

The least of our worries was that they didn't have exams. A lot of people, the staff were starting to work through the grief, and they were on the verge of anger and the whole bit.

So, we canceled exams, tried to get back to as much normalcy as possible. Because although this was a lot of students, half of our school probably didn't really know them. Because the grade nines and tens at that time, in high school - it's a big difference if you're a year or two younger. They were upset that this had happened, but it wasn't as dramatic as it was for the older ones. So, we were able to focus on the grade elevens and twelves a bit more.

We had an arrangement at the school, based on a provincial model, but it wasn't popular. I personally liked it a lot. But we had our nines and tens in teams. We had three teams. And they were combined. It was not just a grade nine team or a grade ten team. You were in the Maroons, the name of one team. Or you were in the Indigos, or you were in the Charcoals. So, you were on one of those three teams. And those three teams had a

group of teachers that taught all the kids all of the subjects, except for stuff like music and Phys Ed, and I think, technology.

So, they would have a separate wing of the school or section of the school that was just theirs. Those teachers had each other to help their kids. They didn't have to worry about a different set of kids coming in every period.

A lot of their kids they had for two years. Like the grade tens they would have taught before. So, they knew them really well. I could count on them to look after their kids. And what I had to look after was the eleven and twelve teachers, although we did a lot of team building at the school prior to the accident.

There were very strong connections cross-curricular between people. They still went into their own little classroom, shut the door and were by themselves though. I had to pay a little bit more attention to them.

But the strangest thing happened. While we were dealing with this, the undertaker called me. "Jeanette, you've got to plan these funerals."

I said, "What? I've got to plan the funerals?"

"Yes, because we can't do that many funerals separately, it has to be done as one group."

"Don't you think the parents should be the ones to plan the funerals?"

Anyway, somehow, it got arranged, that we had to plan the funeral.

It was a very small space that the undertaker had. We had a great relationship with City Hall. We got the Civic Center that seats over 3500 people. And that's where we had the funeral.

I had a teacher on staff that I had a great deal of respect for. I knew I couldn't plan the funeral. And I called her in, actually there were two of them. Two of them, salt of the earth, strong teachers. Strong. Greatly respected by their students and the community.

I said, "Can you do this?"

So, we had the funeral, except for the parent sponsor. That funeral was separate. But all the boys were together. Well, the funeral was together.

And all of the high school students were there and as many community members as we could fit in. And the parking lot was full, and it was televised. And we did the best we could.

And it was very, very hard for the families. Some of them were angry. Because, you know, they wanted to honor their children in their own ways. But to break from that group was asking a lot of them. You may not have wanted to be in the group, but you didn't want to get out of it either.

So, they were between a rock and a hard place. Like, you can't have only a few boys at the Center when the whole community is talking about it.

And so, what they did eventually was have some private ceremonies afterwards.

My life has been a litany of tragic events. I'm kind of a tragic event guru. This was the big one, I think. The rest prepared me a little bit for it, in terms of the way I approached it, the confidence in myself.

But I remember sitting at my desk in my office, and I'm going to cry…There was a dear friend of mine who was a teacher, we taught together, we went to university together, was killed in a car accident when she was 39 years old. She was like a sister to me. And I always had her picture on my bookshelf in my office. And I just looked at it and a feeling of a calm came over me.

I just knew I can't fix everything. All I can do is look after the school. And if we're good, the community will be good. If we fall apart, the community will be worse.

The parents, obviously the families, they were sacred to me. I knew there was anger, I knew there was blame. It was all justified. It was what it was. I did what I could. Like I said, that was sacred.

The school - I was going to look after them. And if I look after them, the rest will be alright. So that was my thought. I cannot control everything. But I can have a lot of control over these four walls.

There was just this calm, and I thought, “I know what to do”.

> Every time a decision had to be made, I felt, “I know what to do”.
>
> For example, at the funeral, the Minister of Education at that time was there. Best wishes from the government, offers of help. He said, "If there's anything we can do, just call me".
>
> I said, "I'll be in touch." I knew I needed a trauma counselor.
>
> Not just a counselor, but someone who was specifically trained in trauma. And I wanted them in my building. I didn't know where I was going to get that person. But I figured he [the Minister of Education] was a good place to start.
>
> Anyway, like I needed this for my students for my staff. They have to have this, and I have to have another team member to council me about what I'm doing. Well, maybe a little bit of regular help. But I just felt I know what to do. So that was that.

Jeanette and her administrative team walked through a very complicated year as they supported the students, staff, and community to return to a semblance of normalcy despite the pain of tragic loss remaining present in their school and community. Jeanette stayed two more years in that school until she retired. (See Appendix H for Jeanette’s full addendum sent via email after the interview)

Maria’s Story

Maria began her teaching career in the 1980s. She taught for about 15 years before moving into a vice principal position. In 1999, Maria was the principal of a mid-sized Ontario school situated on the outskirts of a city of approximately 150,000 people. The school was part

of a district that had both city and rural schools. Maria was new to the school and community where she began her principalship. Maria was made aware that the school had undergone several challenges and upheaval prior to her beginning her tenure as principal. Maria's first principal role started at the beginning of the second term.

> This school had trauma even before I got there. Here's what happened. Oh my god, this was the third school in the same building. So, it was public [the school district]. Then it was passed over to the Catholic Board. And then it became the school where I was.
>
> Do you want to know how the staff and the students found out their school was closing? On the six o'clock news. So, on the six o'clock news, that's how the community found out they were no longer going to be in the city building and moving there.
>
> Now that was two principals before I got there. So, the first principal is angry. He's beside himself. So, the second one comes in, and she starts working on changing the presentation of the school and she works on the community to get the community to see the school differently. Not the inside, but the outside. And she does a really good job. So, she's got a strong parent council, she has been doing some work in the community. They like the school.
>
> When I walked in the very first day, I saw kids running rampant. And I said to the VP, "What's that kid doing?"
>
> Well, I was told, "Just leave him alone. And just let him be".

I said, "He's running in and out of classrooms".

She goes, "No, no, I was told not to address this". A kid punched her. And she was told not to suspend him, just keep the image that it was a good school.

So, when I walked in there, I said, "Well, that's all got to change".

And on my third day, the vice principal ran down the hall after she turned off the fire alarm. And she said, “It's real. It's real. Evacuate the school”.

And I looked at her and I said, "Okay", because it was lunchtime. So, we had to find everybody because they weren’t in class.

It was the third day in February, which was the third day of the semester, and it was winter. We evacuated the school and I'm sitting there wondering, where's the fire department because there was smoke? At this time, I didn't know what transpired.

And they said, "Oh, we live out the country. So, we have volunteer firefighters".

I said, "Oh, okay".

At that time, principals didn't have cell phones. So, I borrowed the custodian’s phone to call the Board Office to say, "We had to evacuate the school. It appears that the fire department’s coming."

Everybody was at work, and it took a while for the volunteer fire department to come. We found out later, one of the students had gone online and learned how to create a bomb. He had gone up to the second floor and had dropped the bomb down the stairwell.

Luckily, he wasn't very good at building bombs, so it didn't explode. But all the smoke came. And we were fortunate that only a couple of students had to go for medical care because of smoke inhalation.

So, the division office said, "Well, okay, we're not going to send the school buses, because it'll throw the school bus schedules off for everybody else."

So, I said, "Well, what do you want me to do?

“Just keep everybody outside and keep everybody together."

So, I walked around and checked to see how everybody was doing and I was joking, because I didn’t know it was a bomb. I just thought it was smoke.

Anyhow, I think we were outside for maybe an hour and a half. And then the fire department said, "It's okay for you to go back into the building".

So, we went back into the building. And later on, we found out that it had been a homemade bomb. And the young person was arrested. And I didn't know this kid from a whole in the ground, I’d only been in the school for three days.

It compounded because we had a teacher die from cancer, and we had a young person die by suicide. We had a kid who turned on the gas in a science lab and the supply teacher had noticed that we had a gas leak. We had two other little fires in the school. All of this had transpired in less than six weeks in our school.

The superintendent said, “You've learned more and had more experience in your six weeks of being a principal than some people in ten years”.

All of those things happened together. And of course, I was new as an administrator. In that school year, in April, the shooting at Columbine happened. So, remember there was nothing out of the ordinary done for our school because it was so out of the ordinary what happened.

So, Columbine happened and of course it's very traumatic. We're in a school, and then Tabor happens.

And at that time, I had three or four students who came into my office, and they said, "Miss that could have been us".

And I said, "You're right, it could have been."

Remember, I still have no idea that all of this stuff is actually trauma. I didn't even know the word trauma back then.

The other thing that transpired during that time was, I asked, "Where am I supposed to bring these kids if something else happens?"

At the time, I was a volunteer for Red Cross. So, I partnered up with Red Cross, the Police, and Fire and the City to come up with a backup location, which was an arena that wasn't very far. And we did a dry run through.

So, I told all the parents, "This is our dry run through. This is where the kids will be."

I didn't do it right after the bomb. I did it after we were getting bomb scares, and I decided we needed to figure this out. And that helped to calm people.

Interestingly the following year, one of the other high schools in the city, one of the academic schools, had a bomb scare. And they had the dogs, and the school was closed for two days until they were sure there was no bomb.

Now I had staff in my office saying, "When it happened to us, no one cared. When it happened to us, they didn't close the school. When it happened to us, it didn't make the newspaper."

And I said, "Well, you're right". And I said, "We were the first. But think about it. Do you really want us to be in the newspaper? Because there was a bomb scare?"

> I said, "We handled it." And ours was about a three-line reference to the kid who made the bomb, and his Court appearance. And that was it. That was all.
>
> And then my father dies, the following year, in 2000 - suddenly, he wasn't sick. So, all these things are compounding. And I have no idea until I got involved with Kevin [Cameron] in the VTRA, taking TES, and working really closely with our protocol partners and understanding the trauma lens.
>
> I was in a major car accident in 2004. And part of it was counseling, and I was diagnosed with PTSD. And he said it wasn't the car accident. It's all these other things that happened in your life that have layered on top of one another which brought you to this point.
>
> My mom died when I was eight. So, I was just raised to keep doing what I had to do. And I just kept on motoring.

Maria remained a school principal in that school three more years until the school was closed owing to declining enrollment. She became passionately focused on school safety, school climate and culture and building capacity with her staff, in part, after her early experiences as a novice school principal.

Isabella's Story

Isabella had been a vice principal in the same prairie-province middle school for five years. Near the end of her fifth year, a high-profile grade nine student died by suicide. Isabella

had worked closely with this student for three years, and his death had a substantial impact on her.

> I was a vice principal at a middle school, and one of my students in grade nine committed suicide. It was right in June, close to the end of the school year. And I had already found out that I was going to be transferred to the high school for the following school year. So, I actually followed that cohort of grade nine students into grade ten. Now they're in grade eleven, and I'm their vice principal.
>
> He was a student that had been flagged to us when he came in grade seven. He was at risk for a few different reasons, like his grandpa had just passed away. He had some issues at home, some mental health concerns. And he was a student that I worked with quite a bit through all three years. Because he was sometimes in the office. And it's a middle school of around 400 kids, so you get to know the kids really well.
>
> I had been away on a PD when I got a phone call at home. That was probably about a month before it all happened. And my principal said, "Hey, this student is suicidal. But he's working with these two counselors, and we have a plan. He's doing check-ins, blah, blah, blah".
>
> I was like, "Okay, well, he's wrapped up, and I'm not going to be asking him about a bunch of this stuff".

We had our achievement night and then, one evening, I was home, and my principal phoned me and was just like, "I have to tell you something really bad". She said he had committed suicide.

And I went right down to the ground. Our division has a Tragic Event Response Team [TERT], and I knew we had to do the TERT response. I had to phone staff and tell them, and that was really difficult.

We found out afterwards he'd gone back and visited the elementary school that he went to. And his elementary school teacher had committed suicide on the same day that he chose, and in the same way. But we didn't know he'd been back at the elementary school a couple of weeks before this all happened.

But after this happened, then they're like, "Oh, my gosh, he was at school". That was another reason why he was flagged when he came to us, because he'd been part of this class where his teacher died by suicide.

We canceled finals. It wasn't a normal school day. The students didn't all come. But some stayed in the building. We had a little area where kids went who were really upset and we brought them to different counselling teams. And if other kids were feeling okay, we gave permission for them to still carry on with their day.

Another thing we did as leadership was went to his house. Myself, the principal, and then our two school counselors. And our director went to

the home, visited with his mom, and his stepdad, and his grandma. That was really hard.

And we went to the funeral. We didn't stay for the lunch though. There was a big candlelight vigil that she [the student's mom] did, but I didn't go to that. I was careful with how much I went to. And careful how much I looked at social media. I didn't follow his mom on social media because I didn't want to expose myself to it. Because it was negative, and I couldn't spend my time on it.

In the fall, when teachers came back, they did some check-ins. I came back to the middle school and did a check-in. They had a person from Mental Health, and anybody that wanted to come back, came back. I went because that was the September after I had left the school. In October I was dealing with all these upset kids. And it was really hard. And people in my building didn't know the student who passed.

They heard rumors like, "Yeah, I heard he was being bullied".

It's not just as simple as someone being bullied, and this happened. So, I did go back to the one session in September, because I needed to unload and share some of the stuff that was going on.

For me, I was following his class into the high school. We ended grade nine, then they had the summer and maybe they got their mind off things. Then we all came back to school. I spent probably the first month or month and a half, working with kids that would be crying over him

and missing him and thinking about him. And this was kids from all of the middle schools, not just mine.

And he was a fringe kid. He played hockey. He was in drama club. He had friends in so many different circles. And so, it impacted a lot of kids.

And then they came out with these hoodies with his picture on it. It was almost retriggering of trauma for these kids. And the first time I saw a hoodie, I had a moment because his face was right on the front of the hoodie. And all these kids were wearing it with his picture on it.

I had kids that went and got tattoos done referencing him. And a student came and showed me. On top of it, his mom was on social media talking about how he was bullied.

And that also hurts me because I was admin in the building. And it's like if he was being bullied to a point where he actually took his own life, what am I doing? How am I leading my building? You don't want to be leading a building where someone comes says, "Well, they, committed suicide because of being bullied".

He did break up with a girlfriend. And to me breaking up with someone is not bullying. But his mom was on social media saying, "Stand up, speak out, be kind". She was on social media all the time sharing about him being bullied, and then she started to call out the girl that broke up with him.

She'd be like, "That girl. And I don't even want to call her his girlfriend. She did this and that".

I called our school resource officer [SRO] a couple of times because of what his mom posted on social media. This girl [former girlfriend] was sometimes afraid to come to school. And she actually felt like harming herself because of posts that this mom put up.

And our SRO said, "I can't [pursue anything legal] because she's [mom] not naming her [former girlfriend], so there's not much I can do about it. But, Isabella, she's [mom] literally on the line. Actually, we could pursue this legally as almost like a slander piece".

So, I was also working through that. I had both sides - I had kids grieving and triggered, and in my office crying, and then I had kids that were afraid to come to school.

I also had another girl who made a comment in a girl's washroom that she thought the hoodies were expensive, and a money grab. And the deceased boy’s mom went on social media saying, "This girl at the high school says this is a money grab, blah, blah, blah".

Then this girl was afraid to come to school. Her mom called me and said, "My daughter can't come to school. She's terrified she's going to get beat up".

Again, I called my SRO and asked, "How can she [mom] be putting this out on social media?" And so, I was walking a fine line, trying to support both sides.

It was tough to lead through things like that, especially when the bullying piece came out. That he was bullied, and that's why he took his life.

It's like, wait a minute. Like he came to us troubled. And then the date that he picked was the date his teacher died by suicide. Like there were so many layers to it. But the public doesn't know that. And I certainly can't say that. So, I'm constantly biting my tongue.

But she [his mom] was doing some public speaking events for a parent group in our city. And someone came and said, "This speech was on social media about this terrible girl that made her son commit suicide".

And, you know, we have to be so careful with whom we allow speak. And I think, do you know the full story? And if someone's still grieving, maybe they shouldn't be speaking publicly until maybe they've had some time to heal or see things more clearly.

And they do a Wish Foundation thing in our city, and the boy's family won. Someone nominated them, and it was to get their ceiling tiles put on their basement ceiling because he had hung himself.

> The wish was to give them a finished ceiling in the basement. And my [former] principal phoned me and said, "Isabella, this is coming out". And we had kids crying at school.
>
> She [the middle-school principal] said, "I don't know if it's going to impact you guys at your building. But just so you know". And I mean, they recorded the phone call. And then they played it on the radio. And you get retriggered by different things.
>
> And now for me, if a kid says they're going to hang themselves, I view it as a different level of concern. I've had kids take pills, I've had kids cut, I've had kids do some different things. But when the kid's talking about hanging themselves, I know that I can feel [it].

While Isabella described a central event with the suicide death of a student, the year following involved students who were repeatedly impacted by reminders of the loss. These reminders not only affect students and the school culture, but they also affected the staff.

Ruth's Story

Ruth has been a vice principal in a high school (9-12) in the same community since 2012. She is moving to a principalship in another school in the same district in the fall of 2021. While Ruth described a primary event, she reflected on an earlier event, highlighting personal and division growth with respect to school-based trauma.

> So, we live in an oil field, farming, and rural area. We're sort of on the crux of being a city and a town. We have approximately around 5000

people all the time. There are always arguments about whether we're city or town.

What that means, is we have a lot of transient people due to the industries that impact people here and that people are drawn to. It also means that we have a good hub of people that have been here for a very long time. We have some really strong farming families and the community within the agricultural sector is strong.

But the oil and gas piece make it a little bit more difficult to deal with certain things. We don't have a lot of outside agency support for the school. Everyone has to travel out. We're in the middle of nowhere; the closest cities are all two hours away, no matter which direction you go in.

When it comes to things like social services or accessing any sort of professionals, you usually have to travel quite a way. Our town itself has a few grocery stores, quite a few hotels used for tournaments. It's a big hockey town, big dance town, those kinds of things. And there are three schools in our town.

The high school has about 268 kids, and we're grade nine to twelve. The middle school has about 280 kids, and that's grade five to eight. And then we have an elementary, which is a pre-K to four. They have, I think over 300 students.

And for the most part, it's a busy little town, and there's always something happening because of the oilfield. You can drive out pretty much any time day or night, and there will be trucks and people going to and from work. It never really seems to sleep. People think it’s strange when they first move here that you hear trucks day and night all the time.

I may have only been a vice principal for a year and was very, very new. I would say prior to the traumatic events, especially the first one I didn't really see myself as being ta leader for the community.

After that first traumatic event, no one cared that you were just a leader at the school; you were now a leader no matter what, without wanting to. It was just assumed that you were now going to take that role within the community as well. And it was definitely something assumed by the school that we’d figure out how to help navigate everyone else through that trauma.

In the first instance, it was definitely, “what is the school going to do to help everyone get through this?” And that's how I felt. And it was assumed that the school would help hold ceremonies and would then house the memory of the student. The school would then become and take on that legacy after the first event.

It got very intense because our divisional leadership was just getting into trauma/VTRA conversations and learning that it is not the role that the school should take on alone.

There are pieces of support, but the school can't live in that memory. And that didn't go over well in the community. There ended up being some pretty harsh situations, some awful situations because of that.

With responses early on, as horrible as this sounds, it would depend on how popular the student and their family were. So, this came to a head because the school division was recognizing much more wholeheartedly, that you can't treat one trauma as more important than the next.

There should be a protocol. We had processes, we had procedures, we had policies, but parents expected everyone to sidestep them in their child's case. In this case, the student who passed away was very popular. He was well known in the community, and everyone really liked him. His family was well known. And so, the parents had exceptions.

They expected that we were going to name the football field for him and dedicate a wing of the school to him. That this was such an incredible burden to the community that we needed to make the loss of their son known and impact future generations. Which, right or wrong, that's how the parents felt at the time. That's how some community members felt.

There was that pressure, and the division was saying that sometimes significant memorials might have happened in the past. But we can't do this every time. And the parents did not want to hear that, and neither did different people in the community. But the division was very conscious,

that we can't do those types of things. It's not healthy. And it's definitely not feasible every time someone has a trauma or a tragedy.

Our principal at that time was definitely more concerned about the idea of fairness in this situation and equality with other families. There had been a student who passed away, who had been involved in drugs and other not great things. And she was constantly being compared saying she didn't have an impact. That was what the higher profile family of the boy would say.

And there was a struggle, because of course that girl had an impact, but you [boy’s family] just didn't feel it. And it wasn't your [child] and so it was just a very strange comparison.

And then, of course, the girl’s family was watching to see what happened after this new trauma. And there was comparing. It was quite awful, I'll be honest with you.

And then there were people saying, "So now it's a popularity contest. The more popular your kid is, the more the school is going to do for you".

The school was very cognisant of that, and definitely not wanting that to be the case. As a new administrator, I was observing intently because I wanted to know. I wanted to see what would happen. How is this going to impact us moving forward? And it had a huge impact on me. Even when we deal with things that could potentially turn the wrong way.

We're very careful in what we say. We go back and refer to Kevin Cameron's work, and we want to be very careful in the decisions we make. And that's what the division has been very careful of. Probably more so than they would have been in the past. They would have kind of done what the public or the family wanted a little more.

The event I decided to focus on though was most unusual and didn't play out the way it probably normally would have. We had a student pass away right after we shut down for Covid last year. And it was quite traumatic. It was related to drinking as a young person. And it happened suddenly out of the blue with a family that struggles in the first place but had actually been doing decently well. People were fairly shocked. And he was only in grade nine.

The problematic piece of all of it was that due to Covid, all of us were working from home. All we've learned from VTRA and Traumatic Events System training, [the response] wasn't able to play out the way it normally would.

In that particular instance, it made it much harder as administrators to know what to do. It was harder to know how to respond effectively for everybody's healing, and everyone's ability to manage what had happened. So that was a struggle.

The principal that I work with, was very close to the family because he'd coached many of their kids, and this son in particular. For him, it was even harder.

I was a little more removed because I didn't have that personal connection. But it was pretty dramatic.

I think the anniversary is in June. So, it happened, just not in great times. That would never be a great time, I suppose. But I mean, we were right in the thick of Covid and everything. And so, the family has not coped well. And, it was awful, actually.

That one that stuck out for me, and then that event years ago, when I first became an administrator. Those two resonated. The current event stuck out because of the difference in how we could respond, react, or even just support.

In the more current event, minor sports took a big role, because the student was highly involved in sports. The family was heavily supported by everybody, like, churches came out; they don't even attend the church, but they were coming out. It seemed like everyone needed something to rally behind. And unfortunately, that was what it happened to be. But it was it was beautiful, in a way as well, to see what all happened. And it was definitely a more shared responsibility in helping the family. Our leadership role seemed a bit more shared; more collective or collaborative would be better words.

> We felt better prepared to manage and knew there would maybe be some hard feelings. We knew that regardless due to Covid we couldn't respond as we would have without the restrictions. People seemed to accept that a little bit better. And there wasn't that same intense push to house the legacy at the school. Or for the loss to rest on the school's shoulders. The school was still seen as a source of help, but it was much more collective this time.
>
> As a school leader, you are never considered an individual person. You are always connected to the school - it does not matter…I think maybe in a city, you could maybe see it a bit differently, but out here, you are constantly wearing that hat.

Ruth identified significant growth in understanding how to respond to traumatic events in her school. Her final reflections emphasised the burden some administrators feel in leading not only the school response but being part of a larger community response after a traumatic event.

Lars' Story

In 2011, Lars was a teaching principal in a small, rural K-12 school of approximately 85 students in a prairie province. He was teaching a class when a routine question resulted in some challenging consequences.

> So, we had a grade four/five class, and we were coming off a recess break. As we were going to class, I had a boy that asked if he could use the washroom. We were just going to be doing a fire drill inside. We

were just going to go over procedures for the fire drill, and it would take about ten minutes. And then we were going to the computer lab to work.

So, we had just come back from recess. And, on our way back into class, he had passed two bathrooms on the way in.

And so, when he asked for the bathroom, I said, "No, we'll be going to the computer lab in about ten minutes and wait until then".

I guess somewhere in between there and ten minutes, he actually had to use the bathroom and couldn't hold it and ended up having an accident. And so, you know, I let him go to the washroom, obviously. And I thought everything was okay. He was able to clean up and change into his gym clothes.

And when I got home that day at five o'clock, I had a message on my answering machine from his dad saying, "If you're man enough, call me".

So, I called him, and he launched into me and called me a bunch of names. I don't know if I can actually use them here. But he called me a bunch of names. And then he said, “Next time, I'm coming, to your community, where you live, and I'm going to F-ing kill you”.

So that was that. And he called me some pretty bad names and threatened to kill me a couple of times. It didn't quite end there. I talked him down a little bit and, I apologized. And two days later, we had a ski

trip. And the mom and the son were on ski trip. So, I had a chance to talk to the mom and her son and settled everything down.

But the death-threat part didn't sit too well with me. So, I was wondering, okay, what should I do? Because you shouldn't be able to really make death threats. So, then I talked to my director about it and was wondering what to do.

The very next morning after the ski trip, the RCMP happened to come into the school about an unrelated incident. And I thought maybe this was a sign that I should tell the RCMP.

So, I told the RCMP about it. And that's when I learned once you tell the RCMP something, it's out of your hands. And so, they said they'd check into it. And twenty minutes later they had the guy arrested. I guess he had some other criminal matters. They didn't waste any time.

So then, I had to deal with that. And it went to Court. I wasn't at the initial Court proceedings, but one of the reporters on the local paper got wind of it. And, when they did up their report, it was completely out of context - kind of an ambulance chasing scenario. They didn't use my name thankfully, but it was completely out of context.

It was like, “The principal refuses to let the kid go bathroom and was mean about it,” and all kinds of stuff and wasn't accurate. My school division called the reporter and kind of got it cleaned up.

So, the student had an older sibling. What was too bad about it, was we got along quite well. I had very decent rapport with the older brother. And that just went sideways after that, too. I've since heard, he doesn't think too highly of me. So, that's the way it goes.

The whole family left the school. That’s really unfortunate for them too, because that uprooted them, when they wouldn't have been expecting or necessarily wanting that.

I kind of lost interest in going beyond in school leadership, which seems counterintuitive, because, if I would have gone for division leadership, it would have gotten me out of school. But for whatever reason, I didn't feel like I wanted to pursue leadership at the division level after that. So that was a change. And I'm not entirely sure why. It's just the feeling I had that I didn't really want to do that anymore.

Part of this whole equation was my wife teaches on staff here as well. She was probably affected by this incident more than I was. She was probably more concerned about my safety than I was concerned. I never really was that concerned about my safety. I was more embarrassed about the whole incident for the community and for the family and, for the staff. There was more of an embarrassment for me than anything else.

And then you feel horrible about displacing a family like that. And, you know, over a dumb decision, really. If I were to just let the kid go to the

> bathroom, things would have been okay. But then I've had other people say, "Well, you don't know that family. And we do. And it was just a matter of time before you had an incident like that".

Lars never learned if the threat was viable. He only learned that the father was arrested and eventually charged for uttering threats as well as other criminal charges. Nevertheless, the incident had a significant impact on Lars' perspective about pursuing promotion in his school division. He remains the school principal in the same school to this day.

Brianne's Story

Brianne was a first-year elementary (K-5) principal in a Catholic school with 50 staff and about 390 students in a small urban community. It was a dual stream school (French/English) with a relatively high Indigenous student population, and English as Additional Language learners. Early in her principal career, she received an urgent call from her superintendent to open her school because of an accident that had occurred in a school nearby.

> In October of 2012, I got a call from our superintendent, saying, "Brianne, there's been an accident. Get ready, I'm sending over a busload of kids."
>
> I didn't know what the accident was - I didn't know what was going on. But I'm preparing the gym, I'm canceling gym classes. And I learned in the minutes that followed that a car had gone through their school into a grade six classroom striking three students.
>
> One ended up passing away, and two others went to hospital and one of the students ended up with life-altering injuries.

Somebody just went through a back alley, and it made the news and was very traumatic for the people involved. The school went into lockdown. That was the grade six to nine neighboring school.

So, we ended up receiving children into the building for the parents to come once they were taken out of lockdown. At that time nobody knew what had happened.

A busload of kids came over to my school. And we were in charge of setting parents up with their children as they came to get them. I was a new principal to the building. It was hard, because that grade six class had been our school's students for the previous six years, from kindergarten to grade five.

Many of our staff were obviously impacted. Those were their babies. And, of course, it had ripple effects in the community and in the division. And coming out of that was where a lot of trauma work happened, and we were hooked up with Kevin Cameron. His connection to us came out of that.

I want to say we started Kevin Cameron training the following spring. Our superintendent led us through the hard stuff while in contact with Kevin. And we proceeded to build our leadership capacity in the division, getting level one, two and three VTRA.

In 2018, spurred on by that event and my work with trauma in the school, and the impact of residential schools and colonialism, I went and

got my Master's in Trauma and Resilience in Educational Settings. I completed it in 2019.

Our school kind of went into normal routine quite quickly. The routine was normal. But how people walked through their routine wasn't. We had a routine, but people weren't the same in their routine.

Everyone was kind of going through the motions. The bells would ring at the same time. But people's emotional levels were different. Some people withdrew. For example, the teacher whose daughter was there and whose friend died, and they were dealing with the impact of that as parents. And it was a rough, rough go. And of course, there’s a ripple effect of that type of emotion.

The other piece was that we had kindergarten and grade one students who, unless their parents were talking about it at home, the event wasn't impacting their world. We couldn't hold the whole school in that mourning period. The initial impact impacted many, many people. That impact circle shrunk as time went on. And those that were stuck in it, were still really stuck in it, but everybody else was moving forward. It was about balancing the need to walk those people through that experience and finding movement for those that were needing to move on.

In my leader role I really found I just needed to listen and assist, because the trauma impacted people so differently. It triggered different things in

different people. I had some staff members whose children were in that school or in that classroom. So of course, there was the immediacy of needing to cover them. I became like a facilitator and assisted whoever needed the help the most. Like prioritizing, I was triaging.

I had a teacher, and two EA's who had children in that classroom. So of course, was letting them go to the scene. And then in the meantime receiving some of the other teachers from the other school with those students. And information trickled up, and I didn’t know what to do with the information that I had. So, part of it was, trying to feel where people were at. If they were in shock, if they needed to ask a question, trying to just walk them through the experience.

That happened in October. It wasn't until the new year that things returned to some normalcy. People were very sensitive for a long time after that. It just rippled into the community.

There were ripple effects in the community. There was a heart campaign, so there were visuals about it all over the place.

It makes me think, as long as people keep talking about it in the media, that counts. Those hearts were everywhere. It honored the kids that were in the accident. But one of my great nephews was in the accident as well. He just narrowly missed being hit by that car.

So, I had some personal feelings about how people were walking through it. And just knowing that even once we were done dealing with what we

> had to in the school, there were still ripple effects the community. And those effects were coming back in the kids, and we may not have been completely aware of it. Knowing there's an undercurrent of something going on, but not really being able to put a finger on it. At the time, we didn't have enough - we weren't trauma informed enough.

Brianne indicated that this incident spurred on her personal and professional growth. At the end of the 2021 school year, Brianne will be moving into an Assistant Superintendent position in the small district where the tragic accident took place.

Summary

In this chapter I provided the target event stories that participants shared when I asked them to describe what event they were thinking about when they volunteered for the interview portion of this study. The events were distinct from one another, and the personal, professional, and school or district impacts were also unique. Some of the events affected the school community and some affected a smaller number of people connected to the school community. What was in common, was that an impact occurred for each of the school leaders because of the target event and successive occurrences that followed. The next chapter provides an analysis of my first domain, which is *personal and professional transformations that lead to a changed sense of self.*

CHAPTER SIX

Findings: Personal and Professional Transformations

Introduction

Personal and professional transformations were central to the participants' interview data and connect to Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2013) perspective that the five factors from the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) can be refined into three main categories: a) a changed sense of self; b) a changed sense of relationships; and c) an altered philosophy about life. In this chapter, a changed sense of self will be explored. Not all changes of self were positive for all participants.

This study explored school leaders' experiences of posttraumatic growth following a traumatic event in their school or community. This chapter explores some of the themes that emerged during the interviews. It addresses the personal and professional transformations emerging from the target crisis or trauma. Each domain in this chapter will be divided into additional sections based on the themes identified.

Personal and Professional Transformations Emerging from a School Crisis or Trauma

The participant stories from earlier in this chapter, described the initial impact of the events that administrators described for this study. However, because the interview guide was primarily focused on what occurred after the target event, additional elements are described in this and the following chapters, expanding the narrative beyond the immediate event and response.

A finding of interest was that school leaders tended to stay focused on their professional roles even when I queried their personal responses to experiences. Some were able to clearly delineate between personal and professional transformations. I will differentiate between

professional and personal where possible, despite the somewhat murky intersection of both for this group of school leaders. In this section I will explore themes related to: a) personal toll from the target event; b) crisis leadership; c) crisis overtaking the instructional leadership role; d) accumulation of events beyond the target event; e) pace of school leadership; f) complexity of the leadership role; g) lonely leadership; h) lost chances; i) querying compassion fatigue; j) critical periods; k) contributors to growth; l) trauma-informed development; m) fostering safety; n) self-reflection; o) self-care; p) allowances for vulnerability; q) enhanced empathy; r) appreciation and gratitude; and, s) new opportunities. The referencing logic I used for my interview data was, first initial (or first and second letter), page, and then paragraph number. For example, a quote from Jeanette might look like this: J/4/2. A quote from Rick might look like this: Ri/16/1. A quote from Ruth might look like this: Ru/10/3.

Personal Toll from Target Event

The personal toll from the target event described school leaders' feelings, thoughts, and behaviours after leading through the event. At times, they referenced past challenging events, relating their thoughts and feelings to the focussed event. While the title of this theme uses the word personal, examples often merge between the personal and professional.

Jeanette shared about the toll of sudden losses, most of whom were students involved in a school-sponsored sporting event. She said,

> "…nobody prepared us for eight. It was devastating. I mean, you lost eight people. It affected everybody in town because everybody knows everybody. The feeling of grief here was tangible in the whole community…It was hard. I carried it on my shoulders. Because it was more or less everywhere you went. (J/21/4; J/16/5)

Lars shared about the impact of a single decision on him and a family in his school.

> There was more of an embarrassment for me than anything else. And then you feel horrible about displacing a family like that. And, you know, over a dumb decision, really. (L/7/1)

It was at the beginning of the school year, and Shelly was a new vice principal when her administrative team was pulled together to respond to the crisis of two students. The risk was known to the students' peers, resulting in tumult for the student body. Shelly described the cognitive toll when she began to understand the extent of the risk.

> It was my first experience about how we deal with suicide attempts in our community. And I just remember sitting there wondering, what is going on here? And how do I help? And what do I do? And what's supposed to be done? And I remember saying to my principal, "Okay, we went to def com five, like boom, here we are." (S/2/3)

Elise, an experienced vice principal explained the impact of the traumatic event she chose for the interview in this manner.

> I chose that one because I've had so many violent and traumatic events at school. But that was the first time where I saw somebody, I cared about being physically unsafe for them. I had a kid dislocate my thumb, like sure all that. But that was me. That was the first time it happened to someone else that I was with. (E/16/2)

> …that was the first time I had felt unsafe and worried about my partner. That was the first time I'd ever really worried about somebody being unsafe under my care. (E/2/9)

Isabella explained that the student who died by suicide in her school was one she had worked consistently with for three previous years. His passing was particularly difficult for her.

> I was home, and my principal phoned me and was just like, "I have to tell you something really bad". And I was like, "Okay", and she's like, "You know, that he had committed suicide", and I just like, went right down to the ground…another thing we did as leadership, we went to his house. Myself, the principal, and then our two school counselors. And our director went to the home, visited with his mom and his stepdad and his grandma and stuff like that. That was really hard. (I/2/4; I/5/7)

> …it's like if he was being bullied to a point where he actually took his own life, what am I doing? How am I leading my building? You don't want to be leading a building where someone comes out and says, "Well, they, you know, committed suicide because of being bullied". (I/3/3)

Brianne explained her role in caring for students who were displaced after a vehicle crashed into an associated school.

> A busload of kids came over. And we were in charge of setting parents up with their children as they came to get them. And so, it was hard. I was a new principal to the building. It was hard, though, because the grade sixes were our students, meaning that school's students for the previous six years from kindergarten to grade five had been ours. (B/1/5)

After a grade two student was injured by a vehicle striking her on the way to school, Rick described that he felt he needed to present one way at school, but at home he found support from his wife. "My wife was a rock for me. In school I felt I needed to keep calm". (Ri/1/7)

In describing the bomb threat that closed her school for 2 days, Katrine indicated, "it was extremely stressful and traumatic in in those first few days". (K/3/4) With respect to other tragic events she stated,

> I think quite regularly about the students we lost to suicide. I don't know…if I ever will get over that. Because you have that same question, could we have done something different? Why didn't they tell us…So those are hard. Those are those unanswered questions. (K/12/4)

Crisis Leadership

In this study, the expression crisis leadership was used descriptively. I introduced the term early in the interviews as it seemed to capture the essence of what school leaders were describing. The term seemed to resonate with some of the participants and was used to explore how school leaders thought about their administrative roles following the crisis or traumatic event. Participants saw crisis leadership differently depending on their experiences.

Jeanette looked at crisis leadership as part of her duty of being a school leader. She indicated:

> I don't know that you [are] ever fully mentally prepared, but it sure does help…And, of course, as the leader of the school, basically, you assume all responsibility. And I don't have a problem with that. (J/25/2; J/15/1)

Lars compared and contrasted types of school leadership. He indicated:

> …everyday school leadership…is more task oriented…there's just things that need to be done. There are timetables that need to be done, there's deadlines that need to be met, there's meetings to attend and stuff like that. Whereas crisis leadership is just how you respond in situations that have the potential to cause a lot of anxiety. So, your ability to work under pressure, obviously, is greater in the crisis situation…I think you have to have enough confidence to be definitive in your decisions, and you can't waffle in those situations. And you have to take chances. Sometimes there might be a situation where you need to make a decision. You need to make a decision quickly. You have to be okay that it might not be the right one either… Confident but not cocky…there's no room for arrogance…like you just have to be confident, but you have to recognize that other people have good ideas as well… (L/11/3-4; L/12/1)

Shelly was the newest vice principal on her administrative team during the traumatic event she described.

> …now that I spend some time thinking back on it, I think a lot of my role…was really just kind of picking up loose ends as I could. And being the admin that was kind of in the office to handle any other incoming needs, so that the others of the team with more experience and a closer connection to the event, were freed up to respond appropriately. (S/12/3)

Shelly examined the connection she saw between operational-type school leadership and crisis leadership.

> I see it almost like a very close Venn diagram. So, there's lots of overlap. And I think the organizational leadership is perhaps heightened or accelerated during a crisis management…event. Because none of that organizational leadership stops being necessary when you're responding to a crisis, especially one within a community that's localized, and perhaps isn't impacting the whole community, but the part of the community that is impacted is impacted very deeply. And you just respond to that crisis while still providing this organizational support to everything else that's happening around it. (S/16/4)

Maria thought about crisis leadership as an in-the-moment response.

> That kind of leadership, those kinds of responses don't make changes. What that does is it helps in an immediate situation, so that people are feeling safe or taken care of, and then you need to do whatever you need to do. Because that was your job. So that's what you did to make sure that people were safe (M/24/2).

Isabella explained that despite her relationship to the student who died by suicide, as a vice principal, she still was part of the leadership team that needed to call the school staff and let them know about his passing.

> I also knew, like, we had to do the TERT (Tragic Event Response Team) response. So, I had to phone staff and tell them, and that was really difficult. You know? So, leadership's hard…TERTs are hard. (I/2/4-5)

Brianne looked at crisis leadership as a hybrid of skills and responses, one that appeared to have developed from her years of experience.

> Crisis leadership is being empathically responsive. And in some ways, even though there is a guidebook it is about following your gut. And I would say following your gut in terms of the interactions, not necessarily in the procedural steps, but following your intuition, then making decisions after interactions with individuals and groups. So, let that intuition inform your decision making. Empathic listening, responsiveness, intuition. What are my other words? And understanding trauma, period. You need a breadth and depth of understanding of trauma…
>
> I wouldn't change how I responded because I think I did okay. But, you know, had I had the knowledge that I do now, and our school system, like I think if that same thing happened today, we'd have kids being supervised in their classrooms by one staff member and my staff coming together to support all those other staff members and kids. Because it was me and my assistant principal and the secretaries handling it. And I think we need a group response. We need a family response. I don't say team response; we would have needed a family response in that time. So, I think if this same thing happened just this last October, the school day would have gone on kind of normal for most kids, but most of my staff would have been in the gym with me. (B/21/8; B/22/1)

Rick explained how he responded when the grade two student was struck by a vehicle. His perspective in a crisis was that a school leader needed to be calm.

> At the time I stayed very calm. The principal was a little more intense and flipping out a bit and organizing. We needed to be calm in the storm. The young teacher was emotional and lots of people were in tears. I stayed calm during the first two days. (Ri/1/6).

For Ruth, the concept of crisis leadership evolved over time, in part, owing to how the school and community viewed school leadership following a traumatic event.

> I do think there's a place for that idea of crisis leadership. And I don't think everyone's good at it…someone who could be good at it for the first ten crises might not be on the next one. And I don't think that's recognized. I don't think it's recognized at all. (Ru/20/5)

> I would say prior to the traumatic events, especially the first one…I saw it mostly school related…After the traumatic event, no one cared that you were just a leader at the school; you were now a leader no matter what without wanting to. It was just assumed that you were now going to take that role within the community…And that was definitely something that was…assumed by the school, to then figure out how to help navigate everyone else through that trauma… what is the school going to do to help everyone get through this? And that's definitely how I felt. And it was assumed that the school would help hold ceremonies, the school would then house the memory of the student. The school would…take on that legacy. (Ru/3/7)

Crisis Overtaking the Instructional Leadership Role

Several administrators talked about their original perceptions about school leadership. Instructional leadership played a key role in their understanding about how they would enact their role as school leaders. However, some school leaders identified how their focus shifted once they encountered a traumatic event in their school or community.

Lars was the only teaching principal in the participant cohort. The event he described happened while he was transitioning between classes with a group of students. Not only was he the class teacher for the student who was impacted, he was also the school principal. For Lars, his instructional role took a backseat so he could respond to the threat issued against him and the potential risk to the school.

> And then the death-threat part didn't sit too well with me…you shouldn't be able to really make death threats. So, I talked to my director about it and was wondering what to do…Monday morning the RCMP happened to come into the school on an unrelated incident…I told the RCMP about it…And 20 minutes later they had the guy arrested. (L/2/2-3)

Shelly had expected her role as a vice principal to be focused on supporting teachers with their teaching. However, the traumatic incidences early in her vice principal career seemed to realign some of her thinking about the role.

> I think it really did broaden my understanding of what the role entailed and my capacity to be successful in that role. It quickly brought me to an understanding that although I expected to be going into an educational leadership position to lead educational forays into exploration and different kinds of pedagogy and learning and assessment, really, so much more of it is the social and emotional health of the staff and students. That's really almost, I would say, 90% of what we do. And I wasn't expecting it to be that…ratio of actual educational leadership as opposed to social emotional leadership and guidance and support. (S/5/3)

Elise's perspective on crisis overtaking the instructional leadership role had to do with the array of crises and traumatic events she encountered in her career as both a teacher and an administrator.

> …you get a sense of hopelessness a little bit because it's so overwhelming…I think sometimes our instructional skills go down a little bit because we're so concerned about the care of kids, that we don't necessarily raise the bar on learning and we know kids can't learn well if they're not feeling safe, and they're not safe. So, there's a vicious cycle…which impacts student learning, which isn't okay…(E/16/1)

Isabella explained how her role as an instructional leader was overshadowed by the response she provided to students because they were overwhelmed by the loss of a peer to suicide.

> And so, I spent probably the first month, month and a half [of the new school year], working with kids that would be crying over him and missing him and thinking about him. (I/3/1)

Brianne noted that her professional focus shifted when her school became a secondary location for the traumatic event. Some of her school staff were significantly affected by the accident because they had taught the students impacted the year prior.

> …the instructional leadership…is still important. But understanding the relationship piece, and emotional wellness became a priority for me. You know, very quickly. I was a very green principal. I'd only been an assistant principal a couple years before in a K to 12 school in a rural area. So…there were just under 400 students in the building. And I had all these great ideas about literacy and numeracy. And that kind of faded into the background quite quickly. (B/6/4)

Rick took a reflective view on his change in perspective after the traumatic event that significantly altered the life of a grade two student and the students who witnessed the accident.

> My responsibility is to model what I want in my building…Before this event I didn't think about that enough - it was about instructional leadership and handling teachers. (Ri/1/13; Ri/2/1)

Ruth indicated that the number of events some school leaders face can be significant. Some may become trapped in the crisis-response role, while other aspects of school leadership fall to the side.

> I feel sometimes that you can get stuck in sort of a constant crisis leadership…we're talking about a lot of crisis, even at my own school. But I don't feel that I'm always leading in crisis. I respond differently when a crisis occurs. I feel different in my body, and in my mind …But I do think there's some people who end up almost stuck in that crisis response to everything…I don't want to imply that could never happen to me, or that it hasn't happened to me. But I think there can be periods where your body can't shift in and out of it. And I don't know that there's anyone to stop and say to you," I think this is happening". I don't even know that that's discussed. (Ru/20/5; Ru/21/1)

Katrine had been trained on being an instructional leader in her role as a school principal. However, the realities of her role shifted that emphasis because of her experiences.

> …prior to that [the bomb threat], I would say through my work with my master's and leadership programs…we are always taught in the educational world, that we are instructional leaders, and that we are to guide staff development to improve student learning…I certainly agree with that. But I wasn't quite aware how much the school culture when it comes to school safety played a part in that. (K/4/1)

> …there were other incidents as a school principal, where I was forced out of the instructional leadership realm to focus on students coming into the building and searching students. And do we put metal detectors at the door? Those sorts of things. (K/4/2)

Accumulation of Events Beyond the Target Event

While school leaders described a target event, nine out of ten participants described other tragic, crisis or challenging events. These included impacts on schools from Covid-19, accidents, threats, suicides, and other deaths (student and staff). School leaders frequently noted the accumulation of traumatic or adverse events that occurred during their tenure as a school leader.

While each school leader identified one or two primary events to focus on, the actuality of multiple, and at times, cumulative events was significant.

Jeannette was nearing the end of her career when the accident that killed eight individuals occurred. While this loss was momentous for Jeanette, the school and community, it was not the only tragedy that Jeanette encountered as a veteran school leader. She indicated:

> I think another reason I had to retire was so that people would stop dying. There were a lot of students who lost their lives, like they might do it on a motorcycle trying to outrun the police or tipped a four-wheeler or suicide…there was always something. A farm accident. It was endless. (J/22/4)

Shelly indicated that understanding the impact of ongoing stressors and trauma helped her navigate her role as a school leader.

> I think understanding impact of that cumulative trauma, I've learned strategies that I try to adhere to, to minimize their impact. (S/22/3)

In Maria's first six-weeks as a school administrator, she experienced occurrences that were both unexpected and challenging.

> It compounded because we had a teacher die from cancer, and we had a young person die by suicide. We had a kid who turned on the gas in a science lab and the teacher noticed that we had a gas leak. We had two other little fires in the school. All of this had transpired in less than six weeks in our school. The superintendent said, "You've learned more and had more experience in your six weeks of being a principal than some people in 10 years". (M/2/1)

Elise explained that adverse events accumulated in schools where she was an administrator. She shared how those events resulted in exhaustion and overwhelm, in part because of the discrete elements of each event, and in part because of the number of occurrences.

> And the burden you were feeling about the kids and parents. But I was an administrator in the school division for seven years…stuff just happened every day. And I think people forgot what it was like in the trenches, and that it was fatiguing and exhausting and emotionally exhausting and feeling impossible at times. And it was heavy work. (E/7/3)

> There isn't time to recover. We had a "secure the building" because we had a threat to a student. There was a shooter in the area. Everybody's in the building. Kids have to get picked up. Police everywhere. (E/1/5)

Because of her role Isabella, was necessarily told about students at risk and she was often involved in helping to mitigate the risk. Isabella reflected on the difference between being a teacher and a vice principal.

> I think I've been exposed to a lot more traumatic events and violence since I've become an administrator…I've had kids take pills, I've had kids cut…but when the kid's talking about hanging themselves, I know that I can feel [it]…I had one other boy that tried to hang himself…he wasn't successful. He came to school with bruises. And…just a couple weeks ago, we had a student who disclosed to the counselor that he was practicing standing on a chair with an electrical cord…tightening around his neck. And so, for me I don't get panicky…it just makes me worry that much more…this year, with Covid-19…we're in a level three, so we only get our kids every other day. And I've probably had more kids take pills this year than I have in previous years…like it's been a really tough year. (I/17/5; I/6/2; I/6/4; I/11/3)

While Brianne did not describe additional crisis events, she referenced them and their potential impact.

> …the trauma that goes on in any school, never mind crisis events like this. But I can't take that home with me…there's only so much I can do in a day. And I can't be burdened by all the hard stuff. Because there's a lot of it. (B/16/6)

Ruth explained it was not only events where students or staff lost their lives that were emotionally demanding. She indicated that the content of discussions with and about students resulted in accumulated stress for school leaders.

> That's not always recognized for teachers - it's always like, you're not a nurse, or a doctor… it's not that intense. And I don't think people realize that there is still a lot of trauma that teachers go through…Even hearing stories of child abuse over and over. And witnessing things like that, those are traumatic, they're heavy. And when you teach for as long as you do in a place, you can hear that so many times, and that thirtieth time might be the time that just, you know…in the last decade, we've lost so many students even after high school due to overdose, some terrible decision-making, just bad interactions and that's even compounded for some people. And stressed to us all that teaching can still be quite stressful and full of heartache. And things like that just really add up over time. (Ru/13/6-7)

While the bomb threat in Katrine's school was not a viable threat in the end, it was only one of the impactful instances she encountered as a secondary principal.

> When I was at the high school, I dealt with, very tragically, six students who died by suicide and accidents…(K/9/2)

Pace of School Leadership

The pace of school leadership seemed connected to the accumulation of events yet demonstrated some uniqueness from the impact of multiple crises. School leaders described that the business of their roles sometimes impacted their capacity to be responsive. The personal impact and the number of crisis events seemed to play a part in how pace was experienced.

Maria shared about her first year as a school principal, "I'm telling you…I have no clue. I don't know how I did what I did. I just kept on motoring". (M/19/2) Maria credits her upbringing to her ability to manage the numerous demands that were placed on her as principal. She said:

> "…my mom died when I was eight. So, you're just raised to keep doing what you have to do. Do what you're doing. And I just kept on motoring. …nothing fizzed on me. I just didn't fizz. (M/3/4)

Elise had administrative experiences in rural, community, and urban schools. Referring to a community school she shared:

> I was an administrator in the school division for seven years…And stuff just happened every day… And I don't even think we reported probably 80% of the things that happened, because they just happened all the time. (E/7/3)

> … there isn't time to recover… go through our procedures - did they work? How are you? Did you need something? You know, there isn't time to do that. And that is really important. You just go back to work the next day. (E/11/5)

> …what you don't get to evaluate is exactly what you're doing - the impact on people as they're doing their good job. And then you get home and you're like, "Oh, my god, what just happened? We could have had a kid shot today at school." … maybe you talk to a colleague, maybe you don't. And yet, kids come to school, they just come back. So, you just got to keep going. (E/11-12/7-10.

Isabella reflected on the impact of Covid-19 and gave insight into the pace of her role, and the agility she needed to respond effectively to both crisis and operational leadership matters.

> I got teenage boys crying, staff crying…today I spent two hours with a mom and daughter, but then I'm also going to staffing meetings and then I'm also talking to some people about alt programming for next year. (I/11/3)

Brianne explained how the traumatic event accelerated the next year for her.

> …it was the first year not only of that incident, but of my principalship. I didn't have time. I think it took me the following full year to reflect on the year before. You know, everything was, "Oh, what was I doing at this time last year?" I don't even really remember because it was all crisis response at that time…I had the brother of the girl who ended up in a wheelchair and with brain damage. (B/19/5)

Ruth reflected on the pace of the work of administrators in schools, and how crises add to the intensity of the work.

> …there's always something to do. There are many responsibilities that there isn't really a procedure for an administrator to take care of themselves. Unfortunately, and if there was, maybe they would. But there isn't, and I don't think there can be because then the other things can't be managed. But there's been talk sometimes about when there is a crisis in your school, maybe another administrator would come in and support your school. I've never seen it happen. I don't think I ever will. (R/18/5)

For Katrine, even though there were district supports to assist with responses in schools, sometimes the duties of others fell on principals because they were the consistent leadership presence in the building.

> …we have got a family school counselor, who does the threat risk assessments, but she goes between four other schools. So sometimes it's inevitable that the day you need somebody, they're not in the building, so then you're calling other people in, or you're doing those yourself. (K/13/1)

Complexity of the Leadership Role

Instructional leadership, operational management, and being available during and following crises were expected tasks for most school administrators. However, there were

elements of crisis responding they could not have predicted would fall within their leadership domain.

Jeanette could have not expected that she would be taxed with planning funerals for students within her school because her small city only had limited morgue capacity.

> But the strangest thing happened…the undertaker called me, "Jeanette, you've got to plan these funerals." I said, "What? I've got to plan the funerals?" "Yes, because we can't do that many funerals separately; it has to be done as one group"…somehow it got arranged that we had to plan the funeral. (J/5/7; J//7/1)

Maria knew it was her role to address safety concerns as a school principal; however, she was quickly tasked with risk management opportunities she had not anticipated.

> …I had someone in my office go, "If there's a fire in the school, are we supposed to pull the fire alarm?"
>
> I said, "Yes".
>
> "Well, there's a fire in the rad."
>
> And I go, "Oh, god, what if I hadn't come back to the damn school? Who told you not to? Pull the fire alarm and do it". Okay, it gets even better.
>
> So, then there was another time, a teacher comes into my office and said, "There's a fire in the shop".
>
> I said, "What?"
>
> "And the teacher won't evacuate".
>
> I get on the phone. I get the teacher. I go, "What are you doing?"
>
> "Well, I'm putting out the fire".
>
> I said, "You're not putting out the fire. You're evacuating your classroom. And we're evacuating the school". So, this is all in that time period…[In] the fire department - I got to know everybody, like all the volunteer firefighters and the police officers. And when everything settled down, it was funny because they came back, "We miss coming here". (M/10/11-14; M/10/15-16; M/11/1-5)

Isabella described an unexpected incident where she heard her principal being threatened in a hallway adjacent to where she was stationed. Hearing the threats and not being able to respond effectively in the moment was explained as stressful.

> We had one boy that we had to suspend…and he took off out of the office, and I stayed back to say, "Teachers, keep your kids". And I'm following…going down this one hallway, and they were down another one. I could hear something being thrown, and I was like, "Oh, my god…I've got to get down there. Where is my principal? What's happening?" And he [student] had picked up a broom that was by the back door, and he had thrown it, but he didn't hit her [principal] with it…but the feeling that you have when you hear something like that…you have to work through it and push through it. But it's not easy to get to that point with a kid…you sort of have that trauma response or that fight, flight, or freeze and the stress chemicals that get released. (I/18/4; I/19/1)

As a vice principal Rick did not anticipate being part of a team involved in helping an injured student return to the school by having meetings at a Children's Hospital hours away from the city where he lived.

> We made visits to this girl's house and visited at the hospital…We had about three weeks to a month that we knew she was coming [back] and working with the hospital in the transition…we did a lot of work in that time to prepare…Our district wide learning support teacher was so involved when this young student was going to come back to the school. She drove with me to [the hospital] so we could meet with the doctors up there… (R/2/9; R/9/3; R/14/4)

Katrine described the complex role that school leaders take on out of necessity, not because they have the training or expertise, but because they are the ones available to students and families.

> And I think that dealing with families…we're not only teachers, but we're school nurses, and we're counselors, and we're mediators, and we're divorce attorneys, and we've become all of these roles, unbeknownst to us, and without that formalized training. And in many ways, there are probably daily events that we are trying to navigate and support families through that I had no idea was ever going to be part of my role. (K/18/1)

Lonely Leadership

Not all school leaders in the study identified feeling isolated or lonely in their roles. Most described strong relationships with their co-administrators (if they had them). Nevertheless, there were some instances when school leaders felt isolated, alone, or even forgotten by others.

Jeanette described the need to be alone to address the pain associated with the loss of students, and the challenges that arose from leading a large school where differences of opinion and perspective about the response occurred.

> I work at the problem, then I go to bed, and I pull a blanket over my head. And I don't want to talk to anybody. I don't want to look at anybody. Like, my husband at the time…he spent a lot of time watching SportsNet. Because I would be down in the bedroom with a blanket over [my] head and thinking about what [I'm] going to do the next day or whatever. (J/17/8)

I asked Maria about personal resources she used to help her get through the bomb in her school, and her first year as principal. The loneliness she described was in part due to what happened in her personal life. Maria shared:

> …that would have been the year my dad died. So, there were no personal resources…my dad died February at the one-year anniversary [of the bomb]. My father died suddenly. But so did my uncle. My uncle died thirteen days before my father, and they were brothers. And in that year, I attended thirty-some funerals…which probably twenty were family. Like because we have a very large Italian extended family. So, we lost my father's generation. (M/19/3 & 5)

> … remember, I live alone. I have no interaction with any human beings until I go to work… (M/31/3)

The incident that Elise shared required confidentiality to protect the student and parent at the center of the situation. Despite being impacted by watching her administrative partner's assault, she could not share her experience with her close colleagues and gain support.

> Like nobody knew…because it was the two of us, and our superintendent knew. And our support team at the division, but we couldn't even tell anybody else on staff what had happened…both of us were…of course impacted by that. (E/4/3)

Concerning the event where Isabella's principal was almost assaulted by a student with a broom, she stated:

> And eventually, she did go before the Board, but I didn't get to go before the board. My principal does…She gets to talk about it with the superintendent. She talked about it with the Board. (I/18/4)

Brianne had an unusual and positive representation of lonely leadership; in that, a leader may begin by themselves, but if they are building an intentional community, they never remain alone.

> It [the traumatic event] definitely did change me as a leader. I keep thinking of the lone nut…that…YouTube video. The lone nut where the person is dancing on the hill? … It's…getting people inspired…It's this guy just dancing on the side of the hill…and how people move along in a movement. (B/7/5; B/7/9; B/8/1) https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=256eKjULdgQ

Katrine described feeling abandoned when she called for district supports during a crisis incident unrelated to the target event she shared for this study.

> I remember at the high school, we had a situation where a student did say he was going to bring a gun back to school, and he was coming back. And I called for help, and it didn't really come…I felt let down by the people that were there to support us. And that's a weird feeling. (K/11/6)

Lost Chances

Some administrators indicated that following traumatic events they noticed that hopes or opportunities changed, and those changes had an impact on them. The lost chances identified were relational, personal, and professional.

Jeanette did not share her own experience of leading through the traumatic event described for this study, until she interviewed with me.

> …you're the first person I ever talked to about this. So, any knowledge I have is gone. If you do a good job, maybe somebody might want to learn from it…but…probably… it's too traumatic to drag something up; we'll just let it go or whatever. But I think there would be a lot to be learned district-wise from our experience. But nobody asked the

> question…Maybe people are too busy. We got to move on; we got another crisis. You know, instead of getting a better fire engine, just get more buckets. (J/24/4; J/24/10)

Lars had a personal impact that came out of the event he described. He shared that his priorities changed significantly.

> I kind of lost interest in going beyond school leadership…which seems kind of counterintuitive, because…if I would have gone for division leadership…it would have gotten me out of school. But for whatever reason, I didn't really feel…that I wanted to pursue leadership at the district level or anything like that after. So that was a change. (L/4/9)

> I probably would have been very interested at the time in moving up, because there were a lot of coordinator [or] director-type positions…and it looked like I probably would have some avenues to do that…then after, I just kind of lost interest…I didn't really want to pursue that anymore. (L/6/8)

Maria described times when she took a stand for what she believed was right. She said, “there were…incidents that I knew put the nail in the coffin that I was never going to get promoted to superintendent”. (M/17/4) During one incident she doggedly adhered to school policy despite pressure from the district to violate their own policy. Maria said, “that was an integrity thing.” (M/17/5) Later, when she learned her school was being closed due to low enrollment, she made an unpopular pitch to district leadership to have a well-loved teacher move into the vice principal role to help close her school in a compassionate and caring way.

> And sure shooting, my scenario occurred, which was another nail in my coffin, because two of the superintendents were not this guy's fan. Not even close to being his fan. So, I learned that those decisions…were not going to let me go in the direction I wanted. (M/18/3)

Rick described his surprise and disappointment when he did not achieve the principal position he thought he would after his mentor’s retirement.

> The administrator was retiring…I think the district wanted him to retire for a number of years…but in talking to me said he couldn't retire until he knew there was someone who could replace him that he trusted to take over his building…His plan was to walk out on the last day of school hand, the keys to me and I would…run his building, and it would become my building, and I'd worked last with the staff. I felt like I…was positioned very

> well to do this. I felt the staff respected me, wanted me to be there… I believed I had the inside track on getting the principalship.
>
> When I did interview, unfortunately, they decided to choose somebody else. The superintendent…was not as big a believer in relationships…he didn't think they were as important as I did…we disagreed about that. And he went a different direction and chose somebody different…it was deflating to me. I was very angry and disappointed, and all the emotions that go into [it] when you don't get what you want, especially when you really felt like you had it. (Ri/4/3-4)

Katrine reflected on school leadership and the personal and professional pitfalls that come with administrating through traumatic events. She described lost chances that districts may not be consciously aware they are missing – those school leaders who do not remain in educational leadership because the cost is too high.

> …it's an unspoken topic in schools…we don't want bad things to happen in schools; we don't think that things are going to happen. And that traumatic events…big or small, are prevalent in an educational facility. I think they happen all the time…I was immediately drawn to…your survey, because I think it needs to be talked about, and I think it needs to be an important component of school leadership. There's a lot of people that get out of teaching and get out of leadership because they never expected to have to deal with some of the things that we deal with. (K/17/8; K/18/1)

Querying Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue and related concepts such as professional burnout were referenced by several school leaders. Compassion fatigue refers to "negative psychological impact" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013) that occurs from working with individuals who have suffered because of trauma. One participant used the term *burnout*. Another used the term *compassion fatigue*. Still others described the impact of being exposed to ongoing adverse and traumatic events. Some of those queried what the long-term impact might be for administrators.

Jeanette's community suffered for a significant period. Because she was a pivotal player in the response, she was recognisable by the community. This identifiability resulted in her making choices about remaining more secluded to keep out of the public's eye.

> It was hard. Like I carried it on my shoulders. Because it was more or less everywhere you went. You kind of felt…that they either hated you or they felt sorry for you. It was one or the other. So, I didn't go out a lot. (J/18/1)

Shelly shared that the accumulation of difficult, disruptive, and traumatic events she was exposed to as a school leader eventually took their toll. She made the decision to reach out for professional support.

> I recently worked with a counselor last year. It helped me identify that it was small t-trauma, and a lot of them coming up…I was in a funk. And I came to the realization that I'd been in a funk for quite a while, and it was not getting better. And so, I went to my doctor and did those things I tell other people to do and thought, “Okay, it's time to take my own advice”. (S/20/5; S/21/1)

Maria noted that both her personal and professional life intersected in such a way that she was eventually diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. She had many losses in her life, and her first principal position was fraught with many crises and disruptions until the school was eventually closed.

> I was diagnosed with PTSD. And he [the counsellor] said it wasn’t the car accident. It's all these other things that happened in your life that have layered which have brought you to this point…I didn't even know about PTSD till I had the car accident…And even that didn't make sense to me until I started taking VTRA. And it wasn't until TES. (M/3/4; M/19/5)

Elise explained that over time, hopelessness can set it because some the situations and stories that school leaders hear overwhelm their ability to cope. In Elise’s case, she did hit a breaking point.

> I think if you stay too long, you get a sense of hopelessness…because it's so overwhelming…one day I just broke down and, "I can't, I can't, I can't fix any of this". And it was so beyond me…everything that was going on in the world that I couldn't do anything about. And… there was no hope anymore. And then the guilt I felt…Self-blame, I guess. I don't know. (E/16/1)

Isabella reflected on the reality of compassion fatigue for herself and other administrators. She acknowledged it was a significant possibility.

> Sometimes I think about compassion fatigue, and some of those things, especially after this year, with Covid-19…it's a heavy job, you know? So, I don't know, sometimes I do think about if I need to reach out or not. (I/11/3)

Ruth indicated the real possibility that administrators may be vicariously impacted by what they encounter day-to-day in their jobs. While she was aware of the potential, she was not certain her district had the same awareness.

> I wouldn't say the division's ever really spoken about that, or the idea of secondary, vicarious trauma; any of those kinds of things. I wouldn't say that that's ever at the forefront of our discussions. (Ru/21/2)

Katrine indicated the importance of working closely with district leadership because of the many tasks, interventions, and responses that fall to school leaders. Overtime, the heaviness can lead to leaders leaving education.

> …making sure that your own school shared leadership team is aware of what their roles and responsibilities are when it comes to those events…otherwise, the principal does go home at the end of the day, and just feels that weight…solely rests on their shoulders… (K/17/5)

Critical Periods

Critical periods as explored in the Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response (TES; Cameron, 2019) are predictable times when systems such as schools or districts become particularly heightened after a crisis or traumatic event. Every administrator interviewed for this study had some training from the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR) where the TES originated. Some school leaders had more versatility with the concepts and language from the TES than others. Critical periods, such as anniversaries and unique-to-the-school periods of intensity were described by several school leaders.

Isabella shared her concerns about high school graduation upcoming in 2022. From a critical-period standpoint, graduation would fit into the unique-to-the-school period of intensity. While this knowledge can be helpful for planning, it can also be unsettling for administrators.

> I'm thinking about grad next year…he would have graduated next year…I see things flaring up big time again. Even now, I've got a couple of girls…talking about feeling low and talking about him, and how he had killed himself. And I have got one girl that's really doing quite poorly…and Covid-19, and all the lack of connection…We've got kids already struggling, and then they're thinking about these things. (I/8/1)

Brianne explained the response of the community after the accident that killed one student and seriously injured two others. She described an extended critical period that was unique to the community. It appeared to lengthen the period of grief and stalled the ability for the community to heal.

> …there was a heart campaign…so there was visuals about it all over the place…It makes me think of as long as people keep talking about it in the media, that counts [for an extended critical event]…These hearts were everywhere…it honored the kids that were in the accident. But…one of my great nephews was in the accident…he just narrowly missed…being hit by that car…I had some personal feelings about how people were walking through it. And knowing that even once we were done dealing with what we had to in the school, there was still ripple effects the community…Knowing there's an undercurrent…but not really being able to put a finger on it…we weren't trauma informed enough. (B/4/1)

Rick too experienced a unique-to-the-school critical period. Nearing the one-year anniversary mark of the student being hit at a crosswalk, the school learned she was coming back. Rick found he needed to support the staff and students during the anniversary/return.

> …one of the things when we knew she was coming back is we held two or three meetings where that was specifically what we talked about. We brought up some of the trauma practices…and that everyone was going to relive some of this. And they needed to be self-aware of what was happening…So we were trying to prepare staff that this wasn't going to be this joyous occasion that she's back in the building, but it's going to reignite some of those feelings for people…I went in with the wellness mentor and had talks with her classmates as well. The class that she was going into, but also with the class that she had been in with the year before, because they'd all moved into grade three…"She is coming back, she's going stay [in grade 2]. She won't be with you guys anymore…she

> had a very, very terrible accident, and she doesn't look the same. She doesn't act the same". And so, we tried to prepare kids too about that. (Ri/9/3)

Ruth had originally felt some skepticism when she learned about critical periods through NACTATR training. However, her perspective changed with experience.

> And Kevin Cameron talks about his anniversaries. And I used to think that was crazy. And now I'm like, "Okay, March was like one of the hardest months", and since March, we've had nothing but chaos in the school. (Ru/23/11)

In reflecting on the 2017 bomb threat, Katrine was reminded of critical periods connected to anniversaries. Anniversaries and reminders often bring back thoughts and feelings that were present during a traumatic event.

> …the anniversaries are a big one. And it did get brought up a year after when the school was closed [because of the threat]. Somebody posted the article from the newspaper… And the same thing, we had graduation and it's always on your mind that this could happen, and even to this date. You do think back. But it just seems that anytime you turn on the news, and you hear about a school shooting…there was recently one in Russia; it surfaces again. You know, are we doing everything we can, and why did this happen? (K/14/5)

Contributors to Growth

Most of the participants described growth or significant change following target traumatic events they described in interviews. For some, it appeared difficult to distinguish between target crisis events, and accumulated events. Nevertheless, most identified transformation, largely in the professional domain, but at times in the personal realm as well. Not all identified the transformation as something positive.

In Jeanette’s case, she stated:

> Personal growth…it does have an impact. I don't know if it would be growth-wise. My brothers used to say I keep things to myself, but I'm much more verbal now. I don't put up with Bologna as much as I used to. But it does have an effect and it probably wouldn't be in a growth avenue…there were a lot of times when I would avoid contact rather than seek it. Because I was uncomfortable with it. And I knew people that I was around were uncomfortable with me being there…just kind of avoided it. That's not growth (J/18/5).

Lars explained that he experienced growth in a positive direction following the event he focused on for the interview.

> I think you mature a lot. Even though I was close to 40 years old at the time. But I think you still mature from that. And then you realize there's all kinds of people and you realize that not everybody's going to like you, and some people are going to get mad at you more than other people will. And you do have to try and put yourself in their shoes as well. (L/8/8)

Shelly identified growing in a positive direction during and following the challenging events in her first year as vice principal.

> I don't think I did anything but grow in those first few months. I think every day it was a was a new stretch… “Okay, I'm here to help. I'm here to serve, how can I best do that?" And just do whatever I could to meet the needs of the staff and the students. Learning best how to do that, learning from my mistakes. Realizing that even though your plate seems full, it's not so much more that you can't add anything more onto your plate; rather, you just need to go get a bigger platter. And you can, right? You can go get something that's going to hold more. (S/14/2)

Maria took an historical look at growth. While she did not discount growth connected to leading through the bomb incident, she indicated that her upbringing prepared her to respond to the bomb and other challenging events in her first six weeks as principal.

> I'm going to say part of the contributors to growth is…the way my father raised us, because he was determined that we would be children that didn't have to depend on anyone, because life was unpredictable… But when we were growing up, you better be tough. You better be able to take care of yourself because you don't know what life's going to hand you. You get your education before you get married and before you do anything else, because you need to take care of yourself. (M/21/2-3)

Elise took a practical approach to looking at growth in herself. She identified how the assault on her administrative partner was a firm and clear reminder about safety and security in the school.

> …a refreshing of being aware and being more prepared. More on high alert; not in a in a worrisome way, but just doing a better job of making sure everybody was safe, and we had good strategies in place and safety plans. Other personal growth… that enlightened sense of caring…for my team. Not that I'm not a carer because I am. (E/9/1)

Isabella was somewhat uncertain about growth. However, she did describe enhancement of skills because of supporting students and staff following the suicide death of a junior high student.

> I don't know if I grew from it. I guess I've had some personal growth through it and professional growth because you are leading through a difficult time, and then you are helping people through difficult times, and somehow are trying to remain neutral when you've got both ends of the spectrum. And still being able to be a go-to person for both, which I thought was kind of interesting…I could have kids come to me that were grieving and upset…And kids coming to me that were feeling like they were bullied …And somehow both sides came to me. I think that required really good listening skills and being neutral…So, I think it definitely helped me grow that way. (I/12/3)

Brianne described a personal impact coming out the target event. She noted that she became a more capable parent and connected spouse.

> I became more aware of my own…reactions to things…I became a better parent. As a parent, you know that all your children are different. But I became much more attuned to how different each of my kids were and what they needed in terms of their emotional responses, their anxiety, their strengths, how to converse with them differently…Still have to…I just thought, if I'm doing it for everybody else in my building, I should do it for my family as well… The awareness…is not a skill just for my professional life. I’ve got to be applying this in my home with my children and my husband. (B/15/10; 16/2/4)

Rick was adamant that he grew following the accident that occurred when he was a vice principal. Rick indicated growth in both his personal and professional life.

> I don't think you can go through something traumatic like that, without growing…I guess you could get stagnant, do nothing. And then you stay the same and nothing ever changes. But for me…there obviously was growth. I mean, growth in my personal life. I became better at communicating with my spouse, because I needed her more; I was put in a position where I had to chat more.
>
> …about my leadership style, and how to view the people that I was leading…[I] became a little bit more patient…trying to look at what they needed from me as a leader, and everybody needed something different. (Ri/5/4-5)

Katrine shared that the bomb threat that shut down her school for two days increased her confidence that she could manage complexities that arose in schools. “I think it gave me a sense of confidence that I could manage a large staff, could manage a community, be there for both

students and their families". (K/10/4) She also described a preventative function that the incidents surrounding the event contributed to.

> I think the growth for me with regards to linking it back to those events…comes back to trying to understand students before all of this. And providing the supports necessary for them if they were experiencing any trauma in their lives, or sadness or a need to talk. Because I think as educators, we can support them; hopefully, before they ever get to a place where a traumatic event is going to occur. (K/12/4)

Trauma-Informed Development

Crisis and trauma seemed to have had a transformational impact on several school leaders' perspectives as they considered their own needs and those of students and staff. Some participants made sense of the impact of trauma through their own experiences. Others explicitly used the term, "trauma-informed"; still others appeared to imply that their professional growth moved in the direction of trauma-informed development.

For Shelly, she sought professional support after realizing that what she called "small-t-traumas" had accumulated to the point where they had an impact on her functioning. She realized that her own needs had to be dealt with so that she could be an effective leader.

> I…worked with a counselor last year. It helped me identify that it was small t-trauma, and a lot of them coming up…There's a lot of things over the past six years in particular, within my profession that are small t-traumas. I didn't really recognize the impact they were having. And it took some professional help to help me get through that. But we did. It's good. (S/20/5)

Maria had a similar experience to Shelly. She came to understand that her personal history, as well as some of the incidents in teaching and administrating were traumatic and had an impact on her. In Maria's case, her understanding of trauma gave her the impetus to understand and support it in students. She stated:

> I still have no idea that all of this stuff is actually trauma. I didn't even know the word trauma back then. I have no idea until I got involved with Kevin [Cameron] in the VTRA, taking TES, and working really closely with our protocol partners and understanding the trauma lens… (M/2/3; M/3/4)

Brianne reflected on the trauma-informed journey her school district embarked on out of the accident that killed one student and injured two others. Following the accident, the district reached out to the then-Canadian Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (now, the NACTATR). Brianne shared:

> …five years ago, it became a mandated PD for anybody joining our district to do a residential school tour here at Blue Closet and a blanket exercise…we have heard about the trauma. We know about trauma because of Kevin Cameron. We wouldn't have had Kevin Cameron training except for the accident. So, our trauma-informed journey started with that. And…we're a stronger district because of it. (B/12/1)

> …we have two schools that are mainly Indigenous, and we are surrounded by three Nations. So, as we became trauma-informed, and probably more sensitive and our school teams became more sensitive…conversations become more raw and real… We've done the 60's scoop PD. We've been doing Indigenous PD… for five years…It's not shocking to us to hear about bodies at a residential school because we've had the Blue Coats tour. And we've heard the stories of babies thrown in the furnace and saw where that happened and heard a survivor tell us about watching her brother being pushed down the stairs and his head cracking open…Good and bad from this [accident], is the conversation and the realization that's coming out…the fact that our school community, and parents in our community have changed their Facebook profile to recognize, those tags of the 250 survivors…and shoes on porches and things like that. (B/12/4)

Brianne also talked about how she incorporated a trauma-informed perspective in how she completed school registrations given the demographics in her community and her experiences with students in that community.

> So, the ACEs are part of my entry…with families when I do a new…registration…I do ask, not often, but I will ask about a child's ACE's score…You want me to best help your child and be prepared? I need to really know the story. It's amazing when you offer people… "Listen, I understand that these things will impact your kid" and how forthright they'll be. Before I used to get a lot of secrecy. And I don't know if it's because I've learned to deal with people on whatever their level is. But I mean, I've had people break down…I had a grandfather [tell] me, he came into my office, "I used to get the belt in this office." This is on my first meeting with him. So, I guess I developed an approachability over the years, or knowing how to show up for the people that are in front of you. (B/17/7)

Rick indicated that as his knowledge about the impact of trauma grew after the accident, he became aware of the need to lead from a trauma-informed perspective.

> We had to be trauma-informed and be more understanding of kids and what was going on, which is why I sought out the position I'm in now because this building…is the number one trauma center building in our district and that needed that trauma-informed practice. People needed that to understand kids. (Ri/5/3)

> …when I went to this building, I was like, we need to read about trauma-informed practice. We need to, as an entire staff, be trained in Nonviolent Crisis Intervention. We did Love and Logic…we've talked about restorative justice, all these things that I lump together that I think are really, really important, and how to effectively work with students who have trauma. And we continually revert back to that and go back to those trainings…that we've done. But we did them as a whole staff. (Ri/11/3)

Ruth described how leading through distressing events including those that were traumatic, had an impact on her interests and growth as a professional with respect to trauma-awareness development.

> I'm already very invested in learning about mental health and trauma and crisis. That's just a personal passion for me…that became even more so out here. Because I got to see the lack of resources we have. I also got to see the some of the gaps. And I got to see how difficult it was for the professionals to ask for the help they needed. (Ru/11/4)

Fostering Safety

Many participants mentioned the need to foster safety in school buildings immediately after a disruptive or traumatic event occurred. Some went even further and talked about how fostering safety across time resulted in students feeling secure enough so that learning would more easily occur.

Jeanette recounted that the recovery after the van accident took time and focused energy. Her perspective was that if she could ensure the school moved in safe direction, the community would follow.

> I knew if I could fix the school, the community would follow…Because they were as concerned…about us as we were about the kids…But if we fell apart, it would devastate

> the community. That night, I knew I [had] to look after the school. Everything else will be influenced by how we handle this. That was my thought. (J/16/7)

Maria explained how the pre-trauma functioning of the school impacted on feelings of safety for students.

> I knew that those kids had to feel that they were honored and that they were in a safe place…remember it was not a good place before I got there. Like there was some pretty raunchy behavior. And there were even brawls and all. (M/8/11)

Elise explained that she had always had a safety-focus to her leadership perspective and that was only enhanced after the assault on her administrative partner.

> I've always viewed school leadership as we are the people who are setting the tone and direction for the safety priority of all staff and students and people in the building, and then the learning. So, setting the climate that allows everyone to feel safe, and that they belong, and that it's a good place for them to be. (E/3/4)

> I've always been aware of it [safety], but it's been more about kids…and not really worrying about the safety with adults…it's okay to let that conversation go or call for help. (E/5/5)

Brianne shared about a student who was at risk because of his home situation. School staff consistently attempted to support him, but often were obligated to call social services because he needed protection. In part, because of their calls, the student was removed from his home and placed in foster care. Brianne shared what occurred when he was returned to his family.

> …two months ago, his grandfather came into my office and said, "Hey, we want to bring [the student] back here"… He says, "I know, there was some really hard things, but we want [our kid] back in this school, because you guys took care of him, and he felt safe here". That same child was in the playground just shortly after that, and some of his former classmates saw him and said, "Hey, [Stan], where are you been?" He said, "The Fosters got me."…he even wanted to come back to the school. (B/23/5, 7)

Rick explained how the traumatic event opened his understanding for the need for safety for staff to work through their feelings about the accident.

> I think they [school staff] …knew that they were safe to come and talk to me. And that I wasn't judgmental. There was nothing going to go wrong. She [the student's teacher] knew that she could come and cry for five minutes, clean up and go back to class and I wouldn't be like, "Man, you need to get it together". Like it was that safe spot…And others would come and get angry. Like there were people come and be like "I want the guy who drove that van; I want them to charge him. Why is he not going to jail? Why is this not a bigger deal?" And, trying to come to terms with their own feelings of what went on. (Ri/7/1)

Ruth reflected on how difficult it was to respond to a traumatic event during Covid-19, as the usual supports and strategies to build safety and connection after an event were not available in the same way.

> …the problematic piece of…it was that due to Covid-19, and all of us working from home…there were not the same avenues to provide support as you normally would have, especially with all of all we've learned from VTRA; all we've learned around Traumatic Event System training…it just wasn't able to play out the way it normally would….in that particular instance, it made it much harder as administrators to know what to do. It would be harder to know how to do it effectively for everybody's healing; everyone's ability to manage what had happened…this one [student death] stuck out just because of the difference in how we could even respond to react or, or even just support (Ru/1/6)

Katrine explained that the parents of a couple of students who made bomb threats were fearful of coming to school. She was required to provide a measured response to reassure them of a safe reception.

> Two of the families were fearful to come into the school. They didn't want any retribution on their children. We did keep all of the names confidential. I had to go to the homes and speak to those families. I think it also reinforced my role as a leader to maintain a safe and caring school, but also looking out for those students that were impacted. (K/5/2)

> A couple of the boys were athletes, and there was a team that the boys were on, and one of the coaches wanted to kick them off the team. And I didn't want that to happen. (K/6/3)

Katrine also explained how her perspective on school culture shifted in part owing to the bomb threat in 2017.

> …as I viewed school leadership, it forced me to think about it through two lenses. How we maintain the learning expectations of a school, but also, how you create that cultural piece to keep everybody safe. So, I've always felt very passionate about a positive school

> culture will promote a safe and caring environment, but you never know quite what the day is going to look like… there are daily events that we are trying to navigate and support families through that I had no idea was ever going to be part of my role. And I'm extremely passionate about it myself with regard to school safety and being proactive and how it affects the people within the building. (K/4/2; K/18/1)

Self-Reflection

The concept of self-reflection arose numerous times with participants. Some described self-reflection when they revisited the challenging or trauma-based events they led through. Others described their self-reflective practices that helped them work through the events personally.

Jeanette explained how she thought about the tragic event where eight lives were lost. She reflected on her coping strategies including not speaking about the event and using humor.

> I am a physically and mentally strong person. Like I said, it bothered me and certainly did. But no lasting effects. I get emotional where I talk about it, so I don't talk about it. But life goes on. And I did always have a healthy sense of humor, so I could make humor out of even the worst of times. (J/18/3)

Shelly reflected on the disruptive events that transpired early in her vice principal career. The self-reflection appeared to help solidify her self-assurance that she could lead in the school context even if the work lay outside the expected boundaries of school administration.

> I remember thinking of it as almost trial by fire. I was either going to make it or I wasn't, and if I made it through this, I can make it through anything. So, once things started to settle, once we got our feet under us, once we kind of had supports in place and to a certain extent, things normalized, I sat back and thought, “Okay, okay, we can get through that, like the rest, is no problem. Like timetabling and scheduling and teaching, proof. That's the easy stuff. We got this.” (S/3/6)

Shelly also explained how self-reflection helped her get through the accumulated and traumatic events she faced as an administrator.

> I've always been one who practices very deliberate reflection. And so, in that process, I took a lot of time just to kind of sit down and think through and write a lot about what I was experiencing and kind of sit back and reflect and observe. And so just kind of processing it that way, so that I was able to work my way through it without losing my mind. (S/5/5)

Maria reflected on how she saw herself at the time of the school bombing. She identified her state of understanding at that time, and what areas she grew in.

> And again, because I don't think I was astute enough. To be honest with you, I was not astute enough of the impact that something like that would have on individuals, because I didn't know their stories…I was naïve going in and it was in the middle of a school year. (M/13/6 & 7)

Elise explained how self-reflection played a role in the aftermath of the assault on her principal.

> I reflect a lot. I'm really reflective… Could I have done something different? What did I miss? How did we get from here to here like that…? I've never really been one for barring people from the school. I don't like it. I like everybody to have another opportunity. So, I had to deal with that a bit… Forgive yourself, because probably you couldn't have [done anything different], but if you could have, then implement those changes, and make sure everybody understands why you're implementing those changes. (E/8/2; E17/2)

Isabella took a similar perspective to Elise. She reflected on what she might have been able to do differently so that the tragic result may not have occurred.

> I think lots of self-reflection, and realizing, you did your best. You kind of look back on things, and is there something I could have done differently? I don't know that there was anything I could have done differently. I mean, I saw him that that day. He was actually giving that girl a piggyback across the mud to keep her from getting muddy… When I think about the last time I saw him, I would have had no idea that this is something he was thinking about doing. And I think he was wrapped up, you know? So, lots of self-reflection at the end of the day. You do what you can do for the kids… (I/10/8; I/11/1)

Brianne reflected on her development of mindfulness as a school leader.

> What I know now, and what I probably knew intrinsically, but didn't make any steps about, is after all of this time, I wish I would have been a more mindful principal and had more awareness of *my* (emphasis in audio) feelings. In those moments, I was always putting my feelings aside. So…the five facets of mindfulness; I wish I would have had that skill set… That ended up being my capstone project…the effects of mindfulness on a principal… not about self-care. I wouldn't even just say self-care, just an awareness of what you're thinking moment by moment. Because that's what a crisis is, moment by moment. You have to be super aware of how you're feeling and how that's impacting your decisions. (B/7/3)

Rick described how he used self-reflection in his transition from vice principal to principal. He took time to consider both his leadership and how he hoped to create a school climate and culture that supported the expected needs of students.

> …when I took my first position as a principal, I did a little bit more evaluation. I looked at, if I'm going into this building, what is it that I want? I'm now no longer working for someone else…it's all about what I want. So, what is it that I value? What is it I want to do? The principal I was taking over for had done a really good job with our building and trying to de-stigmatize some of the labeling that our community had about our building. And I went in there with some very, very distinct plans of, this is what I need to do… and really make not just our community, but even our school district understand what our school is and what our students are and how we act…We're not the school for the behaviorally challenged. We're an alternative school. It's for kids who have not experienced the amount of success in a regular classroom setting as they deserve. (Ri/10/2; Ri/11/1)

Ruth described her perspective about the need and value of self-reflection as an administrator, especially after a disruptive event.

> And really do some self-reflection. I know we talk about that word reflection a lot. But I do think there needs to be points to really stop and think, to be more mindful. And more emphasis on that piece, especially when something's happened, that you realize you're a person first, and not just an administrator all the time. You are a human being, and you can respond in all different ways. (Ru/25/5)

Self-Care

Self-care was a term and concept that surfaced during participant interviews. Some discussed self-care generally and others described how they engaged in self-care. For most school leaders, self-care was seen as essential in administrating through disruptive or traumatic events and the aftermath.

Jeanette did not describe specific self-care strategies she used following the school-related van accident. As indicated, she expressed that she did not speak about the accident, and the interview for this study was the only time she shared her experiences in depth. When I

queried how she would manage after the interview, she shared how she took care of herself and engaged in self-care in the present.

> I have solid friends, relationships. I'm sitting on the beach, overlooking the beautiful beach. I got myself a little one-year old, soft-coated terrier, who's chewing up my slippers as we speak. I'm in a community down here that my neighbors are good to me. (J/27/7)

Shelly explained the need for administrators to care for themselves given the challenges inherent in the position. She offered suggestions for administrators to engage in self-care.

> Take time to breathe. And take time to be still…Celebrate the accomplishments, even the smallest ones. Celebrate and recognize the positive impact you've had. Do your best to forgive yourself for mistakes that you make during the process and seek out support…if you need it. And when you're able to, depending on the nature of the crisis, remember that there's opportunity to learn… That will help you be better prepared moving forward… Look for those moments. (S/16/6)

When reflecting on the incident where her administrative partner was assaulted, Elise shared that self-care was a part of how she responded after the event.

> I am pretty good at self-care. I believe in letting things go and then leaving work at work and having a great relationship at work and then a great relationship at home. (E/8/2)

> …we got to care for yourself first…care for yourself as a leader to get ready to support everybody else through it. (E/17/2)

Isabella reflected on the need to engaging in strategies to continue in a job she described as “stressful” (I/11/1). She also shared some of the coping strategies she used following disruptive or traumatic events at school.

> …if you don't have some coping strategies, then you can't keep helping. You can't help kids from an empty vessel. I have good relationships. I could talk with my husband or my parents. I have couple of good friends. One's a former administrator, and one is the principal at [another] school; she and I are good friends. And we can talk. So, I have people I can debrief with. And I have two boys that keep me busy too. So…that's how I get through it… At the end of the day, you do what you can do for the kids and not holding on to that [negativity] and then making a conscious effort to not get pulled into the social media stuff. (I/11/1)

Brianne explained that her personal space provided some of what she needed to get through after the traumatic event. She also described her method of dealing with daily challenges so that she could honor her leadership values.

> Our landscape is amazingly built, overlooking a pasture. So connected to nature. We have a hot tub looking at the landscape - walking, reading in the morning, getting up by myself, taking time to be alone and process things. So, I'm a morning person in that way. I need the house quiet by myself. So, I didn't give that up. That became really important, even if it meant for me going into work early to deal with head-things and managerial things on my own, so that I had the energy during the day. That's what I've always said, "people first at work". If that means I need to do paperwork at night, so I can be emotionally available and be able to act on meetings or parent requests or staff needs, that's always been my motto. So, people first, paper second. But it also helped to just go into work early and get paperwork out of the way… I've also since that time, become much better at leaving work at work. That's been a growth thing too… (B/16/6)

Ruth shared about care for self, indicating it was an area of growth for her. Early in her career she was less likely to engage in self-care.

> I would never have been comfortable taking care of myself at the beginning versus now. Even with mental health being what it is. (Ru/13/7)

Katrine identified the challenges inherent in leadership and the need to care for oneself to address the disruptions and competing demands.

> …trying to be calm, keep calm and carry-on kind of a mentality is what I've had to maintain as a leader, for my own sanity, as well. And, knowing that you do your best during the day. You can't control everything and protecting my own heart and mental health as well. So that I can be good for my own family. So, it is a balance. It's not easy. And I've been in education 32 years. It doesn't really seem to be getting easier. Some aspects are getting harder. So, you know, doing the best we can. (K/9/3)

Allowances for Vulnerability

While some administrators described periods of tough togetherness, some also shared episodes of vulnerability. Vulnerability appeared to come after some experience in education and was not easily accessed for all.

Jeanette described avoiding contact with the community beyond her school-related tasks. However, she had people in her life that she reached out to after the tragic loss.

> I'm blessed with a very close circle of friends. And, you know, there were times when they knew… If I ever needed to bounce ideas off of anybody, I had a very strong circle of friends. (J/17/8)

Lars was afforded a unique opportunity following the death threats he received. His school district enabled he and his wife to attend a retreat designed to support educators who were undergoing challenging life circumstances. The retreat was hosted by the provincial teacher/principal Union.

> …they [Union] had some sort of spring retreat where people would go for a week. So, the division sent me and my wife there. And I didn't ask. They just said, "Why don't you check this out and go?" So, I went for a week, and it was pretty good. They had counsellors, and…it…puts things into perspective as well. Because you go there and there's probably…sixteen other teachers there. And all of them have some really big-time problems like personally…You start thinking, “Ok, other people have got problems too”, so you're not that unusual…They [the district] paid for that and let me go for a week and let my wife go. …and it was a retreat in the springtime specifically for people that were having anxiety issues and mental health issues and personal family issues…There were people that had some significant issues there. (L/7/9; 8/1, 3)

Maria provided several examples of vulnerability. In one instance she described how her personal loss after her father’s death opened the door to having an honest conversation with a student.

> …after my father passed, I had used quotes all the time about dads and how important they were. And a young person came down and said, "Miss, could I talk to you?" And I said, "Of course you can". She said, "Well, I just wanted to share. We're really sorry that your dad died. And we know that those quotes are helping you to feel better about your dad dying. But there's a lot of us that don't have a dad, or we have a bad relationship. So, could you not do that?" I said, "Oh, my goodness, I'm so sorry. I will stop doing that right away". (M/7/2)

Elise offered her perspective about the value and importance of being vulnerable following significant disruptions and traumas school leaders face in their leadership careers.

> I would say make sure that you have someone to talk to, and that you're honest about what happened, and you don't just do it once. You should probably do it at least once a week for about two months…because it hits you at different times, or in different ways…having someone to debrief with and be honest with and talk it out. (E/17/2)

After learning about the suicide death of the grade nine student, Isabella described an encounter with a teacher that highlighted an allowance for vulnerability.

> …my band teacher was sitting by me, and I looked at her and we hugged, and…as a leader, I need to be able to show emotion, and feel and be real. And in that moment, I couldn't hide everything, or pretend like everything was okay, because it really wasn't… That permission to feel and show how you're feeling. And after…she just said, "Oh, I needed that so much Isabella". And I was like, "So did I" …people look to you for how they should respond… So, if I had just kept everything in, not really showing how I was feeling, then someone else doesn't have permission to show how they're feeling. But also, that permission that everybody grieves differently. And everyone kind of deals with things differently. (I/4/3)

In the context of exploring several leadership characteristics deemed necessary for effectively leading through a traumatic event, Brianne indicated that vulnerability in leaders was acceptable and at times necessary. She stated it this way, “So being vulnerable; being brave and vulnerable.” (B/24/7)

Rick expressed that remembering the accident and the student’s return to school through the course of the interview was “cathartic”.

> I haven't thought of this in a number of years. I've left the school and the student has moved into a specialized program… I haven't seen her in a couple years. But it was strangely cathartic to go through it all again and talk about it…I know that anytime you talk about anything it’s helpful… I've really enjoyed it [the interview]. (Ri/17/5)

Ruth described the growth she saw in herself about her willingness to be vulnerable. She compared how she thought about vulnerability when she was a new vice principal, compared to how she viewed it during the Covid-19 event where a student died because of alcohol.

> The first event we had, there's no way I would have [been vulnerable]. I would have…felt like I was being weak or that I was being perceived as a young new admin…Whereas now I wasn't even caring about that. It didn't matter. And I feel like it's kind of given me some more confidence in what I know and what I can trust in myself just as a human

> being. That it's okay to just be who you are and feel how you feel. And that we're definitely not all the same… I think I'm more open to share my own experiences or feelings around how I feel with trauma and how I feel with events such of these. (Ru/13/2; Ru/12/6)

Like Ruth, Katrine described a shift that took place in how she saw vulnerability considering school leadership.

> I think my personality is more stoic… Yet I have learned through those experiences to also balance that with being vulnerable and talking through the human lens of it… I think as administrators were oftentimes taught, never let them see you sweat, and don't exhibit emotion and be strong for everybody else. And I think sometimes people forget that we do have feelings too, and we've had to carry that load. So, my own personal leadership journey has been a bit of a balance.
>
> At first, I would say…I saw vulnerability as a bit of a weakness…because I thought nobody wants to see their leader upset or crying…but I've seen…lately that it's okay to have those conversations, so that everyone knows that we all go through good days and bad days. And if we're truly a team, we have to be there for each other, and not exclude the principal from those conversations… I think the same could be said for district office; that it's nice to hear when my superintendent shares a situation where he was vulnerable, or didn't quite know how to handle it, because it puts us all on that human lens. So, these situations certainly do…make us all focus or reflect on what it means to be a school leader and what we need to do for each other… (K/9/1; K/15/5)

Enhanced Empathy

The experience of leading through a traumatic event appeared to have an impact on how administrators saw their students, students' families, and communities. They described and explored how their empathy was enlarged.

Jeanette expressed her understanding about how the families of the deceased felt after the accident. While she was a target for some of the blame, she also expressed compassion because of the families' losses.

> The parents, obviously the families, they were sacred to me. I knew there was anger, I knew there was blame. It was all justified. It was what it was. I did what I could. Like I said, that was sacred. (J/7/2)

Lars recognised how challenging it was for the family to be displaced after the father engaged in threat making toward Lars.

> And then you do have to try and put yourself in their shoes as well. And that was a difficult situation for them. Surely, the dad didn't handle it well, but I can't say that other people wouldn't have done the same thing. It was probably a pretty bad situation for them… There was a lot of upheaval, and the police were involved… So, you definitely learn to try and be empathetic and sympathetic with people as well. (L/8/8)

Following the assault on her administrative partner, Elise described how she considered the situation from the parent's perspective, and how that affected her responses to other parents who became heightened during challenging conversations.

> …it really did help with me having an empathy piece towards that Mom… I don't know what we could have done to prevent what happened, but I sure wish we could have. So, I think I am less pushy in interviews with parents, where I'm trying to say, "You know, what? We really need you onside here." …Some of those harder conversations, I think I'm pretty good at recognizing when it's not the time to have it, or it's not going to work and letting that go…because it's not worth that… Accepting where we're at in the relationship with the parent… That's where we are at right now. And that's okay. (E/10/8)

Isabella moved to the high school with the cohort of students who had been impacted by the suicide death. She described how she empathized with students who were affected by the death.

> I could empathize with them because I knew him too and I knew he was a good kid and that he had all these different friends. And I knew what they were feeling was real. (I/7/2)

Brianne talked about competencies that developed from leading through trauma and building a trauma-informed leadership perspective. One of the competencies she described was an empathetic stance.

> The importance of the communication skills and listening and getting to people's level of where they're at… I've learned to listen. And listen first… I knew to amp up my… energy if a parent came to me very emotionally charged and wanting a solution or resolution… I needed to match the energy level of the people that were coming to me. So being able to read a situation and read people's emotional levels. (B/7/3)

Rick shared how he grew in his ability to work with individuals from a tolerant and empathetic standpoint.

> I think I developed more patience. It became more about, “How can I help?” I am still human. Overall, I started seeing my role as, “what is it this person needs?” With each individual, “what can I do to help them out”? It’s okay to say to them, “Come into my office. What can I do for you?” (Ri/2/7)

Ruth reflected that she had always been empathetic, but that her leadership experiences supporting individuals during and after disruptive or traumatic events increased her capacity.

> I'm very empathetic to people. And I'm very sensitive… very compassionate in the first place. And I always tried to be very calculated in my responses. But I think, yes, it [leading through a traumatic event] would have changed me to be even more so. (Ru/6/4)

Katrine found she needed to balance the needs of the students who made the bomb threats, and their families, and consider what repercussions were reasonable given how the threat impacted the school community.

> Also, the families of the students that were involved. These were junior high students, so they were at a very pivotal age in their development. I know that kids make mistakes. I have two children of my own, and I think it allowed me as a leader to look at the situation with empathy, and compassion, and tried to find out what caused the students to behave in this way. And it also allowed me to support the families in a different way.
>
> Two of the families were fearful to come into the school. They didn't want any retribution on their children. We did keep all of the names confidential. I had to go to the homes and speak to those families. I think it also reinforced my role as a leader to maintain a safe and caring school, but also looking out for those students that were impacted.
>
> A couple of the boys were athletes, and there was a team that the boys were on, and one of the coaches wanted to kick them off the team. And I didn't want that to happen (K/5/1-2; K/6/3).

Appreciation and Gratitude

Several participants expressed appreciation or gratitude despite the disruptive or traumatic events they led through. Often these feelings were connected to the people they encountered or the learning and growth they experienced.

Jeanette explained that the crisis intervention training she completed prior to the van accident assisted her leadership.

> …Kevin Cameron…he is amazing… He threw in a little bit of trauma training, but it was crisis management… Did it come in handy. I can't tell you how much I appreciated having some knowledge and having that as a resource. (J/20/4)

Lars expressed appreciation for his school district. He indicated that they were supportive and responsive to his needs despite the local media highlighting the event where Lars played a central role.

> I really got an appreciation for our school division. I think because they were pretty good throughout the whole scenario. And then you just really ended up being thankful. And that's probably another reason why I changed my outlook on moving into a different position, because I really got a sense of thankfulness and gratefulness for the position that I'm in. (L/7/7)

Like Lars, Shelly expressed appreciation for her school district. She identified their role in helping to support and keep students safe.

> It allowed me to understand with a greater depth the different roles that different people at the division level had, and how they're there to support students. Where before, they were really just a figurehead. Or you'd see them at meetings…but…through this process, [I] gained an appreciation for just how they do help make sure that kids are safe and are having the optimal learning experience available to them. (S/9/1)

Like Lars and Shelly, Rick shared his appreciation for how his district responded after the accident that injured a grade two student.

> That was one of the things… I really appreciate in ours [district] is, the help they sent us…and would come and meet with us and say, "Okay, where do you need us? What do you need from us?" As opposed to coming in and saying, "Hey, we're the experts. Here's what you guys need to do." They allowed us to lead what was going on. (Ri/15/5)

To address some of the poor pre-trauma functioning of the school where Maria was a principal, she determined to have a “student appreciation day”. She brought the idea to the school staff. The school staff did not believe the student were able to receive an appreciation day. In keeping with her staff’s perspective, Maria waited. She brought the idea back to the staff and

they gave the same response. The third time Maria raised the idea to have a student appreciation day, the school staff confirmed the students were ready.

> So, I kept saying, "Let's do a student appreciation day," Because you have to remember, I read Chicken Soup books. I read all these…things about how to make your school better. Anyway, I sit with my leadership team… "We should do a student Appreciation Day".
>
> They say, “No”.
>
> I go, 'What do you mean?"
>
> "No. They're not ready to be appreciated. They won't understand and there'll be chaos."
>
> I said, "Okay".
>
> Then the next semester comes along, and I go, "Can we just do an appreciation?"
>
> "No".
>
> So, the third time I asked, they said, "Yes", we could.
>
> So, we literally got all the kids out of the school. And we decorated the school and I got presents for every kid when they got off the bus…and, had a fun day… I listened to the staff because they knew better and the kids completely loved it… And then we had a second Appreciation Day the following year, and then the school was closed after that. (M/8/15-19; M/9/1-5)

Elise described her perspective on ways school leaders are valued, and how appreciation can fuel forward momentum. She compared historical experiences with her current experience in a new district.

> I think administrators are under appreciated…in some divisions. I'm very appreciated where I am now. In other divisions when things are really busy…I think just that, “wow, are you guys doing an amazing job!” …That makes you feel like you're okay, so then you can be okay for everybody else. Because a lot of time, we don't know that we're doing a good job… And that's important. (E/19/3)

Isabella described her first experience with a student death. She was a teacher at that time, and it was early in her career. She explained that the uncoordinated response from the

school contributed to the heightened distress in students. She compared that situation with the current response from her school district.

> I am very grateful that we had a TERT response [this time], because when I came to work, there were not kids wailing in the hallway… There were people there to get those kids and, get them help and get them feeling better. So that was good. I'm glad that protocol was in place. (I/12/4)

With respect to her growth as a trauma-informed school leader, Brianne expressed, "…there's lots of things that I'm grateful for". (B/23/5)

Related to other comments by participants, Ruth described how crisis and trauma response policies in her school district were particularly valuable as a new administrator.

> …as a younger administrator, I would have been lost without them [policies and procedures] …how I've seen them change, as research has changed, I appreciate them. I fear that should those policies and practices always stay the same, regardless of what the researcher is saying, if no one's visited them in a while, then that can actually hinder people's growth. (Ru/20/1)

Katrine described the working relationship she and her team had with the RCMP who supported them through the school shooting scare. She expressed gratitude for their teamwork and their ability to use their unique skills and resources to help mitigate risk and enhance safety.

> …the RCMP did an amazing job… We're very, very thankful for their communication and their work. The technological side of things…really helped…us foster a sense of teamwork with them; that they were on our side, and that they were not going to proceed until all avenues had been looked at. (K/7/4)

New Opportunities

New opportunities opened for some participants after the traumatic events they led through. Most of the participants who identified new opportunities connected their personal and professional growth to leading through crisis, trauma, and disruptive events, making these opportunities even more salient than they might have been otherwise.

Maria developed an understanding of trauma because of the influence of the then Canadian Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (now NACTATR), and her PTSD diagnosis. She became such an advocate for threat assessment and trauma response work in communities, that she eventually became the Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA) Coordinator for her city in Ontario. She continues to work with police and justice, education, social services, health, and other community-based organizations.

> …after I'd retired from education…VTRA was the first time where I was able to start something, and here I am, 11 years later. And I'm still part of the process and helping it to grow. And it was purely by accident… I got to continue doing it until the point where you embed yourself and then people go, "What are we going to do without her?" Which is not good. Because seriously, I'm 57 years old, there could be a chance I want to leave… (M/21/4)

Isabella expressed that participating in this study was a new opportunity for her. While some parts of the process caused a heightening of emotion, she wanted her experiences to potentially benefit the learning of others.

> Parts of it were re-triggering… I knew that it probably would. But I wanted to share the perspective and just to be part of it and see if there's any learning that comes from it, or to help somebody else through another situation. (I/20/7)

Brianne explained that part of the impetus to take her master's degree was in direct connection to her leadership focus of understanding and addressing trauma in school settings.

> …in 2018, just spurred on by that [training in VTRA and TES] and my work with trauma in the school, and… the impact of residential schools and colonialism, I went and got my master's in Trauma and Resilience in Educational Settings. (B/2/5)

Rick believed that the opportunity to move from a vice principal role to a principal position was related to how he responded to the tragic event and follow-up after the grade two student sustained injury on the way to school.

> …when I applied a couple years later to the position [as principal]…under a new superintendent who had been a deputy at the time of this incident, I think the fact that he saw how I reacted to things, he saw my relationship with the building…he really believed

> in relationships. So, I think that was…my leg up against some of the other people who were applying for the position I ultimately got. (Ri/5/2)

Summary

In this chapter, I showcased the domain *personal and professional transformations leading to personal change* by providing data to support the themes. The themes included the personal toll from the target event, elements of crisis leadership, crisis overtaking the instructional leadership role, the accumulation of events beyond the target event, the pace of school leadership, the complexity of the leadership role, lonely leadership, lost chances, querying compassion fatigue, critical periods, contributors to growth, trauma-informed development, fostering safety, self-reflection, self-care, allowances for vulnerability, enhanced empathy, appreciation and gratitude, new opportunities.

The exemplars in this chapter highlighted *a changed sense of self* and for some an *altered philosophy on life* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). In interviews, participants explored their experiences coming out of adversity and how their experiences shaped them as school leaders and, as people. School leaders noted the increased complexity in their roles after a traumatic event, and shared that while there was often growth, and perspective changes, they periodically came with a personal cost. While some found clarity through the tragedies and losses, others were still in the process of making sense of them. While this domain highlighted how school leaders were changed personally and professionally by the traumas and crises they faced, these changes were not necessarily expected.

The themes in this chapter were concerned with a shift in perspective on life and understanding oneself and professional role. Some themes demonstrated task-oriented shifts such as engaging in crisis leadership, and crisis overtaking the instructional leadership role. Other themes were connected to the deep intrapersonal, such as self-reflection, lonely leadership,

allowances for vulnerability, appreciation, and gratitude. Others involved an increased awareness of the needs of others, like enhanced empathy. Recognising that leaders may experience an altered philosophy about life, along with personal and professional changes are relevant for those who support and employ school leaders. As leaders grow and change, it is possible that their needs will also change and benefit from targeted encouragement.

In chapter nine, I offer more in-depth analysis about personal and professional transformations following crisis or trauma. In the next chapter I provide my analysis on my second domain, which is, *relationship transformations coming out of a school crisis or traumatic event leading to a changed sense of relationships.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Findings: Relationship Transformations

Introduction

Relationships were central to the participant's narratives and connect to Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2013) perspective that the five factors from the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) can be distilled into three main categories: a) a changed sense of self; b) a changed sense of relationships; and c) an altered philosophy about life. In this chapter, a changed sense of relationships will be explored. Not all changes were positive for all participants.

Some participants described personal relationship changes and others described professional relationship transformations. Some of these changes were deeply positive and lasted well beyond the event itself. Some relational transformations were difficult and resulted in some internal struggle for a portion of the participants. In this section I will explore themes related to, a) school and community impact; b) relationship disruptions; c) inequities; d) relationship connections; e) repair; f) enhanced partnerships; g) help-seeking for staff and students; h) creating and maintaining trust; i) transparency; j) integrity; k) becoming a growth facilitator; and l) administrators supporting administrators. As with the previous chapter, the referencing logic I used for my interview data was, first initial (or first and second letter), page and then paragraph number.

School and Community Impact

The participant stories (Chapter five) described the disruptive or traumatic event and the initial impact. However, each event also had unique aftermath that highlighted relational elements. This section explores school and community impact, primarily focused on relationships.

Jeanette explained how the traumatic event impacted the families of those who lost loved ones; however, she also shared how the van accident impacted the other athletic coaches, two who had also been travelling the night of the accident.

> …there was only one coach in the van that night. But there were other coaches who drove those vans with other teams. Actually, there were two other coaches on the road that night. And so, the driver of the van was a very close personal friend of theirs through teaching, through coaching… The students that were killed, were students that were on their [the other coaches] teams… If you played on one, then you probably played on them all - like small town. And some of them really struggled, like for the full two years I was there…needing time off, needing support…They're functioning was difficult. One of the teachers in my building, her son was in the van. But he survived. Another one of my teachers, his son was in the van, but he was killed. So, you talk about functioning? (J/13/3)

Lars shared that when the school staff found out about the threats toward Lars, they were concerned about school safety because of the rupture between Lars and the student's parent.

> …they [school staff] were…concerned. You know, for their own safety…because they didn't know if he would be coming back - if he would…turn on them or something like that. (L/5/2)

While there were central instigating events that Shelly described about the students' who became a focus for attention because of their mental health concerns, there was also fall-out that occurred beyond the initial six weeks of the school year.

> And the ripple from that [stalking behaviour toward the students that attempted suicide] was a lot of blame that his actions had contributed to the attempt. … It quickly rippled throughout the student body and was impacting their ability to get into…the learning… (S/4/2)

The complexity of the student suicide at the school where Isabella was a vice principal had several elements. The student related to a variety of other students, so the impact zone expanded between student-groups and even schools.

> And he was a fringe kid. He played hockey, he was in drama club, he was friends with all different…He pierced somebody's ear in grade nine in the boys' bathroom, another boy's ear. And so, he just had friends in so many different circles… It impacted a lot of kids. (I/3/2)

Further, Isabella identified that the deceased student's mother connected with the community using social media. On one hand she honoured her son's legacy; on the other, she also engaged in behaviour toward students that was distressing for Isabella, and there was no clear remedy to address the hurtful behaviour.

> …in terms of…the power of social media and the negative impact of that. And basically, becoming a bully on Facebook towards this young lady. Like her [the former girlfriend] coming to school low and [saying], "I think I want to die". I'm [Isabella] talking to the counsellor, "Do you [mom of deceased student] not see that you're doing to this 15-year-old girl exactly what you say she did to him?" … And then just to be powerless to do anything about it. Like the police to say, "Well, she [mom] didn't name her [student].
>
> …the posts about the girl that said the sweaters were expensive or a money grab, then people replied, "Let's kick her ass."
>
> "Yeah, who would say that?"
>
> "What a selfish whatever".
>
> And here's this 15-year-old girl crying, afraid to come to school because of these people… (I/7/2; I/7/3-6)

Brianne recalled how the accident affected "people's emotional levels" even in her school, despite the accident happening in a neighbouring building in the district. Relationships were tied to the community impact. (B/5/1)

> I'm thinking in particular, [of] the teacher whose daughter was there and whose friend died and they're dealing with the impact of that as parents… It was a rough, rough go. And of course, that ripples through; there's a ripple effect of that type of emotion. (B/5/1)
>
> …For the parents…being staff members of the division and having those three staff members being parents of kids in that classroom, and…they're…not…understanding about…decisions…being made, [and] in the way they're being made… How to honor these children; what to do [and] how to protect their feelings… We learned if the parents are okay, the kids are okay. We definitely learned that through that experience… (B/5/3)
>
> … We're the only French immersion school in town. So, all of those kids were kindergarten to grade five in our building. So of course, the teachers who had those kids or the staff members…those were their children as well… The one teacher, it was her

> daughter, and a couple of EA's who had children in the class as well. So of course, they banded together. They were each other's understanding system, little mini system. (B/5/9)

Rick reflected on how school cultures and relationships can shift after a traumatic event.

> What I really noticed about the culture of the school was that traumatic events changed the culture of schools. A third of each staff moved to other buildings. There were a lot [of] teachers who were scared of coming to the building. This trauma almost seemed it was fusion point. And they came together as a community. It seemed to be a catalyst to be a cohesive staff. (Ri/2/3)

Relationship Disruptions

While relational growth occurred for interview participants, relationship disruptions or ruptures also occurred for some. PTG acknowledges that not all individuals grow following a traumatic or adverse event, and it is not expected that all people will experience growth in all areas. In this study, because the participants were leaders, their decisions and choices had impacts on their staff, families, students, and communities. In some cases, relational disruptions were resolved and in other cases they were not. Relational disruptions caused feelings of stress and at times overwhelm for participants.

Jeanette described a scenario with their local mental health services that highlighted a relational disruption.

> …we invited them [mental health services] to come down to be in the school that week during when we were having the open houses and dealing with the students…just to be there. And we almost had to beg to have them come down. And when they came down, they didn't know what to do with themselves. You know, they couldn't find a reason to be there… They were going to debrief people because of the accident. You know who was not debriefed? [Our] high school. They debriefed all the other schools in the district, but not us. We had to do that ourselves…
>
> I went to a meeting about a year later with mental health. I was sitting at a table… some of us were education, some mental health, when the guy sitting across from me said, “I got to apologize to you.” I don’t know this guy from Adam. I said, “You got to apologize to me. What for?” He said, “When you had your accident, I told my boss if you make me go there, I'll quit.” I just about came across the table at him…He just couldn't do it. Poor you. I didn't have a choice. Anyway…there was silence at the table as

> everybody else just kind of looked down. Like I mean, none of them [mental health services] were inclined to get down to the school to help us out. (J/11/5; J/11/7)

The second example from Jeanette pointed to relational ruptures that could not be repaired or redeemed.

> …I was going out the door to my retirement banquet when the phone rang… She [parent of one of the deceased students] had called me a number of times before, and said, "I just called to wish that you don't have a happy retirement." Another one wrote me a letter; the poison letter… "If you see me downtown, act like you don't know me". It wasn't all peaches and cream.

Lars explained that after the death threats and the student's father going to jail, the student and his brother did not return to the school

> …The student didn't come back to our school. The division moved him to another school. And I don't know if that was on the parent's request, or how that exactly happened. I certainly didn't request that to happen. But it did. That probably made it easier for all parties involved… What was too bad…was…I had very decent rapport with the older brother. And that just kind of went sideways… I've since heard, he doesn't really think too highly of me. (L/5/2; L/5/8)

Shelly described a range of events that started shortly after the suicide attempts and continued until she left the school for another administrative position.

> …at the school where I was at…in the second year…the principal took a leave to have a knee replacement… then in March, just as he was set to start coming back from his surgery, he announced he was taking a leave of absence, and he and his wife were moving to [to another country] to teachPsalm91
> . And then when the new principal was announced the long-standing vice principal…decided that it was a good opportunity for him to change. So, he announced that he was leaving. And then the third vice principal was transferred to a different high school. So, in my second year of leadership, by April, I was the last man standing on that team who was going to continue to the next year… A whole new team was coming in. And when the new principal started putting his philosophical and pedagogical views into practice, it created conflict within the staff, because it was in a very different direction from where we had been going previously… By the time that I left that building, not that I have any personal experience with this, but I liken it to realizing that…I was leaving an abusive relationship that I had stayed in for the kids. (S/21/7; S/21/9)

Maria explained that the already existing relationship disruptions were quickly evident in her school when she arrived as a new principal and had an impact on the functioning of the building.

> …there was also a staff dynamic that I inherited where there were groups that actually didn't like each other - that had aligned differently. There would also be internal conflict. (M/11/7)

Elise shared that the district made the decision that the parent who assaulted Elise's administrative partner could no longer visit the school. While this was counter to Elise's belief system and values, in this situation, she determined it was necessary to keep people safe.

> I still struggle with saying people can be excluded from the building… I really hate to say, "No, I'm sorry, you're no longer welcome there". And after that experience, I was like, "Yeah, you know what? You're no longer welcome here." This is just not good for anybody… That was a decision by the division, which they were correct in doing. And I supported at that time, whereas other times, especially with students, I would advocate on their behalf. And that was not going to happen on this one. (E/3/6)

Brianne shared that, "there were a couple people who were not satisfied about how I led or dealt with things… It was very conflictual with a couple of them." (B/8/5) With respect to long-standing relational ruptures at the school, Brianne stated:

> I resolved with all but one. And the one person was an EA, and she was somebody who wasn't from the community. So, it triggered something in her. (B/9/3)

Rick described how the superintendent of his district at the time of the accident seemed to avoid the building, keeping himself apart from the staff, students, and situation.

> At the time the superintendent himself did not do well with it; he kind of avoided our building and let everyone else come in. And maybe that was a good thing because he wasn't a relationship type of person. And his presence always kind of made people feel a bit awkward. And it might have been worse if he'd shown up… (Ri/8/3)

Early in Ruth's administrative career her district was beginning to learn and understand key principles about a trauma-informed response to crisis or tragic events. This knowledge and

practice had a significant impact on relationships in the community following the first event she described for this study.

> …it got very intense because our superintendent and our divisional leadership was just getting into…trauma/VTRA (Violence Threat Risk Assessment) kind of conversations and learning that…we can't live in that memory [of the student]. And that didn't go over well in the community. So, there ended up being some pretty harsh situations; some awful situations actually, because of that… The parents… they expected that we were going to name the football field for him, that we were going to… dedicate a wing of the school to him. That this was such an incredible burden to the community that we needed to really make this known and impact future generations, so that they could know who their son was. Which, right or wrong, that's how the parents felt at the time. That's how community members felt. There was that pressure, and the division was… saying, "Yes, sometimes things like this might have happened in the past. But we can't do this every time". And the parents did not want to hear that…and neither did different people. (Ru/3/6; Ru/4/3)

Katrine touched on the hurt she felt because one of her vice principals chose to avoid the search process following the bomb threat.

> I had two vice principals at the time, and one didn't want to come into the building. And so that person stayed home. So, in some ways I was a little hurt by that because as an admin team I felt that it was our duty to be at the school. From that person's perspective, I'm sure that they have their own personal opinion as to guarding their safety, and they didn't want to come into the building… I couldn't judge that. But that was a little bit hard. (K/9/1)

Katrine described how a family whose son had been part of threat-making was angry with the school. It was a delicate balance to know how to honor parents' perspectives and still issue commensurate consequences for a situation that was extremely disruptive to the entire student body.

> …Another family was…a little bit more angry about the situation and said, "You know, it's just boys being boys; they didn't mean anything by it. These were just words. Why would you overreact?" And that would upset the staff because, we didn't know…at that time, and we were following RCMP guidance on how to manage the situation… But it was hard, because it was difficult to know what kind of consequences to give these students when nothing actually happened… Yet the threat permeated the building and community… It was difficult to know…how to respond and how strong to be in the consequences… We didn't want to put a cross on the kids either, and have it be a punishment-for-life type of a thing. So, it wasn't easy to make those decisions. (K/6/3)

Inequities

The inequities described by some participants led to some significant controversy and relationship disruptions in the school or community. School leaders explained how they addressed inequities and their observations about them.

Maria indicated that her school was beyond the outskirts of an urban center. It did not have all the supports, or esteem that city schools had.

> …the city [schools] were considered the academic schools… and they had the… magnet programs, so the performing arts, the science intact, the IB program… All the kids from the outlying areas would be bused into the schools… It's hard because it's so evident. Like, they [district office] don't come and visit you. Like it's easy for them to drop into a city school because they're close. It's easy because they have a larger staff, or they win more awards there. (M/4/2; M/11/9)

With respect the bomb and subsequent threats, it was up to Maria to establish the responses needed. Maria described a situation where an urban school in the district experienced a bomb threat. The response from the district was far different than it had been for Maria's school.

> …the following year, one of the other high schools in town, one of the academic schools, had a bomb scare. And they had the dogs there. And the school was closed for two days until they were sure there was no bomb. Now I have staff in my office saying, "When it happened to us, no one cared. When it happened to us, they didn't close the school. When it happened to us. It didn't make the newspaper."
>
> And I said, "Well, you're right…we were the first…But think about it. Do you really want us to be in the newspaper? Because there was a bomb scare…We handled it." And ours was about a three-line reference to the kid who made the bomb, and his Court appearance. And that was it. That was all.

Isabella explained a complex dynamic between the mom of the deceased student and his former girlfriend. The former girlfriend was vilified in social media for her alleged role in his death. During the next school year, the former girlfriend volunteered to be a part of a Red Cross campaign to address bullying in elementary schools. She was screened in as an acceptable high school volunteer. However, the deceased student's mother was opposed to this girl's

involvement, and her advocacy to have her removed from the role made its way to a superintendent.

> And then we had a Red Cross bullying thing that our kids can join. And this girl joined it. She wanted to be part of the anti-bullying… You present at middle schools, but you have to go through the training first and then present. Well, she went and presented at a school. This mom found out that this girl had gone. And she went to the board, and I had one of my superintendent's phoning to me. "Tell me how she got to do a Red Cross presentation?"
>
> And I'm like, "I don't understand how she couldn't have done that" …I know this went to the police… if there were any charges or anything that came out of that, of course, we wouldn't have her doing Red Cross things. So, I said, "She did everything that any other kids would get to do". (I/3/5; I/4/1)

Ruth provided a glaring example of inequities in her community regarding the first event she described for this study. She shared how the expected trauma response was dependent on how popular the student or family was in the community. In her school's case, they made decisions that honoured fairness despite the pressure to engage otherwise.

> …As horrible as it sounds, it would depend on how popular the student and their family were… In this case, the student who passed away was very popular. He was well known in the community. Everyone really liked him; his family was well known. And so, the parents [had] exceptions… It's definitely not feasible every time someone has a trauma or a tragedy.
>
> …And then there was people saying, "So now it's a popularity contest; the more popular your kid is, the more the school is going to do for you". And so, the school was very cognizant of that, and definitely not wanting to have that be the case. Which to be fair, as a new administrator at the time, I definitely was observing intently because I wanted to know. I just wanted to see what would happen… (Ru/4/3; Ru/4/5; RU/5/1)

Relational Connections

Participants described a range of positive relational connection that seemed to stem from the traumatic events they described for this study. Some shared that these connections continued beyond the aftermath and recovery periods.

Jeanette explained several elements that helped her school recover to the degree they were able to after the van accident. One of the elements she described was community relationships.

> The community relationships. The relationship that we had with the police department. The respect between us… We always had a police representative in the school. But we didn't always see them…through Kevin [Cameron], who said, "You have to have this kind of representation at my training sessions, or I'm not coming", was very valuable…. The trust was there. They treated me like their commanding officer. "What do we do now? What's up? What are we're going to do?" …They were there… talking to the community. So, the community involvement, I would say, was very helpful. So those were things that were done intentionally to make a stronger school. And they had an impact [on the recovery]. (J/20/5)

Maria described an open-door policy as a principal, inviting both staff and students to share their perspectives and opinions. "…the kids had no problem coming to me and telling me things and correcting me on things that were bothering them." (M/7/1) Maria explained how she established a feeling of connection in her school.

> …All those kids…were in this sense of family, because you have to remember, this is how I would end morning announcements "Remember, your principal loves you". (M/3/6)

Elise explained how the assault on her administrative partner had a positive relationship on their administrative connection.

> It just bonded us closer. And, you know, we just strengthened our admin relationship…Whenever you go through something like that together… And I never wanted him to be in that position…where he was worried about me. (E/5/3; E/4/5)

Isabella reflected on how the traumatic event appeared to strengthen the relationships between school staff and students.

> "I think it probably deepened relationships with school staff…because you've…been through this event and supporting each other through it… I think that it's probably deepened relationships with students. And I know, like, especially last year in September, if a kid came down, and they were [crying], I could say, I knew him too. (I/6/6; I/8/6)

Brianne explained that the traumatic event appeared to enhance relationships, in part because the needs of school staff were greater in the aftermath. “[…relationships] definitely got closer with some because, I have an open-door policy, so people were coming in to share things with me.” (B/8/5)

Rick explained that part of his leadership value system was that relationships were paramount and needed to take priority in his work. Because of this focus, staff appeared comfortable coming to him in the aftermath of the accident reliant on the relational safety he provided.

> …Because I had those relationships with the teachers and staff… they knew how I would react to things [and] they felt comfortable coming. And… the teacher whose student it was, she did not feel self-conscious coming to my office and just closing the door and breaking down and crying and saying, “I just need five minutes to cry in here. Can you sit with me? Can you talk to me? I'll go back and teach in five minutes, but I can't do it right now. And I don't want the kids to see me like this.” (Ri/7/4)

Ruth associated the relational connections between the two incidents she described for this study. The first one, early in her career, and the second, more recent incident.

> The first one…brought us together…as a staff. I think it made the staff more sensitive. And actually a little more compassionate, because we had to really work through that situation… And we need[ed] to be somewhat united in that. Like you can differ. But if you go and back talk behind our back as a school, that's going to create a really negative response in the community.
>
> …In the second incident…[it] made us as a staff make sure to check in on each other more. Make sure that we're, even though it was Covid-19, and we were working from home, finding ways to come together virtually…even if it's through emails… just focus on that and actually address it…not just pretend we're doing it…but actually vocally say, “here's what we're doing”. Being intentional in this. And that was, I think, successful. And I think that also made the staff feel like it's okay to grieve… It's okay to feel that this is traumatic… Or it's okay, if I'm not really close to the family, and it didn't really impact me, but I'm going to look out for my fellow staff members. (Ru/7/3)

Katrine noted that because she and one of her vice principals had worked so closely with the RCMP, they had a connection that seemed to transcend the threat to the school itself.

> … the RCMP…were actually very empathetic to the feelings we had within the building… There was one or two police officers in particular that checked in and followed up with us after, which was amazing. (K/14/1)

Repair

Some participants described how relationships that were disrupted or ruptured after the traumatic event underwent some repair. Jeanette described that some of the school staff struggled emotionally after the accident and made assumptions that appeared to create stress and conflict. However, upon some expert advice, Jeanette and her team planned a staff-focused event to demonstrate support for them in the aftermath of the accident.

> …There were times when there was anger, because they [staff] thought we were going to make them do things that they didn't feel capable of doing before we even told them what we were going to do. They just automatically, “I think I'm speaking for everybody when I say that we think that we shouldn't be doing this”.
>
> …We did things for the staff. And this was one of Kevin's [Cameron] pieces of advice. Probably within two months of the accident, we had a get-together at the golf club, where we had a band, we had some nice food for them. (I/12/6-7)

Despite the unfortunate interaction Lars had with the parent of the student who wet their pants, he described attempting to make repair.

> …and I apologized. And… two days after, we actually had a ski trip where the mom and the son were on ski trip. So, I had a chance to talk to her [mom] and settled everything down. (L/1/9; L/2/1)

Elise explained that even though the parent that assaulted her administrative partner was banned from the school, they wanted to keep the children coming and keep them connected to the building.

> And we tried really hard to keep them [kids] coming. And they eventually started coming back and the kids were fine. I don't know - the older one - I felt really bad because she witnessed what had happened there. But eventually, we could talk to each other [mom and administrators], but she was not allowed back on the school property. (E/2/3)

Katrine shared about relationship challenges with two of the families of the boys who made the shooting threat toward the school. They were fearful that their child would be identified and then threatened because of their role in the threat making. Katrine explained her perspective about how to reengage with the families after no viable threat was found.

> Two of the families were fearful to come into the school. They felt they didn't want any retribution on their children. … So, it was a real seesaw of emotion because in one lens, I was concerned about the safety of the other…695 students in the building, while still trying to maintain the confidentiality and empathy for those other students. (K/5/2)

Enhanced Partnerships

Several participants described how their relationships with new and existing partners was enhanced following the traumatic event they focused on for this study. In some cases, the relationship growth was quite profound, transcending the event and the aftermath.

Jeanette described a committee that formed following the tragic van accident associated with her school. While she had established relationships with those on the committee, the committee did not form until after the accident.

> I remember…the first crisis meeting that we had that night… I had a committee of seven who were kind of like my inner advisory committee. And we met quite regularly and there was myself, my two vice principals, a guidance representative… For a while, the mayor was on the committee…the superintendent was on committee, and a former principal of [the school] who left the profession 25 years ago, but [was] a solid community member who had contacts provincially, nationally, locally if I needed something… A community representative, district representative, and school representative, my own little advisory committee… We talked, and we planned, and we spoke, “Here's where we are now. What do we do next? Who do we need to talk to, to get it done? And who's going to do the talking?”
>
> …As a committee, probably at least a year. And then after that, it would probably be phone contact… as needed… Some of that… came from talking to Kevin [Cameron]… He talked about the need for the staff to be debriefed… It's the one thing in our community that was a downfall. It was mental health. They did not partner with us. (J/7/6; J/10/7; J/11/3)

Shelly explained that police were an integral partner during and after the mental health crises of two students that disrupted the school community during the first couple of months of her first year as a vice principal.

> …Our school resource officers…their role was mostly information sharing. So, they would have access to different reports and… historic events that we otherwise wouldn't have been aware of, and… gave us a little more context and understanding of other events these students may have been involved with. They were able to access information from other organizations that helped us make sure that kids were safe, and they needed to be. And if I remember correctly… they would have done a wellness check or two on some of the students that we were particularly concerned about… offering their experience and insight as well, having navigated other traumatic and… far-reaching events. (S/12/3)

At the time of the bomb in Maria's school, there were no protocols for how to respond in a crisis. There were no district plans about where to take students if they were unsafe at school. Maria described how the lack of district support following the bomb in her school resulted in an innovative solution to address future bomb threats, ensure safety for students, provide parents with clarity about the school's proactive plan regarding threats, and build strong community partnerships.

> The other thing that transpired during that time was I said, "Where am I supposed to bring these kids if something else happened?" At the time, I was a volunteer for Red Cross. I partnered up with Red Cross, the Police, and Fire, and the city to come up with a backup location [in case of another bomb/threat], which was an arena that wasn't very far. And we actually did a dry run through. I told all the parents, "This is our dry run through, this is where the kids will be." We did that whole thing together with those particular partners… (M/2/3)

Out of necessity, Isabella connected ongoing with her school liaison police officer. The mom of the decreased student was influential on social media making statements about certain female students that placed them in a negative light. Isabella advocated to police on students' behalf because she saw the negative impact the posts we having on them.

> I had to actually call our school resource officer a couple of times because of what she [mom] posted on social media. Then this girl came to school - sometimes she was afraid to come to school. (I/3/4)

Isabella also encountered an incident where the deceased student's mom wanted to search school lockers because she alleged a current student had stolen her late son's iPod. With the help of police, the matter was resolved.

> …His mom… called, me, and asked me to search lockers. She was… upset, crying. She said it had his playlist on it - that these kids had been at her house because she had still had relationships with kids… They'd come to her home; they would come to her business…I had kids over the lunch hour going… because it's a block from the high school, so they leave and then they come back upset. Or they'd come and…be upset and they'd say, "I'm going to go visit her [mom] at lunch. I'll be back…"
>
> So, what we ended up doing with the stolen iPod was she [mom] reported it stolen. And then the school resource officer did an investigation. And then that way, I wasn't searching anybody's lockers or anything like that. (I/9/6-7)

The partnerships that were enhanced in Rick's case were largely those within his school district.

> …Particularly the deputy Superintendent was wonderful and was a large part of helping us in being present… We weren't on an island dealing with this alone… having that support [from a deputy superintendent] …knowing he was there was exceptional. We have a district wide learning support teacher who was incredible throughout the whole of it as well. She was a wealth of knowledge and information and would help us out with all the things we needed and became a personal friend through this as well. (RI/9/1)

Katrine reflected on her own personal growth and described a unique but powerful set of partnerships that developed as she moved from high school (where the 2017 threat took place), to an elementary school principal.

> …Many of the families in my building now, I'm probably old enough to be the mom of the parents…recognizing that they do seek us out in this world. They want to know what we think, and they trust our opinion, and I think they really want to be partners with us in their children's education. And it's an honor for me to do that, and to share with them my experience, and, whatever little wisdom I might have, so that they feel comfortable sending their children to our school… It gave me the confidence to lead staff in a more purposeful way. And then to also reiterate the message that it's not just about the learning. That we are here for molding young human beings, and if they don't love school, and

> they don't love their teachers, and they don't feel safe, then we're really not doing them any favors. So, I think I've shifted more to the social-emotional side of our school and learning than the academic side only because, if the well-being of students and staff is not healthy, then how can we expect them to teach them the curriculum? (K/10/4)

Help Seeking for Staff and Students

In situations where staff and/or students were affected by a traumatic or disruptive event, administrators sought support for them. Seeking the collective good, school leaders believed that staff and students should be intentionally attended to.

Jeanette realized very soon after the van accident that her school and community required specific support to recover from the event. She requested that the district secure a trauma expert to come into to the school as a longer-term resource.

> They advertised twice across Canada, and nobody would come. And what eventually happened is the Department of Education… knew of a girl who was trained and was married and moved to [the States]. And she agreed to come to [our city] on a rotation schedule. So, she'd come for two weeks, and she'd go home for two weeks. Because she did have a family. I wanted somebody in place for two years. I don't think she stayed the full two years because it got to a point where we were okay. (J/8/4)

Maria explained she was only at the high school where the bomb was detonated for three years. During her second year, she learned that the school would be closed owing to decreasing enrollment. She advocated strongly for a current teacher to become vice principal so they could close the school with connection and compassion.

> So, I get the phone call…This is the school that's going to close… so, I need to have someone in the school during the closure time… What do they want to do? They give me somebody that has no connection to the community. No connection to the school. Nothing. So, I think of myself, "Okay, so I know who goes where".
>
> So, when I got the phone call… I said, "Okay, thank you very much. I kind of thought I was getting this call." And then at our graduation [in Maria's second year as principal], the Director of Education and the chair of the Board are at my graduation. And I say, "Have you guys thought about this? So that he [a current teacher] would end up at my school? Because well, you know, we're closing the school. He's very popular. He knows these parents, he knows the community, he's respected by the staff and the students. Wouldn't it be a good idea to have him here during the year when you're telling us that

> we have to close?" … I just gave them my scenario. And sure shooting, my scenario occurred… (M/18/1-3)

Elise described how she would ideally support staff and students following a traumatic or disruptive event. Her aspiration was rooted in care and concern for those in her buildings.

> But in the real world (after Covid-19), you could certainly bundle people up to give teachers or teams time… You could put kids together with other teachers to give the teachers a break and time to debrief and make sure people are okay. You know, like we do that when there's a death in the school. Often, we bring external people in to deal with classrooms so that the teachers can do what they need to do, and that grieving process, and take care of themselves and each other through that. Because kids always come to school. (E/17/4)

Isabella explained that one of her core values was to advocate for students. As an administrator she has had even more opportunities to care for and support students and families.

> I've always seen myself as an advocate for kids. And, as a classroom teacher, kids would always come to me. You can do some different things as a classroom teacher, but now that I'm an administrator, I can advocate for kids a lot more, and in more different ways. And you can follow up with kids and families in a different way. (I/4/3)

Brianne, who was a new principal in a new school saw her role as being present in the time following the accident to support staff and be tuned in to what people needed.

> In that time…my role, I really found, was just to listen and assist… because the trauma impacted people so differently, and of course, it triggered different things in different people. I had some staff members whose children were in that school or in that classroom. So of course, there was that immediacy of needing to cover them… I just became like a facilitator and assisting whoever needed the help the most…prioritizing… triaging… part of it was…trying to feel where people were. Where…the teachers from the other school… were; if they were in shock, if they needed to ask a question, trying to just walk them through the experience. (M/3/1; M/3/5)

Rick explained that there were several external supports in the building for the week following the event. Afterward, the internal supports connected as needed, given the shock of the accident did not dissipate immediately.

> Our [school] wellness mentor reached out to her clinical supervisor and talked… throughout most of that year, because a lot of weight was on her. She dealt with a lot… of kids coming about things [that] we really tried not to lose focus on. Yet this family was

> going through some amazing and critical things… so were the six kids who were walking with her to school that day and came within inches of getting hit themselves but saw her …on the ground afterwards. …So, she [the wellness mentor] dealt with a lot of that as well as the adults, because she'd been there [at the school] a number of years… She and I talked; we had a very good relationship…
>
> And then we got this shocking news that she [the student] was coming back to school, and we needed to meet with the team up [at the Children's Hospital] and decide how we were going to make this work as a building and how we could support her with all her new needs. And it was a wonderful, wonderful thing. But…it re-invoked all of that trauma, again… especially with the adults… The kids have that elasticity; they seem to bounce back… But adults have a harder time with that. So even our teacher, it was wonderful, she was coming back, but it brought up all those emotions again, and we're back to she'd come into my office crying because she's like, "She's here. And this is wonderful. But… I look at her sometimes and feel such, you know, horror over what happened. And it reminds me of how sad I was then, and it brings it all up". And we were re-dealing with that trauma again, a year later when she returned. Because she… was not the same… We all saw the miracle it was. But you could also see the dramatic change. I mean, she'd gone from a grade two kid who could run, and play, do everything, to a kid who was in a wheelchair and couldn't talk and couldn't open her eyes properly. And so, it was a massive thing to deal with… (Ri/9/5; Ri/10/1)

Ruth described how community dynamics can play a role in supporting staff to reach out for support.

> And for your staff and other people to seek out things even privately, should they be suffering, that's also been a struggle. Because if they are ashamed, or if they're embarrassed, or if they feel judged, there's not really a way for them to do that privately in town, and that's been a struggle for people. Covid-19 has made it a little easier because people can access things virtually. But that's where as an admin team… you have to be a bit sensitive… Like telling someone to go to a counselor is not that simple. Out here we have a private counselor who is a woman who's technically not really a counselor. You can go to her. She's good, and people really appreciate her. But she's not a social worker. She's not registered. She's just been doing it forever. So that's just how it works. But …her house is on a main street, and everyone sees and so no one will go. And then she's related to certain people… What if she told someone that you went? And it gets very convoluted… But people are much more comfortable with the idea of driving all the way to [a larger city] and seeing a counselor there. They would rather do that, then, than do anything out here. (Ru/10/6)

Creating and Maintaining Trust

Many leaders described the importance of creating and maintaining trust with those connected to the pivotal event they described. In Jeanette's case, she explored the trust that

developed between herself and her superintendent which allowed her to lead as she needed to and depend on him when required.

> I knew who my leaders were… I knew I could trust him [superintendent] and I know if you spoke to him, he would say, I did a good job. Because he didn't have to manage me. He knew what I was doing… But there was a confidence between us… I would say there was more respect and more trust. (J/15/4-5)

Lars discussed how emotional vulnerability allows for a leader to build trust in difficult situations that impact a school or system.

> …Emotion that is obviously authentic. And true to the situation… I think people will just trust you more. So, what I mean by not showing emotion is you can't let that paralyze you, and not allow you to make decisions. So, you can show emotion. You still have to make decisions. (L/12/4)

As a new administrator, Shelly explained that the unfortunate set of events in her school were in part, the building blocks of trust that was established.

> I think it probably accelerated the process of earning their [school staff] trust. And I think it accelerated our bond. And I think it really did lay a groundwork for a very collaborative, open, trusting, relationship that really laid the groundwork for the next five years that I was at the school. (S/6/5)

Maria offered several examples where she intentionally sought to build trust that was maintained during her short tenure before the school was closed. One particularly humorous example described how she interacted with staff around a petition that was developed against her. Maria's take was that she had developed such a level of approachability with the staff that they were comfortable formally lodging complaints, and her leaders were comfortable bringing them to her attention.

> …I come back from a meeting and my leadership team comes in and they said, "…We have some bad news for you… They have a petition against you."
>
> I said, "They do?"
>
> …I had talked to one of the teachers the other day…about the yearbook. "You did something with the yearbook, and they got all upset with you".

> I said, “Okay, well, you're right. I made a mistake. I will make it better. I'll fix it…Now rip up that petition and throw it in the garbage”.
>
> And they go, “Well, we can't do that”.
>
> I said, "You do not want me to read the names on that petition".
>
> And they go, “Why?”
>
> I said, “Because someday I'm going to make another mistake, and I'm not going to be grounded. And one of those poor fools is going to be in front of me. And it won't be pretty. So, rip it up”.
>
> “Oh", they go, "Good idea".
>
> And I also said, “I must be a really good principal”.
>
> And they all go, “They had a petition against you.”
>
> “Exactly,” I said, “How many people have sat in the principal's chair that all of you have had?”
>
> They go, “Lots”.
>
> I go, "And how many of them have you done a petition against?"
>
> They go, “None”.
>
> I go, “Exactly. You feel comfortable enough to make a petition. So, I must be really good”. (M/7/4-11; M/8/1-9)

Isabella transitioned from a middle school to a high school immediately after the student suicide that occurred the schoolyear before. She found that because she knew the deceased student, she was a connection point with the students who came to her struggling at the beginning of the new school year at the high school.

> …That first month of being at the high school, any kid that came into my office upset it was about him…Kids from other schools… and they'd say, “I had a friend that passed away or committed suicide.” I'd say, “I was at [his] school and I knew him". And then they would be able to tell me more and open up more. Because they were like, she gets it, right? (I/8/8)

Rick referred to the necessity of establishing relationships to create and maintain trust with school staff.

> …That's what relationships are built on… You can't have good relationships with people if there is not a trust in place. And I think one of the things that this trauma did was built a huge level of trust with so many staff and the leadership. Not just myself, but anybody who was seen as a leader in our building, and with some of the central office leadership who was available as well, because you were thrust into this horrific event…it just became a whole new layer of trust that I think is vital. And I wouldn't wish it upon anybody to gain trust through trauma, but you find those silver linings… Like I said before, it really impacted our school and for the better. Everybody became closer as opposed to pulling apart from each other. (Ri/17/3)

Katrine described the need for trust in leadership in schools. She contrasted this need with how districts, at times, make it difficult to create and establish trust.

> They do tend to move administrators around in ours [district]…about every five years. And it is sometimes difficult. It takes you a couple of years to get to know staff, and yet you're being expected to come to work every day and have these 100% trusting and caring relationships when it takes you a couple years. And people are guarded too, you know, if they're constantly getting new administrators in the building. So that does make it tough. (K/9/3)

Transparency and Confidentiality

Some school leaders described the value of engaging transparently with staff and parents especially during and after disruptive or traumatic events. However, there were periodic struggles for some, because often there was information that could not be shared publicly. School principals reported straddling between the need to provide transparent communication to ensure the school and community felt safe and cared for, and managing the necessity of maintaining confidentiality in schools.

Jeanette described the process she used for sharing with the school about the van accident where eight lives were lost. The night of the accident, people started showing up at the school. After Jeanette met with her crisis response team, she met with the individuals who had come to the school.

> …it was three o'clock in the morning. There might have been fifty or sixty people there (school). And I read out the victim's names, to tell them that they were deceased.
>
> The next thing I had to do was to inform the school in general. So, I sent out a voicemail to all of the homes, because we had a telephone system, whereby we could send messages to the homes regularly…So, that had to go out. (J/4/6-7)

Lars reflected on how the death threat from a parent required balance about how to respond. School staff were alerted to an altercation coming out of the incident with the student and were curious.

> …In the immediate aftermath, there were definitely people wanting to know what happened…. You're balancing, well, how much can I tell people? How much should people know? …Yet they really want to know. So, as much as I could, I shared details I thought were okay to share. Other than that, I couldn't really share a whole lot of what went on… (L/6/3)

As Maria worked to connect with a fractured staff and build capacity in her team, she was open to feedback about school culture and leadership. "I remember after a year talking to my leadership team, I go, 'They're still telling me that there's poor communication'." She went on to reflect on what that poor communication seemed to mean in the context of the culture at the time, and how she might respond as a leader. (M/15/4)

Isabella felt frustrated with rumors that were spread through social media by the deceased student's mother against female students in Isabella's school. She knew she could not respond in a transparent fashion, and needed to keep her knowledge confidential; however, she struggled being unable to clarify because of the impact the social media posts were having on the two students the parent was targeting, as well as the school community.

> …They had only heard the rumors, "Yeah, I heard that he was being bullied"… And I'm like, "I can't speak to all of them. But like, there's layers there" …It's not as simple as someone was being bullied and this happened… That's been it's tough to lead through…especially when the bullying piece comes out. And that… this child was bullied…and that's why this happened. It's like, "Wait a minute". Like he came to us troubled. And then the date that he picked and how it all went down. Like there were so

> many layers to it. But the public doesn't know that. And I certainly can't say that. So, I'm… constantly biting my tongue. (I/5/5; I/4/1)

After the accident that occurred in Brianne's neighboring school, and the impact it had on her on her school, Brianne shared that transparent district communication was pivotal to the overall recovery process. "…Communication about why they [the district] were doing the things they were doing. So, being clear and transparent with their communication…" was vital to recovery. (B/18/6)

During the time it took to determine if the threat at Katrine's school was viable, Katrine indicated that some school staff wanted more transparent communication from the school leadership. She described what she learned through the process of navigating requests for more open communication.

> …There were some staff members that were upset because they didn't know all of the information. And they wanted hourly updates on what was going on. And they were upset that they were kind of left out… But it wasn't for a lack of transparency on our part. It was the fact that we were… in the moment trying to deal with all of the pieces… I learned from that to be as open and transparent as possible, but also to know when to set the boundaries around what we are able to share out of respect for the families. (K/5/4; K/6/1)

Katrine also shared that parents were interested in learning who the boys were who made the bomb threat. While Katrine and her team made sincere efforts to keep this information from the public, it did eventually leak, causing some unease.

> …The day when the students returned, we weren't quite sure how to manage it… even though we tried to maintain the anonymity as much as we could… People eventually figured out who the boys were. And that was distressing because the family reactions were very mixed as well. (K/6/3; K/6/5)

Integrity

Several school leaders demonstrated an obvious moral or ethical standard to their leadership after the traumatic event. These school leaders expressed a sense of what was right

and good, and leaned toward an ethical code even when there was a negative impact for them. In Jeanette's case, there was retaliation against her because of the bus accident from some parents. She in turn, did not lash back at those parents, but wished them peace.

> But I mean, I know where they're coming from. I don't know what I'd be like if I lost my son… I don't judge that. That's just the way it is, and I wish them peace… but I know that I'm not going to be part of that peace. (J/14/4)

Lars owned up to his part in not allowing the student to use the washroom in time to avoid an accident. Because of media attention he understood that the school was in the spotlight in a potentially damaging way. He offered to relocate to keep the focus off the school, even though it would have inconvenienced him and his family as they lived in the community and his wife taught in the school. "…I offered - if they needed to place me somewhere else for the division's benefit, to go ahead and do it…" (L/8/6)

In Maria's first school as principal, she identified an instance where she was asked to violate a district policy. She staunchly refused and credited her integrity to the reason she stayed true to the policy.

> …During my tenure as a principal, they were considering closing the school… Kids were now going to change schools before the schools closed… they were athletes. And there was an athletic rule. If you transfer to another school with no good reason, you are going to be not allowed to play sports. So, this parent got really angry because how dare that the principal of the school enforce that rule? But the vice principal, my program leader of Phys Ed, and the students are all watching what I'm doing… This is what the rules are meant to be. What is she going to do? So, I said, "I'm sorry, I can't sign that transfer paper, because there's no reason for you to leave the school".
>
> So, the director of education [and] the superintendent is on the phone; they're all telling me, "Sign the piece of paper".
>
> I said, "No, I can't sign a piece of paper. And these are the reasons why".
>
> And they said, "Well, it's one kid. You're hurting that one kid".
>
> I said, "No, I'm not hurting that one kid… I'm hurting my school… I have staff and students that are watching the decision. And if I say to them, that this rule doesn't matter

> for this kid, then what do I have for the rest of the school community?" …You're the director of education, you can sign that anytime you want. You're the superintendent of the school, you can sign that anytime you want. Oh, and by the way, I didn't make this rule. Would you like to call the person in charge of all the sports in the city and talk to him about the rule?" Which they did.
>
> And he said, "No, she's right. She's doing the right thing."
>
> …So, one day, I'm down at the Board Office, and the director goes, "Just break the rule".
>
> And I looked at him and I said, "Just break the rule? So, you're saying you want me to break this rule?"
>
> He goes, "Yes, I do".
>
> I said, "Well, okay, how many other rules can I break?" And he just looked at me… We had a good relationship. So, he's killing himself laughing. (M/5/4-8; M/6/1-5)

Rick explained that after he failed in acquiring the principal position he expected following the traumatic event, staff came to his defense. They wanted to petition district leadership to change their decision and move him to the principal position the next year. Instead of encouraging the staff to revolt, Rick supported the direction of the district even though he was disappointed he did not achieve the principal position.

> I know our staff were absolutely shocked. They came to me for the first few weeks after… it was announced in May, in June… You still finish the year before the new principal takes over in the following September… They were really, "What's going to happen?" "Do we revolt?" "How do we help you?" …I think it was my job to just get everybody relaxing. "No, it's going to be fine. This new guy coming in will be really good. I'll still be the VP; it's going to work really well." (Ri/5/3)

Becoming a Growth Facilitator

While most administrators noted some personal and professional growth during and after disruptive or traumatic events, three school leaders shared narratives about how they engaged school staff to build capacity and cohesion. Jeanette described how she built her school team through targeted team engagement that she called "teaming". The story she shared occurred before the van accident, but she credited team building as one of the mechanisms that assisted

with recovery. Jeanette planned a retreat that involved dependence on team members to accomplish a meaningful objective and described the result as transforming.

> There's a mountain here… and it has a Provincial Park… with wilderness camping… The first of the year, we would have professional development administration days. We had about four days before the students would come… So, we did our admin stuff the first two days, like… getting the classes ready, policies down, getting new directives in place, getting the classrooms organized… The next two days, we went up to [the mountain in the] Provincial Park…[We] were there overnight… You had to be prepared to stay there. It was rustic. We were going to be doing some team building activities…
>
> …We had a guy who's very good at doing that… Basically the highlight of the professional development was, we were going to climb the mountain. And we had people on staff of all ages and physical ability… There's an old logging trail that goes the shortest way up, about four kilometers, and maybe the last 200 meters or so you got to scramble hand over foot… o get to the top where there was an old fire tower.
>
> I didn't think everybody could make it up, because we had people who had colostomies, we had people who had heart conditions, we had people who were overweight, we had people who smoked, we had athletes, we had everything. So, I said. "I don't care who makes it to the top of the mountain, I just want everybody to get together at the starting point. Go as far as you can, come back, and we'll get together." We were going to order pizza from… thirty miles away. They were going to deliver it to the gate. We were all going to have pizza and beer when we got back.
>
> …We all went to the foot of the mountain, and every single person made it to the top and down. And I remember I was at the back of a pack, and I'm not a real fast walker, but I did catch up to some of the slower ones. And I got to this group, and it was one of my Phys Ed teachers. And he had four or five women with him. And he was determined that he [would get to the] at the top of the mountain with them. And when I talked to him, he said, "Okay, we're just going to go to that rock over there and see how far we get. When we get to that rock, we're just going to stop and have a little chat". And they went from rock to tree, to brook…till they go to the top of the mountain…When we get back down the mountain that night… we got together and had the pizza and the beer in one of the big cabins… And I remember one of the teachers coming by me and her eyes are like saucers, and she's got this great big smile on her face and she's just like, "We will never be the same again". They were just ecstatic that they had all made it and were so proud of themselves. So, we did things like that as a school. (J/19/2-5; J/10/1)

Jeanette also credited teaming to caring for and supporting the school after the accident occurred. After the interview, Jeanette sent an email (June 24, 2021) with some additional thoughts about how teaming assisted in the aftermath of the accident (Appendix H).

Maria described building capacity by attending profession development outside of her school division so she could facilitate growth in her staff.

> I had also gone away to Washington to learn about diversity and inclusion… I had learned a lot of those strategies, and I trained students [and] staff, which included secretaries and cafeteria on the strategies to be more welcoming, to learn how to communicate… We did a lot of [it] back then. It was called coalition building… I had fifty people trained… I brought in the facilitator to do this work with the whole staff. And we went off site, and we went to the arena. And we had there a community room. We did the whole work with them. (M/6/5-6)

Following the accident in Brianne's neighboring school, and the aftermath that occurred in her school because of it, she became focused on developing a trauma-informed school.

> …Most of my teachers…18 out of the 25 have been through this with me… We've gone the last nine years together… There's definitely breadth and depth… We know about executive functioning and amygdala and prefrontal cortex and… trauma responses, and *The Body Keeps the Score* [Bessel van der Kolk] … Ee're way more informed now. I would say there's definitely depth from my staff right now. (B/22/9)

Rick described how his experience as a vice principal led him to be purposeful in how he engaged and developed his staff when he became a principal in a new school.

> I think that's led to how I was very purposeful in what I was doing. But I also have to let staff grow on their own and do it their own way. For example, we were doing *Love and Logic* (https://www.loveandlogic.com), and everyone's going to get trained in *Love and Logic*. But once we did that, then I didn't sit there and say, "Okay, now show me the three things you're doing. Tell me what is your go-to phrase? What are you using all the time?" I've allowed them to do those things on their own. I'm providing some of that framework. I wanted them to be Nonviolent Crisis Intervention (https://www.crisisprevention.com/Our-Programs/Nonviolent-Crisis-Intervention) trained, but then they use it as they see fit within their classrooms. And when we meet for PLCs (Professional Learning Communities), "What is it you guys want to do for PLC this year?" And we come up with three big topics. One of them would be mine and two will be theirs. (Ri/14/3)

Administrators Supporting Administrators

Several school leaders described the important and pivotal relationships they had with their administrative counterparts. These relationships supported them through challenging events

and were important in how they saw their roles. Jeanette indicated her two vice principals at the time of the van accident were as close as siblings.

> And my administration staff were like brothers to me. I had two gentlemen vice principals. And they definitely had my back and were supportive. (J/17/9)

When I asked Shelly what the working dynamic between the four administrators (one principal and four vice principals) at the time of the attempted suicides, she indicated:

> Very strong and very open, very collaborative. And they included me right away, being the newbie both to admin and to the school. I was kind of like a deer in the headlights. I remember the principal, we were talking things… and he's like, "I could literally see the day they tore the tape off your eyes… Your eyes were wide open. You're like, "What the --? What's going on?" And it's a humorous story because the principal who hired me for the high school position, he left that school, after three years of us working together. But now I'm working with him again in a different school. (S/8/3)

Elise explained that watching her partner get assaulted in her presence had a profound impact on her as a leader, but also on her relationship with her principal.

> I never felt like I'd had to protect my partner before. You know, I was like, "Oh, I can't believe I'm doing that". But I did, right? Because I've always been that way for others, but I've never felt that that was needed. So, I guess it made me closer with him, and with any partner I had… I was always very fortunate to have good admin partners, which made all the difference… (E/4/5; E/7/3)

Isabella experienced some triggering emotions about the mom of the deceased student. On one occasion the mom came to the high school with hoodies with pictures of her son on them. She was there to distribute them to students. The dilemma was that she did not have a child at that school and was considered a visitor even though her son would have attended the high school had he lived. Isabella's principal supported Isabella's emotional state, given the circumstances surrounding the mom's interaction with students.

> …she [his mom] was just like, "Oh, should I have checked in? I needed to drop off these sweaters, but maybe they could have come to my business or something?"
>
> And the secretary was like, "Yeah, probably if they just came to your business".

> But when that happened, I went to my principal and I said, “I don't know, if she comes in again, and it needs to get addressed, I don't know if I'm the person to go do it. Like, I might cry… This is going be really difficult”.
>
> And he was like, "No, Isabella, I'll take that. If she starts coming in here, I'll deal with it."

Brianne talked about how senior leadership in her district stepped up after the accident and allowed the school principals opportunity to reach out and care for one another.

> …Our senior admin team was really busy dealing with the heat of things [immediately following the accident]. So as principals, we would call and reach out to one another. So, calling my colleague at the other school, sending a text, just from that relational point of view. (B/15/4)

Rick shared a close and collaborative relationship with his principal the year that the accident occurred. Rick noticed that they seemed to balance each other’s strengths.

> I learned a ton from my partner. We have a good relationship to this day. He was the old-style leadership. He did what he did. My job was to build relationships because that wasn’t what he was good at. (Ri/2/2)

Katrine indicated that her district office did not provide support following the threat to the school. However, other administrators in her district connected with her and she found encouragement from them. She also shared that because of her experiences, she was prone to reach out to administrators who struggled through similarly disruptive events.

> Not from district office. And I'm not saying that to be critical, but that's just the reality of it… The reaching out was more from fellow administrators that were my friends, or had perhaps been through something similar, but not necessarily from that [district] level. (K/14/3)
>
> `
>
> …Now that I've been through a few situations like this, when I see them occur within my own division…I tend to reach out to the administrator, because I know what it’s like… It seems like the administrative teams are the ones that support one another. Because if the people at division office have never been in a school, and they've never been through that, it is hard to put yourself in their shoes. But I know what it feels like to have a student…commit suicide. I know what it feels like to have a student make a threat at school. So, I feel that I can at least offer support or let that person know that I'm there for them if they need it. (K/11/6)

Summary

In this chapter, I highlighted the domain *relationship transformations leading to a changed sense of relationships* and provided exemplars to support the themes in the domain. The themes included: school and community impact, relationship disruptions, inequities, relationship connections, repair, enhanced partnership, help-seeking for staff and students, creating and maintaining trust, transparency, integrity, becoming a growth facilitator, and administrators supporting administrators.

The exemplars in this chapter highlighted *a changed sense of relationships*, and for some, *a changed philosophy on life* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2013). The data confirmed that relationships were significant dynamics in schools and school districts and had a bearing on school leaders wellbeing, and at times, their ability to function. Like the previous domain, *personal and professional transformations*, relational changes were often unexpected, and had an impact on participants' perspectives on life and on leadership. Because of their role, school leaders necessarily engaged in a variety of relationships with a variety of impacts throughout the course of their career. Many of the weighty leadership challenges were relationship-based, and required wise, persistent, humble, and compassionate communication to bring about a desired relational result. At times, even with genuine attempts, relationships could not be restored. Interview participants described some existing relationships that were seen in a new light. For some, relationships transformed positively, allowing for increased connection, support, and collaboration. In other instances, participants felt let down and hurt by what occurred in relationships, and at times the fractured relationships increased the sense of loss they experienced. Acknowledging that relationship impacts on top of the practical challenges of leading through a traumatic event, is pertinent to supporting the role of administrators in schools

and bears consideration for those who employ school leaders. As school relationships are sometimes changed following traumatic events it is probable that school leader needs will also change and benefit from intentional encouragement and support from districts.

In chapter nine, I offer more in-depth analysis about relational transformations following crisis or trauma. In the next chapter I will provide my analysis on my third domain, which is, *school district impacts on school leaders*.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Findings: School District Impacts on School Leaders

Introduction

As indicated in the definitions section of this dissertation, the term *system* may refer to a school or district that encountered a disruptive or traumatic event (Cameron, 2019). In most cases, notable change ensued in schools or districts; in other cases, the status quo remained, and districts did not engage in obvious transformational growth or learning following an event as described by a school leader. Within this chapter, recommendations from administrators about how systems can support school leaders will be described. This domain will be divided into sections based on the themes identified. In this chapter I explore the themes: a) pre-trauma functioning; b) relationships with districts; c) where support was found; d) developing district strengths; e) role of districts and unions; f) the influence of the NACTATR; g) school leader recommendations for districts; and h) school leader recommendations for school leaders. Like the previous two chapter, the referencing logic I used for my interview data was, first initial (or first and second letter), page and then paragraph number.

Pre-trauma Functioning

Pre-trauma functioning depicts how a school or district functioned prior to the disruptive or traumatic events school leaders described. Typically, collaborative, engaged, and supportive systems recover better than those that are fractured and disconnected (Cameron, 2019). Jeanette described strong pre-trauma functioning. She shared about the intentional teaming efforts to build relationships, trust, and healthy inter-dependence both between staff and how they responded to students. Jeanette also described pre-existing relationships with community partners that allowed for a quick and concise response when the van accident occurred. Finally,

Jeanette shared that the training she received provided a framework to understand crisis and was instrumental in how they responded. She credited the strong team element within her school, the dedicated partnerships, and professional development in crisis response as being essential to the eventual recovery after the accident.

> The whole team-thing that we had worked on developing within the building…not just within the 9/10 groups, but within the whole school. That was a big part of our preparation. The other thing was our relationships with the community. Like I said, we had a really good working relationship with the police department… If we called them, they were there. They only have their police station five minutes away. They trusted us; we trusted to them. There weren't any big secrets between us. We knew that when we talked to each other it was confidential… Like I had taken several workshops from Kevin [Cameron] and really liked what I saw, found them very helpful. My staff had taken some workshops. We had Crisis Response Teams developed that we used regularly. And so that was there. And we also had like [Josh], my police officer, he had taken the training with me. So, there was a lot of that training there. So, that gave us confidence. It gave us direction… (J/7/5; J/7/7; J/8/1)

> When the [trauma] psychologist came…in to introduce herself…she said to me… "Would you say your school is opened or closed?" Now, what do you think every principal would say? But I really believed it… People were in and out of our school… [there were] different schools looking at what we were doing; we were visiting their schools… I really felt we had an open school. She really led me to believe that would be a contributor to our doing better, faster. (J/10/5)

While Shelly did not indicate whether she saw a connection between the school's pre-trauma functioning before she arrived, and any recovery the school experienced, she did note that the school had encountered some challenges that impacted it, and the functioning of the staff.

> The spring previous to my joining the staff, a student died by suicide, which is obviously very traumatic for the community and for everyone else who was close to that situation.
>
> …In addition to that, I think it was a contributing factor, but not directly linked in any way, the school within… maybe two years… had gone from 1200 students, down to about 800 students, because a new high school opened… The staff had all been kind of ruptured… they were still reeling from that and trying to find their identity and find who everyone was with these new roles and relationships.
>
> They lost a student to suicide. And then I came in that September. And so there [was] a lot of response to trauma already inherent in the community. And then very early in that year, we had two other suicide attempts. (S/2/1-3)

Like Shelly, Maria explained that the school she was hired to lead as principal had compromised pre-trauma functioning. Different from Shelly's school dynamics, Maria indicated that the vice principal was isolated from the rest of the staff and seemed to have established a role reminiscent of a security guard.

> …Before I got there, she [vice principal] didn't have a good relationship with the principal before. She was alienated from the staff. So, I had a VP that was alienated. I had a staff that was fractured. And I was naive going in, and it was in the middle of a school year.

Maria shared how the vice principal engaged with certain students, which revealed how student discipline was handled when Maria arrived. While the example Maria provided must have occurred after the bomb, it is likely a strong indication of the level of reactivity inherent in the school before Maria arrived.

> But again, remember it was not a good place before I got there… There was some pretty raunchy behavior. And there were even brawls…
>
> My VP was amazing. "I got to go stop the brawl".
>
> I go, "Are you out of your mind?" But she went and stopped it… (M/8/11-14)

Relationships with Districts

In this theme, school leader comments about their relationships with their school districts are highlighted. In most cases, relationships became more intense as districts worked to respond to the event. There was a range of feelings expressed by school leaders about the relationships that existed or developed between themselves and their districts. When I asked Jeanette how her relationship changed with her district following the van accident, she indicated she felt it was better than before and developed into a trusting, solid collaboration.

> [Relationship] probably got better… Before that… the school complains about the district and the district complains about the school. Like teachers, we don't have enough money… You're not doing this and…you should be doing that. You got more than you

> deserve and blah, blah, blah. But in handling this, I had to put my confidence in the district, and they had to put it in me. And I guess we both came out of it with appreciation.
>
> I knew what my job was. I knew what to do. And I knew what I couldn't do. And what I could do was look after my school. There was no doubt in my mind, I could do that… I did not have time to go out and handle the media… My superintendent, definitely a fantastic speaker… Because he was part of that advisory committee…he knew everything that was going on in the school… So, he could go up and talk to the community. He knew what to tell them, how to say it… what we were doing and why we're doing it… I knew who my leaders were, and he was one of them. And I knew who I could trust… he was fantastic… I would say there was more respect and more trust. (J/15/3-5)

Following the incident where a student wet his pants and his father threatened Lars, Lars indicated that his school district supported him.

> I really got an appreciation for our school division. I think because they were pretty good throughout the whole scenario…they backed me up and, helped me out through that. Gave me time off when I needed it, or when they felt I needed it anyway… They were pretty supportive. (L/7/7; L/6/7)

Maria's district seemed to have a hands-off approach to their relationship with Maria despite the bomb that catapulted her into her first principal role.

> I'm sort of one of those individuals where, "…basically she can handle it. And she'll take care of it. We [district] don't have to really - she's not going to cause any problems." And I don't make a big deal of stuff like that… Maybe I should have but I didn't know enough to make a big deal of it, because everybody was safe. (M/3/3)

Rick described a conflicted relationship with his superintendent, but a collaborative relationship with others at the district level. Immediately following the accident that injured the grade two student, the superintendent's absence was noticed.

> At the time the superintendent himself did not do well with it; he kind of avoided our building and kind of let everyone else come in. (Ri/7/3)

When Rick did not achieve the principal position in the school where he was vice principal, the superintendent presented a heavy-handed response to Rick's queries about the reasons he was not chosen as principal.

> …The superintendent did kind of put me on notice, like, we're going to see a lot from you as to how you react to this [not getting the principal position] …If you don't accept the new principal, then they [staff] won't… And that will reflect poorly on you when you apply for further positions… (Ri/5/3)

Ruth shared that there seemed to be an understanding at the district level that school professionals needed to care for themselves, so they could support student growth and development. However, she also indicated that staff's perceptions were different that hers.

> I think our division is very aware of the need for people to take care of themselves. And so, there's always that support available. They always remind us of what we can and need to do. Whether or not people feel it's always realistic; it's judged differently depending on your experience, and also depending on their willingness to want to share in the first place… Some people perceive the division as uncaring, or they perceive the division as just offering it because they have to. But at the same time, people see that and need it and then choose not to, and blame the division. So, the division message is to take care of yourself and support yourself, but they [staff] perceive otherwise. (Ru/14/4)

Katrine described a disappointing response following the 2017 threat. However, she also shared that the incident seemed to elevate awareness that everyone needed to work together to address crises and mitigate safety concerns.

> …As a leader, what I needed in that moment, and in other school situations that I've had, is… the support of our superintendent team. And for them to come to the school and ask, "What do we need?" And then trust that we'll tell them what we need. A lot of times… it can be too hierarchical… If the superintendent is the one that's giving the press conference…we're the ones…in the trenches and were immersed in the situation. And so, I think what it did with our relationship with the school division was just remind them that we're all on the same team. And it did help solidify some of our policies around school safety and ensure consistency amongst the division. (K/8/3)

Where Support was Found

Some of the school leaders experienced obvious, felt support from their districts, colleagues, or school partners. This support was met with thankfulness and appreciation. However, not everyone found the support needed. When districts were inattentive or lacking in aptitude, it had an impact. Jeanette shared her experience with a fellow administrator.

> I had a colleague who was at the middle school… We spent a lot of time talking together… She would tell me what was coming to my school. I would tell her what I needed coming from her school. We had families that…we dealt with that were the same. I had a really solid relationship with another solid professional. And that helped a lot. It wasn't just [that] we'll meet at the principal's meeting. It was… a regular, strong friendship… I always felt leadership is not a one-person thing. (J/10/1)

Lars shared that there were several aspects where he found support and encouragement following the threat-making from a parent and the subsequent fallout.

> …For me, going back to my faith. And that seemed to help me through that time as well. And then my wife was pretty good in terms of just helping me move on. She was scared, but she helped me move on. And then I really got an appreciation for our school division. (L/7/7)

Maria reached out to her district when she learned she had to evacuate the school after her third day of being principal. At the time, she thought it was a fire. She had expected support to arrive from the district, but it did not, and Maria expressed anger about the neglect.

> Tell me what it was like to be a three-day principal and have this happening in your school? What did it feel like when you called the Board office and they said, “We're not disrupting the bussing for your kids.” Like, how dare you say that to me in winter, with no jackets because it's a fire alarm? Thank freaking god it was a mild February day. They weren't important enough for you, because you weren't going to disrupt the busing system. I want to say that to you. But I just said, “Are you kidding me?” And [they said], ‘You figure it out”. Okay, with my vast knowledge of the community and knowing everybody in the school after three days, they'll [staff] certainly follow me wherever I go. (M/27/6)

Isabella explained the importance of debriefing after an event. She described informal debriefing as a resource that was helpful for her.

> …When you debrief. Maybe when you talk afterwards… if I talk with [my principal] about what happened, or if I go home and… talk to my husband about it… If I'm still bothered by something, I'll probably talk to one of my school counselors… (I/19/5; I/20/9)

Brianne shared that the district was discerning in how they provided helpful supports to schools during the anniversary critical period, the year following the accident.

> …More effort was put into the school family, like the other school - not every school in the division… Some schools didn't mark it because it didn't impact them the same way. So really recognizing our diversity within the division and…putting the assistance where it needed to be at the time… Not saying a blanket, "We're all going do a memorial one year later", when it didn't impact the other communities like it did ours… They basically differentiated their attention at the time. Wherever the need was greater, that's where they put the support. (B/18/6)

For Rick, support was found in his deputy superintendent who was intentional in consistently reaching out to Rick in the aftermath of the accident that injured a student.

> And so, he made a point of coming to see me in the days afterwards to talk to me and said, "How are you doing? I know that a lot of this is on your shoulders now. Because [the principal] is not good at this sort of thing. He's going to run the building; he's going to run it well. But he's not dealing with the people. How are you doing? What can I provide for support?" (Ri/9/1)

Ruth shared a recent example of support that occurred in an adjacent community. A student died by suicide, and Ruth indicated the response was effective.

> …We recently had a student die by suicide in another community… And the wraparound there was just amazing… Everyone was able to perceive it, and they were able to witness it. And there were no negative comments made. No one saying, "I wish they'd done this." "They should have done that." …It was fortunate that people were at home [because of Covid-19] so that they could kind of do what they needed to do. Whereas I don't know that they would have, [had they] been at work every day [prior to Covid-19]… (Ru/14/7)

For Katrine, she found the support of her district to be lacking. In 2017 when the threat occurred, they seemed unsure what to do, or how to respond. In another instance she called the district for support after another threat, and they did not respond. Katrine reflected on how it was in 2017 and how she sees district support capacity now.

> I would say they [district] didn't [support]. Because there had not been a lot of incidents within our school division. So, I think it was a lack of knowledge themselves and a lack of awareness as to what needed to be done… I remember at the high school; we had a situation where a student did say he was going to bring a gun back to school… I called for help, and it didn't really come… I felt let down by the people that were there to support us. And that's a weird feeling. (K/11/1; K/11/6)

> I would say that we have a new leadership team now. And so, the new superintendency team, I feel would put forth the skills necessary to get you back. But as I think about it

> from a divisional perspective, I still don't think that there are systems and structures in place that would guide administrators if this were to occur again. So, you know, I think it is still a bit of a taboo subject and topic that people don't think it's going to happen to them in their district and then when it does everybody's, “Okay now what do we do? And let's pull out the VTRA binder and let's get the risk assessment out”. And, you know, right or wrong? I don't know. But yeah, I don't know if there's been a lot of growth in that area, to be honest with you. And maybe that's a good thing, because we haven't had to deal with it a lot. (K/11/2)

Developing District Strengths

In this section some school leaders described what steps their districts took to develop proactive and preventative measures to support staff, students, and communities should future events occur. Maria made her own proactive plans after the bomb and bomb threats in her school. She realized she needed a safe place to take students so a repeat of the circumstances following the bomb could be avoided. She did not have explicit support from her district; however, they did not constrain her plans to create a safe place for students should another risk be leveled at the school.

> I partnered up with Red Cross the police, and Fire and the City to come up with a backup location, which was an arena that wasn't very far. (M/2/3)

Following the accident in Brianne’s neighboring school, their district determined to take training from the NACTATR. They had been in contact with Kevin Cameron throughout the aftermath of the accident.

> …That's…where a lot of that trauma work, and we were hooked up with Kevin Cameron; he kind of came out of that… I want to say we started that training the following spring… Our superintendent led us through the hard stuff while contacting Kevin [Cameron]. And then…we proceeded to build that leadership capacity within the division… (B/2/1; B/2/3)

Roles of Districts and Unions

Districts and unions have been mentioned throughout the course of this discussion. For school leaders, the role of districts and unions seemed to shine through their experiences about

what occurred in their school in the immediate response and recovery periods after the events they described.

Jeanette described how she used her superintendent as a sounding board during the aftermath of the van accident, and how the district was open to providing what she believed her school needed to recover.

> And then sometimes I'd call him (superintendent) up just to verify, "What do you think?" We had a good relationship with district office… I always used to say to my teachers before…there's no cavalry coming over the hills to save us. We're on our own here. But they [the district] were there…They couldn't come in and do for us. The best people to do with, was us. But if there was anything I needed… I just had to pick up the phone and it was there. So, there was a good relationship with district office. It wasn't like somebody interfering and saying, "Well, you shouldn't be doing this; you should be doing that". They let me do my thing. Like I would talk to them and tell them what I was thinking; what I was doing. But they never told me what I should be doing. (J/8/2)

Lars described the value of the system supports he received after the work-place threats he encountered. The district helped provide what he needed and had a clear helping role.

> …The division, and schools, and education at that time…were pretty open to getting help when you needed it… I didn't really feel any stigma, or anything like that… I don't really recall any sort of inhibitions to getting the resources that I needed… Nobody was telling me to go back to work. I didn't take any time off other than that retreat. Nobody was pressuring me or anything like that. I think the system was pretty good back then. (L/10/6)

Elise explained she has been well-trained as a leader during her time in school administration, and the opportunities districts afforded her she considered a privilege. She highlighted the importance of districts preparing school leaders prior to an event where they need to respond from a crisis perspective.

> I have a lot of training. I've been very privileged to have had many opportunities to learn from professionals as well as to develop skills on the ground running… And we're prepared… Preparing administrators is huge… "What are you going to do when this happens?" At least you know, then you kind of go on autopilot. (E/9/7; E/19/7)

Isabella moved to the high school following the cohort of students who had been peers of the boy who died by suicide. The district made some attempts to support the school staff, and Isabella had an opportunity to go back to the middle school to attend a session.

> …What they did at the school, in the fall, when teachers came back…[was] some check-ins… I came back to [the middle school] and did a check-in. They had a person come in from Mental Health, and just anybody that wanted to come back, came back. I went because that was like [during] my September/October I was dealing with all these upset kids. And it was really hard. (I/5/3)

Ruth explained how the district encouraged school staff to take care of themselves after the alcohol-related student death during Covid-19. They appeared particularly concerned about the welfare of staff and offered resources for their assistance.

> They talked about online resources. They talked about counsellors; they talked about each other; they talked about each other's staff. "How are you feeling?" Checking in… debrief, bringing people together. You know, if we needed to connect with even Kevin Cameron himself to come in…They [the district] gave lots of different options. Staff, if they needed to take some time to figure things out, then great. And those were open to us. I don't always know that the staff understands that does come right from the division… not just us as administrators. But we tried to make that clear. That it's… division wide. (Ru/14/6)

The Influence of the NACTATR

Like the role of districts and unions, the NACTATR was highlighted throughout this discussion. The NACTATR is the organization that sent out my survey to school leaders. From the surveys, I accessed contracts for interview participants. It was expected that the NACTATR would surface in the interviews. Nine of the ten school leaders who were interviewed spoke about the NACTATR (or the former CACTATR), or Kevin Cameron, who is the founder and executive director of the organization.

Jeanette explained that part of her school's ability to respond adaptively following the van accident was in part, owing to connections they had with the NACTATR and Kevin Cameron himself.

> I go back to the [Kevin Cameron] training. Although it didn't completely apply to the situation… I remember talking to him in crisis response… He found trauma hardest. But my god he is good… Having that kind of training, that kind of insight. It's not a recipe to get through it, but it will give you a framework to at least get started…At least you have a foundation to say, "Okay, this is where we start. We get together this kind of a team; we get together these kinds of resources". I think the training is out there and I don't know why some districts are so reluctant to bring it in…It [the training] gave us direction, plus, I had Kevin's phone number. That didn't hurt. It's not like I called him every day or anything, but I kind of knew how he thought. (J/25/3; J/7/7)

Lars described how his school district adopted the VTRA protocol developed by the NACTATR and utilized it across the division when a threat was issued. He indicated the protocol had not been in place when he was threatened by a parent.

> …Since then, all administrators have to take Violence Threat Risk Assessment training… But that's in response to some incidents that have happened around the country, not necessarily in our division or in our school. So, we would handle it differently, just because everybody's trained in that way. So, as soon as there was any sort of threat, we're pausing. We're going to get the VTRA team in, and we're going to come up with a solution that wasn't in place back then. (L/4/5)

During the period when Shelly's school leadership team was working to help manage the mental health risks, she indicated they reached out to Kevin Cameron, who willingly provided consultation to the district and school team.

> …Kevin Cameron…was a great resource to kind of have at our fingertips. And he's very open to supporting the community… He really walked us through some processes that helped us understand that…we really do know our kids, and we've got them covered. And we know they're okay. And we know who isn't okay. There weren't any big surprises, as he kind of walked us through that process. And that really helped increase our confidence that we were taking care of our kids properly. (S/6/1)

Maria explained the power of meeting Frank Deangeles through a NACTATR conference. She felt a connection between her own experience and Mr. Deangeles' who was the principal of Columbine High School when the fatal shootings occurred. Maria experienced the bomb in her own school the same year as the Columbine tragedy.

> And then meeting Frank Deangeles at the 20th anniversary [NACTATR conference]. It's like, "Oh my lord". So, imagine his trauma explains everything that happens. But here's a

> man that I'm connected to. And then he's Italian. I'm Italian. So, you're sort of sitting there and thinking of all these things. And they're my kids, and the fact that he stayed committed, and he was there that whole time, which doesn't work in our organizations that way. They closed my school. (M/3/5)

Elise described a situation where school principals and counsellors were in a face-to-face training with Kevin Cameron when a call came through to a principal about a tragedy that happened in the district. Because of confidentiality, there was no opportunity to openly share and support despite being in the presence of a trauma expert.

> I'll tell you…I was in a session with Kevin Cameron, with all of the school counselors and administrators in the division when a student in our division was stabbed to death by two other kids. Like right there, the phone call came in. Right when we were in the session… and again, privacy, privacy, privacy. We all knew what was going on… so you're just left with that. That was really weird. (K/14/1)

In response to the car going through a classroom in her district, Brianne indicated that district leadership was in ongoing contact with Kevin Cameron.

> …I was really taking direction. We were working very closely with our central office who was in contact with Kevin. So that helped a lot… Following Kevin's lead and what they'd learned. So, our superintendent did a really good job… He too was learning on the go… (B/8/9; B/9/1)

Rick described a long-lasting relationship between the NACTATR and his school district. He had opportunity to train in Violence Threat Risk Assessment which he considered beneficial to his growth as a school leader.

> We've worked with Kevin Cameron for years on threat assessment… [We were] one of the first districts who jumped on board [in our province] and to do this kind of work. And I got involved in that right early and loved it and was just fascinated by that. And I think that kind of led to where I wound up. (Ri/14/2)

Ruth explained that her school district has committed to school leaders and counsellors being trained by the NACTATR.

> …All counselors, administration, and anyone at the senior division level…are [trained]. We do level one and two [VTRA] as administration. I've gone further and done more of it. They've now opened it up, so as professional development… teachers can take the

> level one and two if they want to. It's encouraged. A lot of teachers don't really want to because they're scared; then they'll have to deal with the things when they happen. And they'd rather leave that to other people… I am very intentional in my use of that [information from the NACTATR] and referring people back to it. So, when we get the Alerts…we've highly suggested people sign up for them. We want people to be familiar with that language. And with that as a resource. So that when they hear those words, they're not going, "What the heck was that acronym now?" And I do think it would be great for all staff to have that opportunity; at least a level one, so that they feel that they can handle things, even within a classroom. Like the amount of things that happen is unbelievable. And I don't think that's always recognized. That can be trauma, even though it seems on a small scale. (Ru/8/4; Ru/8/6)

> I have been so appreciative that Kevin Cameron's work is being more intertwined in education. And I stick with him quite a bit, because for whatever reason, everyone seems to think he's amazing. I'm not saying he's not. I think he's got some great things. And I think it helps that he's got a characteristic about him, or a personality that resonates with everyone, but they love him. And I could listen to him speak for days. (Ru/23/11)

Katrine credited her knowledge about how to respond to crises to the work of the NACTATR, as well as other organizations dedicated to risk reduction and response in schools.

> I've done a lot of work with Kevin Cameron…and Theresa Campbell… out of Safer Schools, and lots of different people like that. (K/8/3)

School Leader Recommendations for Districts

At the end of the interview, I asked participants to share their recommendations about how districts can support administrators after a disruptive crisis or traumatic event. Administrators seemed keen to provide their recommendations, and in some cases hopeful that districts would have opportunity to learn about how to meet school leader needs better in the future.

Jeanette took some time to contemplate the question about recommendations. She shared that the needs that are often paramount in leaders' minds may be opaque to districts because they are looking at the crisis from a different perspective. Nevertheless, because leaders are in the moment, dealing with the crisis, they need to be listened to and responded to.

> This support is throughout the whole process and hope it wouldn't just end with some time period… You would hope that you would have that support ongoing. Like…if somebody's in crisis, and they say, “I need this”, then you got to believe them. You can't say, “Well that's just that principal. They're looking for things that are impossible, or they're not a strong leader”. In crisis, if they ask for it, they need it. And you can evaluate as the time goes on whether to draw it back or extend it or whatever… I know that there are schools who have been in crisis and district office is determining whether they should get what they asked for. When I ask you [for] something, I needed it…(J/23/5)

Lars expressed that it was important for districts to ensure that supports are in place for school leaders when disruptive or traumatic events occur connected to their schools.

> And then have the supports in place to help people move on. Whether it's time off, or whether it's going to a retreat like I did; seeing a counselor… Then make that available for people as well. That would be more of a macro level. (L/13/3)

When I asked Shelly whether it would be beneficial for districts to take time for reflection after an event, she stated, “I think it’s absolutely necessary”. (S/16/8) Shelly further indicated that engaging in a consistent review after events occur and lining up what happened against policy and policy procedure is an important process for districts to engage in.

> …The constant process that our division has in reviewing our practices our policies, our standards, our guiding procedures, and that constant cycle of bringing in different perspectives and voices to share experiences around those things, so that they are informed by a multitude of experiences not just in response to a single crisis. (S/17/1)

Maria explained that checking-in, something that did not happen with her after the bomb detonated in her school, is valuable. She indicated that having someone with a genuine relationship with the school leader do the check-in is important.

> …After you check-in and what I think is also helpful is [having] someone who has had some experience in having things not go the way you plan. Like you don't plan to have a bomb go off… I’m going to come in and be your savior. Screw you. You don't even know what it's like. Bring in someone who is from a similar community or has had a similar experience or… I have a relationship with them. It wouldn't have been administrators in the city schools that I would have been very open to because I don’t have a relationship. So, it has to be someone that I have a trusting relationship with. (M/27/7)

Elise shared she would like to see a dedicated person assigned in a school district to check in with administrators after a disruptive crisis or traumatic event. Elise also described what she thought the impact would be if administrators were given specific support following a disruptive event.

> I always thought it would be nice if there was a wellness person in the division that was checking on people regularly and double checking on people when they'd had a traumatic event…personal or related to school. Because I think people just get busy. And they've got so many jobs that it would be great to have one or two people dedicated to wellness. And following up and making sure people had what they needed… Someone who knew what they were doing (laugh). Someone who had walked the walk… Who'd been there as an administrator… and understood that, and had a connection, and had the ability to read people [to] make sure they were being honest with themselves and with you to support. And doesn't forget to check-in… Anybody could do it, who had the skill set. We just don't ever have dollars for things like that… (E/14/7; E/15/1)

> I think it [the impact of having a wellness person] would be huge. I think if people were given the opportunity to be heard and feel like they were supported, you wouldn't feel like they had to carry things on their own; they wouldn't burn out as quickly. They wouldn't despair, or feel overwhelmed, you know, that nothing was fixable, this wasn't getting a better. You know, if you're going to [a] community school, you have a traumatic event every day (laughs). Every day and, so that's really heavy. And I think if there was … somebody … just checking in, I think that would do a lot for morale and for personal health and well-being and give people hope, and strength. Their colleagues are good. Teacher partners are good. People in those schools are extremely close because they have to be. But sometimes it's nice to know that someone else is looking in on you too; that they have heard about you. (E/15/3)

Like other participants, Isabella believed it was important to have check-ins with administrators after a crisis or traumatic event. She was not certain who would be the best support person but believed supporting school leaders to be a valuable undertaking.

> I think probably a planned check-in…We do growth plans every year; twice a year. I talk with my superintendent about what do I want to learn about. How do I want to grow? Those kinds of things. And maybe it isn't with the superintendent, but I think it would be fair to have some either planned check-in times, or a planned check-in as a response to something that's happened…We know that this happened; [we're] doing a check in with them. And some people might not open up, but some people might need to. Or not realize that they're holding something in. So maybe the check-in pieces. (I/18/2)

Brianne indicated that communication, understanding, and training are key when districts seek to provide support to school leaders after crisis or trauma. For Brianne, it was about arming school leaders with knowledge, skills, and resources that transcend the original crisis or trauma so that the leader can be agile and effectively responsive across time and situations.

> …It goes back to that communication and understanding - the acknowledgement of the work. Being a school leader is not an easy job with just the regular stuff - with the regular principal managerial stuff. So, the acknowledgement of the effort that it takes, and that could be through words and recognition, with time off… I'm not in it for the money. But, for some people, maybe they need renumeration… I think acknowledgement through time and understanding. Allowing for certain deadlines [to be extended] as paperwork doesn't happen in crisis response. So tight-loose-leadership. That ongoing PD. Responsive PD. Like I said, the VTRA was step one… or us [in] our system. It became about reconciliation and…understanding residential schools and colonialism; [the] 60's scoop. So, doing the learning pebbles. You know, Jessie Lipscolm, and just talking about racism and being responsive to what's happening in the community around you… and… whatever is in social media is going to show up in your in your school. And in your system. (B/25/2)

Rick disclosed that developing and maintaining relationships was vital in his leadership value system. With respect to recommendations, he highlighted relationships as important in supporting school leaders after an event.

> …If you are central office, I think you need to be visible. You need to be there. You need to go into the buildings; you need to talk to the people. To me [that] was [the] most valuable piece. The deputy superintendent showed up in our building and sat down with me…(Ri/15/1)

Ruth reflected about allowing school leaders some time to recover following a disruptive or traumatic event. At the same time, she expressed how unlikely that recommendation would be accepted, given the complex demands of administrator roles.

> I honestly think sometimes they just need some time on their own. Once things have kind of settled - maybe that sounds ridiculous. But I think that to deal with that crisis, go through all that support of your staff… I think they need to take…their own time…I do sometimes think there needs to be almost some isolated time to just be - like some self-care time, because you will never take it unless it's kind of forced…if that makes sense. And maybe it doesn't need to happen right away. I don't know how that works.

> I also think a debrief specifically with the school administrators; almost like a mandatory debrief… right after the event, and then maybe even six months later, [or] three months later… is not a terrible idea.
>
> I know for myself, sometimes, like even thinking about this event that occurred during Covid-19, it's bugging me more now, almost [more] than it was even right after it happened. (Ru/23/7-9)

Katrine recommended that districts be intentional about building in supports for administrators after they lead through a traumatic event. Regular and authentic support seemed particularly important to Katrine.

> I would say that definitely the superintendancy team, or the lead directors at the division… should appoint a person that is a regular connect. And I think it can mean many small things like coming into the school even… Come in with a cup of coffee and let's sit down and just check in on how you're doing. So, it's not such a forced… "I'm checking in. Okay, I've done my check. She seems good. I'm going to move on." But those regular interactions…I think are important. I think asking the questions, "What is it that you need? What can we do?" I think it should extend for more time than it probably is warranted. And even offering to be there when it comes to talking to families, because sometimes, families need to hear it from an individual at the superintendancy level. So, they're there, in conjunction with the administrator. You're side by side giving that message… As an administrator, sometimes you do bear that load of being the face for your community… To have a director or a superintendent beside you when you're communicating to families, I think is important. And I think it's that feeling of support we would have as well with that individual. (K/15/3)

School Leader Recommendations for School Leaders

While most school leaders offered recommendations for districts, some also provided recommendations to other school leaders who may face a traumatic events or disruptive crisis in their schools. These recommendations flow from their personal experiences and point to facilitating a healthy recovery for school leaders. Jeanette discussed the need to remain mindful of what has happened in your school and community because it continues to influence those in the system.

> Don't forget if you get through it, don't rub your hands together and say, "That's done. Let's move on. Everything's back to normal." …Remember, and communicate, reach out.

> Appreciate…if you get through a crisis that devastates the community, you probably should express ongoing concern or support. (J/23/7)

Lars indicated the importance of developing strong relationships with one's district prior to the possibility of any crisis occurring. He believed that by establishing trusting relationships, working through a crisis with one's district was more likely to be amicable and supportive.

> I think you have to know your relationships within the division is first. You got to put enough away in the bank… If you've done a good job, and if you've built up a decent reputation…with your division - with your bosses, then you can probably expect a lot more latitude and a lot more supports…I think that would be my advice is just always do your best job. And then you'll put enough in the bank that maybe you can take some out at some point when you maybe make a mistake… (L/14/8)

> I think just the advice that people need to hear is that you've gone through a situation. You'll come out. At some point, it'll get better. And then there's nothing wrong with looking back at what you did. And you may have done something wrong. You may have done something that was not correct. And that's not the end of the world either. So that type of message… There's room for improvement all the time. There's room for getting better. And just make the situation right. If you've done something wrong, provided it wasn't really catastrophic, then own it and move on. And that's all you can do. (L/13/3)

Shelly shared that taking care of oneself, observing accomplishments, forgiving oneself, and engaging in reflection were some important self-care strategies' that would assist administrators. By engaging in practices that were intrinsically nurturing, Shelly inferred that school leaders would be more likely to cope adaptively with the stress of leading through disruptive crises or traumatic events.

> Take time to breathe. And take time to be still under process. Celebrate the accomplishments, even the smallest ones. Celebrate and recognize the positive impact you've had. Do your best to forgive yourself for mistakes that you make during the process and seek out support in that process if you need it. And when you're able to, depending on the nature of the crisis, remember that there's opportunity to learn in that process that will help you be better prepared, moving forward, and look for those moments. (S/16/6)

Brianne shared several recommendations aimed at supporting school leaders after a traumatic event. A number of these recommendations would require districts and individual

schools to evaluate their own system's culture and style of responding and intervening around crisis and trauma.

> …Mentorship…being able to talk to people who may understand what you're going through. So obviously, people within your circle of understanding, depending on what level you are in leadership with your central office. Transparency, openness, being authentic. Like if you were struggling not to hide that, you can't lead… If the leader's okay, the staff is okay. So, being vulnerable, being brave and vulnerable… Ialking about school culture… is [it] healthy or toxic? For a while those that were stuck in it were stuck in it. It was becoming, you know, nobody wanted to go to the staff room. It was heavy and being really super aware of your school culture.
>
> …Just to become a trauma-informed school… Learn about the neuroscience and the amygdala and all of the crisis response in the body. I think that's really important. Because you can read somebody's temperature when they come in the room… How are they holding their shoulders? How are they walking? Is this parent coming in as a support or to like, to ream me out? You need to be able to have those cues read. You know, of course, doing any kind of trauma [training], *The Brain Story*, VTRA, you know, what are the other ones? …Reading obviously, Bessel [Van der Kolk] … following them; Nagasaki sisters or Jodie Carrington. Those people that are going to help… Inspire you to always be responsive…and that might be somebody different for each person. (B/24/7-8)

Summary

In this chapter, I highlighted the domain *school district impacts on school leaders* and provided exemplars to support the themes in the domain. The themes included: pre-trauma functioning, relationships with districts, where support was found, developing district strengths, the role of districts and unions, the influence of the NACTATR, school leader recommendations for districts, and school leader recommendations for school leaders.

Interview participants had a variety of experiences with their school and district preparedness for a traumatic event. A school's pre-trauma functioning, and a district's ability to provide trauma-informed support for schools and school leaders was a factor in recovery. A district's trauma-informed capacity appeared to be a vital ingredient for districts who seek effective recovery after traumatic events. Some participants experienced expanded support, understanding, and care from their districts. Expanded support appeared to positively influence

participants opinions about their districts. Others experienced what felt like disregard or neglect from their districts. The disregard or neglect seemed to impact how trustworthy and capable school leaders viewed their districts.

Overall, district responses had an impact on how school leaders functioned, thought about their roles, and how they thought about the district and district leadership. Acknowledging that school district responses have a substantial impact on school leaders' capacity to lead through a traumatic event should be a consideration for those who support and employ school leaders. Therefore, district human resource management may need to prepare for a crisis management connection between a school leader and their employer during and after a traumatic event. Further, district human resources would benefit from understanding the impact of traumatic events on school leaders, because personal, professional, and relational effects result in very different challenges than with typical school leadership tasks. In the next chapter, I offer more in-depth analysis about *school district impacts on school leaders*. Chapter nine provides a discussion about my findings from this study.

CHAPTER NINE

Discussion

Introduction

In chapter nine, I discuss the findings of my research considering my research questions. My primary question was, *in what ways do school principals (vice/assistant and principals) experience posttraumatic growth after a traumatic event in their school community?* Subsequent questions were, a) *how did leaders draw on personal, professional, and school system resources to manage through the first year after a traumatic event in their system*; and b) *how did leading through a traumatic event affect school leaders' approach to leadership or their understanding about themselves as a leader?* The structure of this chapter is as follows: a) the survey and discussion of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory; b) Posttraumatic Growth described by interview participants; c) negative impacts of trauma; and d) chapter synthesis.

Participants described encouraging developments that seemed to arise from the events, pointing to posttraumatic growth. Some participants encountered enhanced relationships, developed expanded interests, like a trauma-informed school approach, and others experienced new opportunities in their professional roles. Participants also described negative developments coming out of target events such as a toll on them personally, not being adequately prepared to respond to crisis and trauma, relationship disruptions, and feeling let down or abandoned by their districts. Because of their experiences, all participants had recommendations for districts and school leaders considering the possibility that school leaders may encounter a traumatic, disruptive, or crisis event in their leadership experience. Table 9.1 provides an overview of the main categories and subthemes uncovered in the interviews with participants.

In table 9.1, I provide a visual overview of the domains and themes from my study. While the domains emerged quite quickly during analysis, it seemed that some of the themes flowed across the domains. Notions about support could be seen in all three domains. Interview participants noted changes personally, professionally, relationally, in their schools, or districts. For some, the change that arose was negative and had a significantly hurtful impact on them. For some participants, the personal and professional change was oriented toward growth despite the crisis or trauma they faced as they helped lead their schools.

Table 9.1

Domains and Themes Table

Personal and Professional Transformations	Relationship Transformations	School District Impacts on School Leaders
• Personal toll from target event • Crisis leadership • Crisis overtaking the instructional leadership role • Accumulation of events beyond the target event • Pace of school leadership • Complexity of leadership role • Lonely leadership • Lost chances • Querying compassion fatigue • Critical periods • Contributors to growth • Trauma-informed development • Fostering safety • Self-reflection • Self-care • Allowances for vulnerability • Enhanced Empathy • Appreciation and gratitude • New Opportunities.	• School and community impact • Relationship disruptions • Inequities • Relationship connections • Repair • Enhanced partnerships • Help-seeking for staff and students • Creating and maintaining trust • Transparency • Integrity • Becoming a growth facilitator • Administrators supporting administrators	• Pre-trauma functioning • Relationships with districts • Where support was found • Developing system strengths • Role of districts and unions • The influence of the NACTATR • Administrator recommendations for districts

The Survey in the Context of Covid-19

In Chapter four, findings from the survey, including the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI), were discussed. The survey was not able to answer my research questions. However, it was useful for understanding whether PTG was a viable construct for this sample of school

leaders. More importantly it allowed me to access volunteers for phase two, which assisted me to answer my research questions.

The first nine questions of the survey focused on demographic variables of the sample. The sample included North American school principals and vice/assistant principals. There was a wide range of ages, an array of experience before and after the traumatic event, a variety of grade-configurations in participant's schools, and diversity in where school leaders were located (urban, suburban, rural, inner city, northern). The survey sample identified as male, female, and one two-spirited participant.

The PTGI made up approximately two-thirds of the survey used for phase one of this study. The other portion of the survey asked nine demographic questions including queries about age at the time of the traumatic event, grades in the school, gender, principal, or vice/assistant principal, etc. Overall, the sample of school leaders in the survey did not identify a substantial amount of posttraumatic growth. As per Christensen et al.'s review of prominent perspectives on using the PTGI in research (2016), the overall score of the PTGI was calculated. The overall PTGI score for this sample of school leaders (n = 96) was 1.7462. This overall score was deemed low, because the sample identified their posttraumatic growth between 1) *I experienced this change to a very small degree as a result of my crisis*, and 2) *I experienced this change to a small degree as a result of my crisis.* As indicated in chapter four the lack of comparison samples (i.e., of school leaders who have completed the PTGI focusing on a traumatic event in their schools) does make it more difficult to interpret the degree of growth using the mean score (Stockton, et al., 2011).

I did not include a question asking what kind of event the school leaders were considering when they completed the PTGI, nor did I ask whether the event in mind was no

longer occurring. It is possible that asking questions to understand the nature of the event and the event's timeline may have helped me understand reasons for the score. It is conceivable that some school leaders were considering Covid-19 as the traumatic event for this study. If that were the case, the "event" is long-standing, was still ongoing, and without a clear endpoint where school leaders could engage in the reflection, and rumination process Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) indicated was critical in the process of Posttraumatic Growth (PTG).

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) did not provide a distinct set of parameters for researchers to use when setting up the PTGI for use in their research. The 1996 measure used for this study had the following instructions: "Indicate for each of the statements below the degree to which this change occurred in your life as a result of your crisis [or researcher inserts specific descriptor here], using the following scale". For my study I inserted the phrase, "school-based crisis (traumatic event) when you were a principal". In line with the developers, I chose to use both "crisis" and "trauma" in my descriptor.

The lack of clarity on what *traumatic* (as in post*traumatic* growth) refers to, resulted in a diversity of events from my interview participants. It is probable that survey participants were thinking of a variety of events as well. It is likely that my descriptor ("school-based crisis (traumatic event) when you were a principal") was so broad that it captured a wide net of events the survey participants considered in completing the PTGI.

On the face of the survey, growth appeared minimal for this group. Most interview participants, however, shared that growth or positive change occurred for them coming out the traumatic event. Self-identified growth in interview participants will be discussed later in this chapter.

An area that could have been better developed in this survey was the idea of a central event with some definitions to help participants with an area of focus for the survey. In a study conducted by Brooks, et al. (2017), The Centrality of Events Scale (CES), PTGI and other measures were used to map the first developmental phase of the Cognitive Growth and Stress Model (CGAS). The researchers theorized that both posttraumatic stress and PTG were possible outcomes from adversity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Further, the outcomes flowed through somewhat separate processes. According to the literature on PTG, ruminating about the event that caused distress, at some level, is required for PTG to result. The Brooks et al. (2017) study examined a sample of individuals (N=250) who had undergone a variety of traumatic events. Some of the events were categorized as accidents, natural disasters, serious attacks or threats, serious illness, bereavement, among others. There was also a range of exposure to events, and the sample identified approximately 4 significant adverse events in their lives up until the point they completed the survey. Of importance to the current study was one of my conclusions that a central event (CES) be deemed influential enough to have permanently changed the participant's perspective on their life. When an event becomes salient and significant to an individual's identity, PTG may result. It is possible that if I had described centrality of event in more explicit detail for survey participants – that the event being considered for the survey markedly shaped one's identity - I may have had somewhat different results in the survey. It is also possible that I would have had fewer survey participants and fewer volunteers for my phase two interviews.

Covid-19 had not been a factor when I originally envisioned this study. However, I believe it may have played a role in my survey findings. Vigo et al., 2020 stated the following in their editorial for The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry:

> As of the time this is written, there are over 2.3 million confirmed cases [of Covid-19] and 160,000 confirmed deaths…the pandemic has affected most people in the world in one way or another…in the context of grave threats to everyone's health and livelihood…widespread adverse mental health and substance use outcomes seem likely to occur, both directly from the pandemic and indirectly from the related economic downturn…These mental health problems…can be broken down into four subtypes based on the subpopulation affected: (a) the general population, (b) people with pre-existing mental or substance use disorders, (c) people who provide essential services and are at increased risk of infection, and (d) people who are infected by the pathogen. (pp. 681-682)

School leaders, their families, students, and staff may fit within any one or more of the four categorisations. School leaders certainly fit within the group of professionals providing essential services. North American schools have continued to function in some fashion during the pandemic. School districts and their school leaders have been tasked with finding solutions to online learning, social distancing measures when students are in buildings, and an array of other un-paralleled and thorny matters because of the pandemic (Longthurst & Thier, 2021). According to Vigo et al. (2020), those providing essential services are vulnerable for higher degrees of stress, would benefit from psychosocial support, as well as professional validation because of the higher levels of risk and strain.

Considering PTG in light of the pandemic has posed some challenges, including having no peer-reviewed evidence to say PTG is viable amid extended and ongoing global events. Moreover, authors tend to use phrases such as "following traumatic events", and "a past trauma" (Stockton, et al., 2011) when describing PTG; hence the *post*trauma term the title emphasises.

Nevertheless, the following discussion attempts to address some of the complications. To begin, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) indicated that individuals have a pre- and post-trauma perspective. The pre-trauma perspective is where assumptive world beliefs dominate; these beliefs about the world feel comfortable and normal to the individual. Once a traumatic or seismic event occurs several less-than-conscious process-possibilities exist for individuals. The first possible process is that assumptive beliefs are challenged, or *the world isn't anything like I always assumed it to be*. The result of challenged beliefs is one of two potentials: a) emotional distress because of challenged beliefs; or b) ruminating or agonizing about the confronted world-view assumptions. With rumination, sometimes comes self-analysis or supported self-discovery. Stockton et al. (2011) described a study that found that,

> …both reflection and deliberate rumination were positively associated with posttraumatic growth [and] confirm the view that event-related rumination that is not exclusively negative and involves actively thinking about the event and its consequences has adaptive qualities that may contribute to posttraumatic growth. (p. 91)

It is possible that some school leaders who participated in the survey were emotionally distressed because of the pandemic regardless of the target event of which they were thinking. It is conceivable that school leaders who were experiencing angst, stress, upset, or worry while completing the PTGI were not able to align with growth, resulting in some lower scores on the inventory.

If school leaders used Covid-19 as their chosen traumatic or seismic event, it is unlikely a rumination process (like Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) espouse) would have yet occurred. Based on the PTG model, the pandemic would need to be concluded before growth could be well understood or even identified by individuals, should growth even be a consideration for them.

Further, once the pandemic is over, it is uncertain if individuals will see it as a single seismic event, or a series of events that affected them across time. It is unclear whether the PTGI is effective for prolonged events that have diffuse beginning and end points.

As indicated in my findings chapters (six, seven, and eight), there may be an additional reason this sample of school leaders scored somewhat lower on the PTGI. In interviews, most school leaders indicated they had experienced numerous tragic, crisis, and even traumatic events during their time as school leaders. If that was also the case for the survey sample, it is possible that events were difficult to untangle and therefore growth trajectories associated with a solitary event might have been challenging to unravel and identify. More discussion will occur about the accumulation of events school leaders led through later in this chapter.

Posttraumatic Growth in the Literature

Posttraumatic growth has been researched in a variety of contexts, with a range of traumatic concerns for people, such as breast cancer survivors (Cordova et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2017), tornado survivors (First, et al., 2011) earthquake survivors (Xu & Liao, 2011), veterans (Angel, C.M., 2016; Tedeschi, 2011), paramedics (Ogińska-Bulik & Kobylarczyk, 2014), bone marrow transplant patients (Widows et al., 2005), cancer patients (Rahmani et al., 2012), train derailment victims (Maltais, 2020), and, individuals with chronic diseases (Purc-Stephenson, 2014). It has also been studied in numerous geographical areas (Steffens & Andrykowski, 2016). With respect to schools, PTG research has been conducted with teachers (Mincy, 2021), and students (Yu et al., 2010). At the time of this writing, it does not appear PTG research has been conducted with school leaders (vice/assistant principals, or principals).

While the PTGI portion of the survey pointed to limited growth for the overall survey sample, as indicated, most of the interview participants identified growth or positive after

traumatic events in their leadership role. For some, like Shelly, Elise, Katrine, and Ruth, it seemed to be the accumulation of events that resulted in growth. For participants like Lars, Maria, Rick, and Brianne, the central events described for the interview were key to how they viewed leadership, resulting in a changed professional perspective and philosophy about leading in schools.

Posttraumatic Growth for Interview Participants

My primary question for this study was, *in what ways do principals (school leaders) experience posttraumatic growth after a traumatic event in their schools?* Most school leaders identified some areas of growth coming out of their leadership experiences following a traumatic event. Jeanette, however, did not deem the word growth to be descriptive of her experience. When asked about growth, Jeanette stated, "Personal growth?…it [the event] does have an impact. I don't know if it would be growth-wise" (J/18/5). While a direct question about growth did not seem to fit for Jeanette, she did indicate some positive changes personally, relationally, and philosophically.

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) collapsed the five PTGI factors into three categories: a) a changed sense of self; b) a changed sense of relationships; and c) an altered philosophy about life. A changed sense of self and a changed sense of relationships (although not always positive, or oriented toward growth) were connections with my first categories, personal, and professional transformations, and relationship transformations. An altered philosophy on life, particularly around participants' professional lives, seemed to run through my categories of personal and professional and relationship transformations. My secondary questions queried: a) *how school leaders drew on personal, professional, and school system resources to manage through the first year after a traumatic event in their system;* and b) *how leading through a traumatic event*

affected school leaders' approach to leadership or their understanding about themselves as a leader. Therefore, my third main domain was focused on school districts' impact on school leaders.

Most of the interview participants described positive change or growth following or connected to the traumatic event they focused on for the interviews. In my interviews I asked the questions, "in what ways did you see personal growth occur after the crisis?", and "what contributors to the growth did you observe?" I did not use the term posttraumatic growth when interviewing participants. The first reason was that posttraumatic growth seemed to be minimal in the survey sample. I was not certain it would resonate with the interview sample. The second reason was that Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) indicated the term could be misleading to some, inferring an imperative that a tragedy or adversity should be reframed using positive thinking. The final reason was that I believed I would need to provide a definition of posttraumatic growth, and I was more interested in participants genuine response to a word that is commonly used, than a phrase they needed to apply effort to understand.

In Lars' situation, he indicated maturity and empathy as areas of growth he saw in his life. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) indicated increased sympathy and compassion often follows an adverse event. Shelly shared that her growth was related to having the enhanced capacity to respond to the many needs that resulted from the suicide attempts in her school. Elise indicated that the incident with her administrative partner resulted in a recommitment and dedication to safety practices in her buildings. Brianne described how reflecting on her experience of leading her school through a traumatic event resulted in a more mindful approach as a spouse and parent, and, spurred her on to understand and incorporate a trauma-informed school perspective. Rick too was inspired to adopt a trauma-informed outlook and described that he developed more

patience and empathy after the event connected to his school. Katrine shared that growth came in how she viewed her students and considered the possible impact of trauma and adversity in their lives. In understanding what some students faced, she committed to providing supports that attempted to meet those needs.

Calhoun and Tedeschi also used the term "seismic" as a synonym for crisis or traumatic (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). According to dictionary.com, seismic means, "pertaining to, of the nature of, or caused by an earthquake or vibration of the earth, whether due to natural or artificial causes" (https://www.dictionary.com/browse/seismic). When applied to a personal crisis, seismic might mean, pertaining to or caused by an event (an upheaval or a quaking), presumably triggering a great deal of destruction.

Contrary to Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013), the American Psychiatric Association (2018) gives detailed descriptions of criteria that must be met for an individual to be diagnosed with a trauma-based disorder. While I was not seeking volunteers with a trauma-based diagnosis, I entered the study with the assumption that the events described by interview participants would be somewhat in line with the American Psychiatric Association's categorization. This was the case for some of the school leader experiences and not with other experiences described for this study.

In the case of interview participants, there were those who identified upsetting incidents (no loss of life or injury, and no imminent risk), to those who had serious threats and risks in their buildings, to participants who led through loss of life, and significant school and community disruption after events. As indicated in the participant stories (chapter five), the effects on school leaders were varied, and the long-term impacts were also distinctive. Some participants did not indicate long-term personal, professional, or school impacts. Other

participants did describe longer-term impacts. While it was expected that impacts would be unique for each participant, it was also likely that the effects were wide-ranging because of the nature, and length of aftermath of some of the events. While components of school leaders' roles within schools and districts were captured in a surface manner in the survey, interviews with school leaders allowed for conversational depth, emotional expression, and what appeared to be earnest reflection. Both Rick and Jeanette expressed that sharing their experiences with someone else was meaningful and significant for them. Jeanette stated the interview was the first time she had shared the entirety of her experience with someone and felt compelled to do so in order that lessons learned may be passed on. Rick indicated that sharing his experience was "cathartic" for him. (Ri/18/5)

Compassion Satisfaction

Lane et al. (2021) conducted a study with school leaders that explored narratives of compassion fatigue. The research team included both current and former school leaders, and their interest in the study came from their personal experiences, and observations of other school leaders leading through turbulence. While the focus of their study was on professional burnout and compassion fatigue, they also noted a theme of compassion satisfaction, which they determined to be based in a deep ethic of care, a construct which has been examined in a variety of disciplines, including education, medicine, philosophy, and religion to name a few (Noddings, 2012).

Compassion satisfaction was associated with pride, self-worth, happiness, and productivity. In some participants narratives, these components of compassion satisfaction even in the face of challenging, and sometimes traumatic events appeared evident. Like participants in the current study, the concept of compassion satisfaction pointed to deep learning about oneself,

pushing the limits of endurance, extending empathy, and compassion in ways they may not have in the past, and seeking the well-being of the students, parents, and communities they served (Lane, et al., 2021). In the current study themes that seemed aligned with how Lane et al. (2021) described compassion satisfaction included: contributors to growth, self-reflection, self-care, allowances for vulnerability, enhanced empathy, and appreciation and gratitude.

Rick summed up the concept of compassion satisfaction in the following manner,

> I think I developed more patience. It became more about, "How can I help?" I am still human. Overall, I started seeing my role as, "What is it this person needs?" With each individual, "What can I do to help them out"? It's okay to say to them, "Come into my office. What can I do for you?" (Ri/2/7)

Is PTG a Reasonable Gauge for Most School Leaders?

When using PTG as a framework and to help understand contextual elements, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) expect researchers to learn about an individual's "primary reference group" (p. 44). Contemplating school leaders as a primary reference group offers contextuality for posttraumatic growth in this study. Principals and vice/assistant principals hold unique roles in school districts. They appear to reside in an in-between place. They respond to the needs of students and teachers, while at the same time answer to school districts and their leadership. Most school leaders are no longer in a teaching role (although some are teaching principals like Lars, and some vice/assistant principals had teaching loads like Elise described in one of her vice principal assignments). While not actively teaching, they are also not district personnel (situated at a district office separate and isolated from a school building). School leaders are managers, yet the title manager does not begin to explain the intricacy of their roles (Lim & Pollock, 2019; Nielsen & Lavigne, 2020; Pollock et al., 2019; Young, et al., 2014). They experience the push-

pull of teacher-student-community demands while conforming to mandates dictated by districts (Bush, 2010). School leaders must consider their communities, student, and teacher demographics, and evaluate how district mandates align or must be adjusted to attend to their distinctive schools and communities (Mills & Neische, 2014). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) cautioned that PTG may surface in distinguishing ways because of a person's culture, gender, race, perspective, and lived experience. Given how embedded school leaders are in the life of schools, socially constructed culture (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013) must necessarily encompass the ethos of the district (Leithwood & Sun, 2012), the composition, and climate of the school (Mills & Neische, 2014).

While most school leaders in this study identified some areas of growth, all except one described numerous disruptive, overwhelming, or traumatic events throughout their careers as school leaders. The accumulation of events possibly resulting in toxic stress (Branson, 2021), compassion fatigue, or professional burnout (Lane, et al., 2021) make PTG difficult to gauge for a single event. While growth may have occurred for most interview participants in this study, the concept of *post-trauma* is difficult to measure because of the ongoing nature of events in many schools.

Negative Impacts Associated with Traumatic Events

When I first considered investigating leaders and traumatic events, I was interested in understanding the personal and professional toll an event might have on school leaders. A negative impact seemed an obvious outcome following a traumatic event. According to Branson (2021), negative impacts of trauma for some people may include: a) immediate and delayed emotional reactions; b) immediate and delayed physical reactions; c) immediate and delayed cognitive reactions; d) immediate and delayed behavioural reactions; and e) immediate and

delayed existential reactions. As a professional trained to treat trauma with clients, and one who has responded to traumatic events in schools, these descriptions resonated with me. However, as I pondered my research interest further, I began to wonder if there might also be something that school leaders learned, discovered, or found meaning from considering a traumatic event. Like the psychiatrist and philosopher, Viktor Frankl, I wondered if there was a place for tragic optimism – acknowledging pain and suffering and still seeing hope, possibilities, and even growth (Pringle-Nelson, 2020). While tragic optimism might be the reality for some, there was no escaping negative impacts for the interview participants in this study. In the next section, I will explore the implications of the negative impacts for school leaders that arose from the traumatic events they led through.

Implications of Negative Impacts

This section describes the negative impacts school leaders may experience not just in the initial aftermath of a traumatic event but beyond. There may be a personal toll for school leaders that goes unnoticed by schools, districts, universities, and unions, but the toll does not go unexperienced by many school leaders. Because school leaders play a pivotal role in schools, and districts, raising awareness about the negative impacts is warranted.

Disaster Mental Health. Disasters are typically understood as unpredictable events that have a sweeping impact that affects individuals and communities. Disasters are often associated with natural occurrences such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, typhoons, etc. Other kinds of disasters include significant injuries and/or losses of life owing to accidents or violence (Norris et al., 2002). I had expected interview participant experiences to be more in line with how the common person understands disasters. However, while the concept of a disaster was salient for some participants (although accidents rather than natural disasters), it was less the case with

others. It was not my aim to categorize traumatic events as disasters or not. If school leaders determined their experiences to fit within the parameters I outlined in the survey, I deemed that the event made some measure of impact on that school leader. Nevertheless, I found disaster mental health to be a reasonable model to frame the negative experiences of school leaders, in large part because disaster mental health addresses both individual and collective trauma coming out of events that impact a community, or in the case of this study, a school or district (Baranowski and Gentry, 2010).

The field of disaster mental health is focused on researching how individuals function psychologically following disasters. According to Baranowski and Gentry (2010) people who experience or observe a disaster are influenced or changed in some way by the event. Both individual and collective trauma ensues following disasters. It appeared from this study that both individual and collective trauma occurred in most events described. Commonly, individuals work together to respond and function sufficiently; however, survivors tend to be more inefficient in their functioning than they were prior to the event, at least for a period (Tarrant, 2011a). As expected, those who experience or observe a disaster frequently undergo grief reactions. When a disaster destroys property, the loss has an emotional effect on individuals and communities. Disaster mental health as a response focuses on the community, providing practical support directly following the event. Mental health supports are available to triage those most at risk for mental health concerns.

As indicated, two categories of disaster-related trauma have been identified in the literature (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010). Individual trauma explores how the disaster impacts individual people. In this study, it seemed that the participants perceived they were not triaged by their systems to determine whether they were at risk for mental health concerns associated with

the traumatic event. Some were advised to take care of themselves (Ruth), but it was noted that taking care was not a viable option during a major school crisis (Brianne). Only Rick, Lars, and Jeanette experienced their districts reaching out to them directly and offering collegial support. Only Shelly described having school district leadership support from someone with a mental health background. The counselling director of Shelly's district played a significant role in responding to the collective trauma in the building; however, beyond some basic debriefing and strategizing, it did not appear that anyone assessed the mental and emotional well-being of the school leaders involved in Shelley's account (one principal and three vice/assistant principals).

While the wellbeing of school leaders seemed to be largely overlooked, the well-being of schools and communities was described by school leaders as being prominent. Except for Maria and Katrine, responding to collective events was an area where most districts seemed to have some ability skill in the immediate aftermath of a trauma. When called for, districts intentionally supported students, teachers, and if required, the community. Apart from Maria, Brianne, and Lars, the other participants' districts were exposed to the work of the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR) prior to the event they described in their interviews. It appeared that districts who had some training from the NACTATR had a measure of understanding that trauma has the potential to acutely unsettle systems, impacting school, and community functioning. District leadership seemed to comprehend that facilitating school mental health responses and supporting connections within the school, and with external supports was an effective strategy for adjusting after disruptive events, trauma, and loss. This response to collective trauma is in line with disaster mental health (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010; Kolski, 2014; Webber & Mascari, 2018) and, given school district training, the Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response (NACTATR; Cameron, 2019).

Webber and Mascari (2018) described how schools have been targets for violence (bombs, school shootings) as well as places where loss of life (suicides, accidents, and natural causes) substantially affect individuals, and at times, the entire school and community. These authors identified that responding in the immediacy of the crisis was not enough. Planning for post-crisis in schools was also necessary.

> The final phase [of responding after an event] addresses the end of the event with closing activities and a return to normalcy or a new normal. The plan continues preparation for *delayed responses, anniversaries, and pressure to memorialize the event* [emphasis mine] …the objective is to maintain a safe, secure, and orderly environment. After a traumatic event, everyday routines may return, but individuals are personally changed in some way. The changes may not result in being unhealthy, but they are different. Some people become stronger after a crisis and report posttraumatic growth…Early in the weeks following the September 11th crisis response, two critical mistakes were made: failing to put closure on the process and being blindsided by the aftermath and its effect on all staff, especially the response staff. (p. 225)

Establishing an official "closure" on the event, while maintaining the utmost sensitivity, compassion, and clarity about the reasons for returning to normalcy is necessary for people to feel at ease about returning to a semblance of normalcy. The reason for closure is not to forget, or ignore, but to mark the time, and give people an opportunity to move forward with less guilt for doing so. Interestingly, this advice closely aligns with Cameron's Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response (2019). The quote above described some specific elements that schools, and districts may consider after a traumatic event, including "closing activities and a return to normal", and "personal changes" (p. 225). The following discussion

provides some analysis around school leaders' negative experiences after the traumatic events where they were a key part of the response team.

Closing Activities and a Return to Normal. Most school leaders described that within about a week after the traumatic event, the school returned to a typical school routine. Maria and Shelly were new to their schools and positions, so did not have a sense of what normalcy looked like for their schools. Despite a return to seemingly typical functioning, all school leaders described the fallout from the events. Brianne described the hearts campaign that kept the tragic loss in front of the community for months. Jeanette described the lengthy recovery period following the loss of eight. Rick explained the struggle teachers and student-witnesses had addressing the emotional distress that came from the student who was injured on the way to school. The term "new normal" seemed an apt description of what these school leaders described (Webber & Mascari, 2018, p. 225). Many people in the schools and community were described as changed because of the events. Further, interview participants described emotional aftermath that contributed to school staff requiring leaves and additional support (as in the case of some of Jeanette's sports coaches and staff in Brianne's schools). School leaders were responsible to navigate how responses and delayed responses (including critical periods like anniversaries) impacted schools' functioning, interpersonal relationships, school climate, and culture.

Preparation for Delayed Responses, Anniversaries and Pressure to Memorialize the Event. Like the TES (Cameron, 2019), Webber and Mascari (2018) indicated that delayed responses are probable after a traumatic event. It is expected that delayed responses are compounded by extended responses in some schools and communities. Delayed responses may refer to days, weeks, or months after the event. Further, anniversaries of events are often met with heightened responses from some individuals (Cameron, 2019). The TES speaks specifically

of critical periods, one of which is the anniversary of the traumatic event. Both delayed responses, such as individuals realizing they might need to take a leave (one of the teachers in Isabella's school), and anniversary periods were raised by participants. While several school leaders' districts had TES training prior to the events described, there was limited preventative support or guidance specific to potential delayed reactions or anniversary periods for their schools. School leaders whose staff and students had delayed, or extended reactions addressed them on their own, or referred their staff to Employee and Family Assistance programs.

Concerning memorials, in Jeanette's experience, the community made the decision to construct a memorial and create scholarships after the accident. She did not describe any community disagreement about those decisions. In Brianne, Isabella, and Ruth's experiences, memorializing contributed to conflict. The *heart campaign* in Brianne's community perpetuated the feeling of loss for an extended period because people were continually confronted by the visual cues, even if they might have preferred to avoid reminders. The TES uses the term *extended critical period* (Cameron, 2019). This is typically used when an incident is in the media for a prolonged period and keeps the traumatic event in the forefront of people's minds, contributing to extended psychological reactions for some. The concept of an extended critical period resonated with Brianne's situation, because the *hearts campaign* perpetually reminded the community of the tragedy, keeping the collective traumatic response alive whether people wished to be reminded or not.

Similarly, in Isabella's experience, the hoodies with the deceased student's picture were present reminders about his death. Both students and school staff who did not purchase the hoodies were exposed to reminders without their explicit consent. Isabella described grief reactions from students well into the next school year (and in a different school) because the

deceased student's mother brought hoodies into the high school. Isabella was part of the team who responded to those extended grief reactions from students.

Ruth described two experiences in her interview (separated by several years). In the first, a student died tragically, and his parents (and some community members) wanted the gym to be named for him. There was considerable disagreement between the school and the family and involved relational fallout because of the ultimate decision made by the school not to memorialize. In Ruth's second situation, the same school had established and communicated trauma response practices, and the community did not have the same expectations as the first loss several years prior.

Cameron (2019), Webber and Mascari (2018), and this study all point to the likelihood that delayed responses, extended responses, the impact of anniversaries and memorial expectations are expected and because of that, preparing for such after a traumatic event may be warranted. Given that, longer-term plans may assist school leaders, so they are fully enabled to respond as Ruth's leadership team was in the second scenario she described for this study. Ruth did not express feeling as burdened after second event because her district appeared more confident in trauma response practices. They were able to lead their building depending on their trauma response policies and practices and did not deal with accusatory fallout from the community that occurred in the first experience. Ruth's contrasting experiences highlight the potential benefit of established trauma response policies and the commitment of the district to work together to respond effectively to the school and community.

Individual Impacts of Trauma: Personal Changes. Webber and Mascari (2018) also referred to "personal changes" (p.225) that may occur for response staff following crisis and traumatic events. Interview participants in the current study were all key responders in some

fashion after the crisis or traumatic event connected to their school. For the purposes of this study, it was not my intention to categorize traumatic events as more or less impactful. If school leaders deemed them worthy of discussion in a voluntary interview, I determined that the event made some level of life-changing impact on that school leader.

Compassion Fatigue and Professional Burnout. As alluded to earlier in this chapter, an area where my study fell outside the parameters of disaster mental health concerned the accumulation of disruptive, crisis, and traumatic events. Nine out of ten participants described an accumulation of events in their interviews. Jeanette called herself a "tragic event guru" (J/7/1). Elise described working as an administrator in community schools where, "stuff just happened every day…and that…was fatiguing and exhausting and emotionally exhausting and feeling impossible at times…(E/7/3). In Maria's first year as principal, she stated, "it compounds because we had a teacher die from cancer, we had a young person [die] by suicide, we had a kid who had turned on the gas in a science lab…we had two other little fires in the school…that was a bad year for bomb scares. I think we had four or five…" (M/2/1-2).

While my professional experiences in schools should have alerted me to this result, I was surprised by the strength of this theme and how it surfaced in the interviews without prompts. All participants except Lars explained numerous challenging events that affected them, with some events even contributing to changes within them as people. For example, Shelly described how she worked under a principal for several years who functioned in a harsh, dictatorial manner. At one point, she realized her principal's behaviour had so negatively affected her mental wellness, she felt compelled to seek counselling to address the impact. She stated that, like an abused spouse, "she stayed for the kids" (S/21/9).

Lane et al. (2021) conducted a study that examined school principals' experiences of compassion fatigue associated with extensions of empathy and compassion. All school leaders in this study described feeling empathy towards those they served even when ill-will was extended (Jeanette), or schools were vulnerable because of student threats (Maria and Katrine), or when school leaders themselves were threatened as in Lars' and Elise's experiences. While compassion and empathy are hallmark emotions that signify an authentic connection to others and a dedication to understand their needs as though walking in another's shoes, there are costs to ongoing extensions of compassion and empathy. One of the potential costs is professional burnout or compassion fatigue (Lane, et al., 2021; Maslach, 2017). Professional burnout results in some measure of exhaustion, cynicism, and/or inefficacy. Employees who face burnout may struggle to cope, feel overwhelmed, develop negative attitudes, and demonstrate inferior performance at work. Burnout is associated with compromised health, diminished work performance, including increased errors, nonattendance, increased resignations, decreased optimism at work, and a higher risk of mental illness (Maslach, 2017).

As indicated in chapter five, the concept of compassion fatigue surfaced in a few of the school leader interviews. Isabella queried whether she would end up with compassion fatigue because of the heaviness of her role as a vice principal. Rick noticed the overpowering compassion and empathy that the teacher of the injured student expressed. Rick had considerable concerns that the compassion and empathy might result in psychological and emotional costs for her. As a leader, Rick would have been the individual to assist his employee should that have occurred. Katrine indicated she had little support from her district office despite leading through six student suicides, the viable threat of a gun in her building, the school shooting threat (which was the focus on our interview), and other incidents and challenges that arose for her in school

leadership. According to Lane et al. (2021) elements of compassion fatigue are frequently aggravated by school leaders' dealings with their administrative supervisors. In Katrine's case, she indicated low levels of responsiveness from her district when she expressed a need in her schools.

Aspects of compassion fatigue, particularly exhaustion, did not always appear to be associated with the traumatic event alone. Rather, the accumulation of disruptive events school leaders led through seemed to be significant contributors to periods of exhaustion. All the school leaders in this study had at least five years of school leadership experience at the time of the interviews, although the target event they identified typically occurred earlier in their leadership journey.

Personal Toll. It is difficult to deny that school leaders play an indispensable role in schools and districts. They lead instructionally (Shaked, 2021), manage the day to day functioning of schools (Reinhart & Alcorn, 2019), support teachers, school staff and students, and establish district mandates (Pollock et al., 2019; Wells, 2013). On top of these responsibilities, they are also expected to lead through disruptive, critical, or traumatic events when they arise, and live with the aftermath sometimes unaided by their employers. To say that many school leaders are highly committed to their roles, staff, students, and communities is not an understatement (Mills & Neische, 2014). The school leaders in this study endured as school leaders through the trials of a traumatic event, even when they encountered psychological suffering or deep angst as a result.

There was a personal toll of some kind for each interview participant following the traumatic event they described for this study. Some were substantially and deeply impacted. Jeanette for example rarely left her home except for work for two years following the tragic

accident that killed eight. Both Rick and Lars indicated they needed to lean on their spouses more after the events they described because of the emotional strain. Isabella wondered about compassion fatigue connected to the impact of her role as vice principal. All school leaders experienced increased complexity in their roles at least in the initial aftermath and explained that their university and professional development school leader training was inadequate for responding and leading in the aftershock of the event. Not only was it sometimes inadequate for understanding how to lead, it also did not prepare them to deal with the emotional and mental drain they experienced. While some districts seemed responsive to schools in the initial crisis (Rick, Ruth – second incident, Brianne, Lars, Elise, and Shelly), most did not seem to have a longer-term plan, and few demonstrated support for school leaders themselves. For example, Maria and Katrine indicated a significant *hands-off* approach in supporting their schools, and them as school leaders. Katrine indicated she felt more support from the RCMP than from her district. Maria was compelled to design her own external shelter-in-place protocol to address the ongoing bomb threats that occurred after the bomb in her school. She advised her district of her plans, but they offered no assistance.

This section began with a discussion about the personal changes that may come from a traumatic event (Webber & Mascari, 2018). Relationship ruptures due to hostility or incivility, compassion fatigue, and limited supports from districts were described. In this study, it was noted that some districts and professional supports were unaware and unresponsive to the personal toll on school leaders from responding to traumatic events, and how that toll may affect school leaders' well-being over the long-term (Kabat-Farr, et al., 2016; Lane, et al., 2021; Wells, 2013).

Relational Impacts: Incivility at Work. Personal changes were not just internal for school leaders. They were unavoidably affected by external impacts that came out of the event. For example, there were serious relationship ruptures for some school leaders. Jeanette experienced some parents of the deceased extend ill-will toward her. Jeanette expressed compassion about their losses and empathy about their reactiveness but did not deny that their incivility hurt her. Brianne indicated that one member of her school staff was unable to forgive her for how she handled parts of the trauma response in her school despite efforts to make some resolution.

Katrine indicated two of the families whose children were party to the threat did not believe they should be sanctioned for his actions. They pushed back on the school's consequences. Katrine described feeling caught between issuing appropriate consequences so that the students would take their actions seriously, and their parents who thought that the actions were minor and insignificant even though they affected the entire school. She knew she had a responsibility to put boundaries in place to protect the school from future threats, but this impacted negatively on relationships with families. Katrine also navigated one family's fear of their child returning to school because they were worried he would be targeted because of his part in the threat.

Isabella expressed anxiety about a potential rupture between herself and the mother of the deceased student. Moreover, she was troubled by the incivility of the mother toward certain students and felt an obligation to protect them. Isabella was determined to support the students who were the mother's targets; and at the same time hoped she could also honour the mother as she grieved. These tensions caused stress and strain for Isabella. She expressed amazement that

she was able to navigate the attacks against students without becoming a social media victim for the mother herself.

Elise explained that she had always struggled when banning people from her schools seemed warranted. She also shared she had been a target for student violence as a teacher so was familiar with the impact. However, after the assault on her administrative partner she felt compelled to honour the district's stance to prohibit the mother who engaged in the assault from entering the school. Putting a boundary up for this parent, though justified, was an emotional struggle for Elise.

The school leaders identified in the preceding paragraphs did not identify any intervention or assistance from their districts concerning the incivility or potential ruptures they faced as part of the aftermath of the traumatic events. Incivility in the workplace is associated with exhaustion, negative job attitudes, absence from work, intentions to quit, psychological stress, and physical symptoms associated with stress (Leiter et al., 2012). According to Kabat-Farr, et al. (2018), incivility in the workplace is connected to reduced personal and professional wellbeing. The authors' concluded:

> …Those employees whom organizations value the most, those who are highly committed, face the worst aftermath of interpersonal mistreatment. Organizations that are reluctant to address incivility…are likely to suffer loss of human potential, especially among their most committed members. (p. 124)

As indicated, several school leaders faced a variety of interpersonal challenges without obvious or intentional interventions from their districts. Rather, it appeared that most school leaders were expected to simply shoulder the stress, emotional pain, and intensity inherent in their role as responders in the aftershock of traumatic events. Equally troubling was that school

leaders in the interviews were so self-effacing, they did not seem to expect their employers to care for their personal well-being even when interpersonal occupational hazards arose in relationships connected to their work. It seemed that intervention around relationship ruptures and incivility was a significant blind-spot for districts and even school leaders.

Lars' experience was different from many of the other school leaders. His district found an intervention that took him out of the environment for a time. They made efforts to influence the media with correct information and reached out to check on his well-being. Rick too indicated that he experienced support directed at him. Overall, however, district perception about the fallout of incivility from traumatic events, and the value of supporting school leaders did not appear to be the norm in this group of participants.

The Work of School Leaders

Much of the literature on school leaders discusses their instructional and managerial obligations within the context of policy, leadership competencies, and frameworks (Lane, et al., 2021; Riveros & Wei, 2019; Riveros, Verret, & Wei, 2015; Shaked, 2021). In an earlier section, I briefly highlighted some contextual realities of school leaders for the purpose of exploring PTG and whether it is a viable concept for single traumatic incidents in the work of school leaders. In the next sections, I explore the emphasis on current leadership standards for school leaders and compare these to what school leaders in this study indicated (Riveros, 2016).

Expanding the Work of School Leaders

When considering successful school leaders, Sun and Leithwood's (2015) meta-analysis highlighted the following skills and activities: a) setting direction; b) sharing vision and helping to make meaning of work in schools; c) developing staff goal consensus; and d) nurturing optimism. They stated that a competent leader was able to effortlessly move between

instructional leadership and transformational qualities and behaviours. Considering the participants in this study, Sun and Leithwood's (2015) metanalysis seemed incomplete as it did not look at the impact of unexpected disruptions to setting direction, sharing vision, developing consensus, and nurturing optimism.

Riveros (2016) argued that school leaders embody an emergent identity rather than an essentialist identity as offered in Sun and Leithwood's (2015) overview of successful school leaders. An emergent leadership identity develops through the intersection of policy, relationships, circumstances, and social-cultural-political realities, while an essentialist identity is formed simply because a school leader is posed as the central actor representing and enacting already established leadership standards. English (2012) indicated those standards are largely unquestioned and impose a perspective on school leadership that is embedded in misrecognition. Misrecognition in the case of school leaders refers to the reproduction of leadership standards based on present expected practices and roles. If successfully managing crisis events and their aftermath are not clearly identified as part of a leadership standard and framework, given English's perspective, it is unlikely they ever will be so in any official capacity.

Lane et al., (2021) indicated that the work of school leaders involves supporting individuals in perpetual turmoil, where Leithwood and Sun (2015) give little obvious room for this possibility in their perspective on effective school leadership. According to Lane, et al. (2021), school leaders necessarily navigate distressing concerns including poverty, abuse, substance dependence, loss of life, suicides, assaults, and incarcerations. Lane et al.'s (2021) perspective seems in line with what participants in this study described, and highlighted a variety of concerns, pressures, and unexpected events that are well beyond leading in academic areas alone. Further, as those in charge of the school, leaders periodically address contraventions from

school staff that result in labour relations inquiries and substantially impact school relationships. At the same time, school leaders are tasked with,

> increasing pressure to improve teacher instruction, raise student scores, to keep students, maintain teacher morale, and negotiate accountability and often conflicting demands from parents, community leaders, and government officials. While these pressures…have grown over the past two decades, they have more recently become amplified with the constant 24/7 access and exposure via email, texts, and omnipresent social media. (p. 17)

While policy, competencies, and leadership frameworks take up the bulk of the literature on school leaders (Riveros & Wei, 2019), school leaders in this study referenced them somewhat infrequently. The school leadership concept that was referenced most was, *instructional leadership.*

Some of the school leaders seemed to express a level of anxiety about not meeting the standard of school leadership as crises diverted them from the instructional leadership role into a crisis management role. Further, school leaders seemed to see these as separate functions in the role of school leader. However, revisioning or expanding school competency frameworks may allow leaders to see areas where instructional leadership and crisis management intersect. Instead of stopping instructional leadership, and starting crisis management, it may be beneficial for school leaders to notice places where they merge and overlap, giving meaning and credence to the entirety of their work in schools.

It can be argued that the focus of this study was a traumatic event, or set of events, therefore the study did not prompt for discussion around leadership frameworks and competencies. However, as administrators trained in educational standards, it was not surprising that some essentialist terminology surfaced. Katrine stated, "…we are always taught in the

educational world, that [we] are instructional leaders…[but] there were other incidents as a school principal, where I was forced out of the instructional leadership realm… (K/4/1-22). Rick stated, “Before this event I didn’t think about that enough [supporting teachers who were struggling because of a traumatic event] – it was about instructional leadership and handling teachers.” (Ri/2/1) Brianne shared, “Originally, it was about…the instructional leadership… always…and is still important…I had all these great ideas about literacy and numeracy. And that kind of faded into the background quite quickly”. (B/6/4) Shelly shared, “…Once things started to settle…once we…had supports in place…I kind of sat back and thought, okay, okay, we can get through that, like the rest, is no problem like timetabling and scheduling and teaching, proof. That's the easy stuff. We got this.” (S/3/6)

While no one denied the importance of instructional leadership, participants described that it was emphasized in university training and professional development, while crisis management and crisis response were unrecognised skills that may be required in a leadership position in schools. Nine out of ten participants indicated they were consumed with responding to the crisis they described for this study, not allowing them to focus on instructional leadership for periods of time. Katrine indicated, “there were other incidents [beyond the threat] as a school principal, where I was forced out of the instructional leadership realm to focus on students coming into the building and searching students” (K/4/2). Both Brianne and Jeanette referenced the one-year mark where the trauma sequelae in their school lessened to the point they could focus more intensively on other school matters. Rick indicated that with the injured student returning a year after the accident, previous triggers of the traumatic event were reintroduced in his school. Rick described that it was approximately three months after her return until the staff

and students became less focused on the dramatic changes that had occurred for the returned student.

As indicated, instructional leadership was the main school leader competency referenced by school leaders in this study. While not regarded as needless or inconsequential, it was also not deemed completely relevant and useful across the complex work of school leaders. For Jeannette, Brianne, Isabella, and Rick, leading during and after adversity had a significant effect on their attention to matters such as instructional leadership. Further, instructional leadership and leadership standards alone were not able to address the complexities inherent in participants' school leadership roles (English, 2012) especially during and after a traumatic event. Not only did school leaders in this study encounter crisis and trauma, but they also endured and led through the aftermath. At times, the aftermath coincided with additional disruptive events that also had some longer-term effects. School leaders described a host of crisis-based experiences that intersected with each other. Sometimes these overlapped, which meant some of the school leaders in this study were perpetually focused on crisis and their repercussions despite training being focused on school leader work like instructional leadership. Robinson indicated that instructional leadership involved activities that are focused on planning, assessing, organizing, and enhancing both teaching and learning (2010). While instructional leadership is focussed on student achievement outcomes, crisis management is focused on helping individuals impacted by crisis navigate through unpredictability, distress, loss and at some point, a return to more typical functioning.

A competency framework that did appear relevant in this study was the trauma-informed school (TIS) framework (Branson, 2021; Dorado, et al., 2016; Herrenkohl, et al., 2019), which is noticeably absent in much of the school leadership competency literature. In essence, trauma-

informed schools are those where every adult connected to students understands how exposure to trauma affects behaviour and learning (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Both Rick, Brianne, and Ruth described developing a TIS framework considering how they saw their school leadership roles. Jeanette, Maria, Elise, Brianne, Rick, Katrine, and Ruth shared how the importance of creating a safe environment for students developed from their own professional growth. Maria, Elise, and Katrine alluded to TIS concepts and applied them to their view of school leadership. Rick, Ruth, and Brianne saw a TIS framework as indispensable in leading after a traumatic event and found it valuable for leading in schools where students and even staff had experienced the effects of inter-generational trauma, poverty, systemic racism, and other social injustices that impacted on learning and social development.

Crisis Management

Crisis management was a concept that came out of the private sector and was applied to schools when evidence began to mount that schools were vulnerable locations where disasters, violence, terrorism, and accidents could occur; never mind the social-cultural impacts of poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, addictions, cyberbullying, and suicide (Eledour, et al. 2020). According to Eldedour, et al. (2020), managing school crises is a looming and serious dilemma for contemporary education. Crisis management in schools refers to having an established plan to address crisis and trauma at the organizational, community, and individual levels. Included in these crisis management plans, are communication protocols, immediate action procedures, and procedures designed to address the types of school crisis at the individual, organizational, and community levels (Webber & Mascari, 2018).

The term crisis management was introduced by me early in the interviews (not originally in the interview guide) as it seemed to be a descriptive fit for what school leaders experienced in

their roles. Most had thoughts about crisis management as it pertained to their school leadership. Alhoussein et al. (2020) indicated that crisis management preparation should become an imperative for education. Eldedour, et al. (2020) indicated that preparation was essential to help mitigate negative results from crises. One aspect of crisis management involves pre-planning to avoid preventable crises (Alhoussein, et al., 2020). School leaders are key informants about predictable school crises. While pre-planning is critical, developing a crisis management team is also essential. Crisis management teams often involve district and school-based personnel (Cameron, 2019; Eldedour, et al., 2020). However, because the principal is central in the building, they must necessarily play a significant role (Webber & Mascari, 2018), as Jeanette, Brianne, Rick, and Isabella described in their interviews. Elise referenced adhering to a crisis management-type policy as critical to leading through a traumatic event. Because school leaders are central stakeholders, and have relevant and current school-based knowledge, their input in policy development is critical. Alhoussein et al. (2020) reviewed the literature on schools and crisis management and summarized the need to strengthen preparedness for crisis management in schools, with school leaders at the helm. Policy, planning, and preparedness necessarily work together to form effective crisis management plans (Eldedour, et al., 2020).

Liou (2014) also indicated that crisis management is pertinent to the work of school leadership. Liou highlighted that school leadership realities involve ongoing unpredictability, uncertainty, and complexity. While Alhoussein et al. (2020) focused on preventative and avoidable, crises, Liou (2014) highlighted that many times crises are not preventable. Even apparently minor occurrences can result in disorder and turmoil because of the dynamics at play in schools. Liou used the term *constant adjustment* when referring to the general realities of school life and, based on repeated crisis events in schools, predicted that schools will continue to

be susceptible to crisis (p. 248). Therefore, cause and effect models of crisis management are unlikely to be effective. Liou went on to say that traditional, linear models of crisis management are often deficient for responding to crises as they manifest in schools. A core feature of Liou's complexity and chaos theory-based crisis response model is responsiveness. Liou emphasized that responsiveness refers to flexibility, collaboration, and self-correction to address the expectedly non-linear, dynamic reality of crises in schools. Liou's model is theoretical; however, Liou's perspective that school crises are dynamic, fluid, not always easy to contain, frequently have seepage and are interconnected with other seemingly small and large crises fit within some of the interview participants' experiences of crisis management in this study.

Based on the participants in this study, crisis management seemed a reasonable term to describe some of the responses they led through. While not all school responses were described in an organized fashion as those theoretically proposed in the literature, there appeared to be some knowledge of steps to take and supports to reach out to support students, staff, and communities. School leaders were identified as crucial crisis response personnel in some of the literature (Brown, 2018; Cameron, 2019; Eldedour, et al., 2020; Tarrant, 2011a; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Most of said literature appeared to adopt the stance that once the school returns to typical functioning, there is monitoring for student mental health concerns, and support for the parents, the crisis was fully abated (Kolski, et al, 2014). This did not appear to be the experience of the school leaders in this study, as sequelae often permeated and the impacts continued longer that districts seemed to be aware.

School Leaders and the Support they Received

School leaders are central figures when traumatic events occur in schools (Alhoussein, 2020; Brown, 2018; Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Lane, et al., 2021; Mutch, 2015b; Tarrant, 2011a &

2011b). According to Norris et al. (2002) disasters of a variety of kinds are not unusual. While not every participant in this study described an event or set of events that would fall into a disaster-type category, each described a personal impact, and most described a relational, school or community impact. In the cases where lives were lost or nearly lost, the school and community impacts were profound and required substantial support to intervene.

School leaders in this study also identified resilience in the face of threat and loss, personal, and professional growth. At times they leaned on their families or spouses, other times they leaned on their school colleagues or mentors, at other times they found supports in the community. Interestingly, the majority of participants indicated that they did not lean on their district leadership for support. The reasons seemed to be two-fold: a) the districts were unresponsive or ignorant of the needs of the school leader with respect to traumatic events; and b) school leaders simply did not reach out to them and did not view districts as capable of providing support. Jeanette, Lars, Shelly, and Rick were the only interview participants that described obvious supportive responses from their districts.

One of the featured resources that school leaders appreciated was district-paid-for training from the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR). While each school leader described some training from the NACTATR, some like Lars and Maria did not have the training prior to the event they described for the interviews. Most interview participants indicated the NACTATR training provided a helpful framework for understanding trauma in schools. Comprehending the word “trauma” was valuable for school leaders and understanding that trauma symptoms could manifest collectively in a school, community, or district was also deemed beneficial (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010).

All school leaders explained that they required more support following events, as the NACTATR framework was not enough to assist them through the unique challenges that arose from their events (Liou, 2014). Some individual schools had NACTATR support offered to them. For example, Jeanette, Shelly, Rick, and Brianne, either had direct access to Kevin Cameron (Executive Director of NACTATR), or their districts were in contact with him to help them traverse the unique trajectory of each situation. It was not unexpected that discussions about the NACTATR would surface in interviews because the organization sent out my survey, and participants did discuss the impact on their knowledge and skills for responding to crisis and trauma.

Lars was offered support through his union in the form of an intensive retreat for school staff who were going through difficult experiences in their personal or professional lives. Isabella was offered support in a group session at her former school. Katrine, while acknowledging personal support was available through her employee benefits chose not to access it. She found her most helpful support to be from the RCMP and colleague administrators, not her district. Maria did not have district or union support. Out of necessity, she designed her own supports by engaging community partners to assist her create a safe and secure setting for her students.

Chapter Synthesis

In this closing chapter, I will conceptualize traumatic events for school leaders and describe how they may be connected to PTG for some. I will consider the work of school leaders, including how trauma response and recovery remain outside of current leadership standards. In addition, I will discuss school leadership in terms of expressed compassion and empathy. I will describe how crisis management skills may build capacity for school leaders who respond to crisis in their schools.

Conceptualizing Traumatic Events for School Leaders

In this study, several words were used to describe a significantly disruptive event that occurred in schools requiring school leaders to redirect their attention and respond to the event and the repercussions. The reason I used a variety of terms was that the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) used both *trauma* and *crisis* in the measure. In their descriptions of the construct of PTG, Calhoun and Tedeschi use additional terms including "seismic event" and "tragic" [event] (2013, p. 17).

The participants in this study described a variety of disruptive events as well as short and long-term impacts. The experiences described were unexpected and required more assistance than was available in the school alone. The North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NATATR) described a "traumatic event" as one: a) that occurs without warning; b) that does not remain contained in the school where it occurred, but has a larger impact; c) where the school does not have the internal resources to respond without assistance; and, d) where the ability to forecast who will be affected is appreciably diminished (Cameron, 2019). Several events described by participants had impacts that extended well beyond the boundaries of the school.

For the purposes of this study, a traumatic event was one where school leaders were required to respond because of their lead role in the school. The event was sudden, unexpected, and required more assistance to support those impacted than what was available in the school. Traumatic events for leaders resulted in personal and professional transformation, in part because of the toll it had on them (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Most school leaders in this study explicitly identified they grew or changed in some positive way when they considered the events they administrated through.

Posttraumatic Growth for Some Leaders

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) estimated that between 30 and 90 percent of individuals who encountered a significant distressing event reported some components of growth. Therefore, it is not unrealistic that some school leaders will experience some elements of growth after leading through a traumatic event in their schools. Even so, the PTG construct is not an imperative for individuals to reframe their tragedies into positive experiences. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) compassionately acknowledged that some people do not experience PTG and there is no implied criticism when it does not occur. For those who do see their traumatic experience through the lens of growth, having someone notice its appearance and label it as growth is considered a means to help situate it more firmly in the experience of the individual (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

Most participants in this study reflectively described their growth through adversity and trauma. They described some elements of a changed sense of self, a changed sense of relationships with others, and an altered philosophy about life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). While growth was identified, participants did not deny pain, discord, exhaustion or overwhelm during and after the formal responses concluded. Jeanette and Isabella appeared to find the term growth inadequate for their experiences. At the same time, they did observe some areas of change which they deemed somewhat positive.

The Work of School Leaders from a Trauma Response Perspective

As indicated, current leadership standards do not appear to acknowledge trauma response skill sets or capacities as important in the role of school leaders (English, 2012; Riversos & Wei Wei, 2019; Robninson, 2010; Saked, 2021;). Given the impact on school leaders, this glaring omission is surprising (Lane, et al., 2021). The school leaders in this study indicated they

expended a great deal of energy after a crisis or trauma; sometimes it took over their professional and personal lives for a time, resulted in a personal toll and developed in them indelible change that impacted their professional trajectory.

It appears that while principal standards do not account for role-based crisis and trauma leadership capacities, they also do not acknowledge workload intensification which may have an impact on achieving those standards (Jutras, et al., 2020; Lim & Pollock, 2019; Pollock et al., 2019; Pollock et al., 2015). It is difficult to reconcile these discrepancies and might be an additional reason that leadership standards may be inadequate for reforming schools and leadership (English, 2012); these standards may not illuminate the actual role that some school leaders play in certain schools (Riveros et al., 2016).

Revisiting Compassion and Empathy

Nel Noddings (2012) described the central role of care within the education profession. She highlighted that education is first a relational endeavour that requires and ethic of care. The participants in this study underscored the need and necessity of relational care, compassion, and empathy in responding to traumatic events and their aftermath. At times, participants expended compassion and empathy to the point where they were depleted and exhausted.

Compassion fatigue and burnout (Lane, et al., 2021; Maslach, 2017) are risk factors for professionals who respond to the extensive needs of those they serve. Participants in this study described individual needs of students and parents, needs of teachers and other school staff, and needs of the community. Sometimes these needs were relatively short-lived like in Lars' situation; other times these needs were extensive and long-standing like in Jeanette, Brianne, Rick, and Isabella's circumstances. In the experiences shared by Katrine, Elise, Shelly, Ruth, and Maria there were ongoing crises that they responded to with compassion and empathy as well as

strategic responses to circumstances. It is reasonable to consider that school leaders who engage emotionally and relationally like many of those in the study may be at risk for professional burnout or compassion fatigue at points in their career. Burnout can lead to diminished personal and professional capacity, exhaustion and even a desire to leave the profession, among other concerns (Bakker et al., 2014; Leiter & Maslach, 2016).

Crisis and Trauma Management Education for School Leaders

In the Canadian context, which this study largely situates itself, the NACTATR has provided school districts opportunities to train in the Traumatic Events Systems of Crisis and Trauma Response (TES; https://www.nactatr.com/tes.html). This approach of responding to crisis and trauma in schools has similar elements to Webber and Mascari (2018) and Kolski et al's (2014) synopsis of trauma response. The NACTATR emphasizes that they address trauma from a systems lens (Cameron, 2019), and provide face-to-face training in the model. The TES elevates the school leader role and uses that role as a lynchpin to organize responses in schools; therefore, leaders are often targeted for this training in schools.

While these models (Cameron, 2019; Kolski et al., 2014; Webber & Mascari, 2018) are relatively consistent with each other and provide some stepped direction for addressing school-based trauma, they do not address the personal toll traumatic events may have on school leaders, nor is it their objective to do so. Further, they do not discuss that school leaders may truly grow through adversity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013), and this growth may change how they view their role in school leadership. Given the emphasis on leadership standards (English, 2012; Robinson, 2010; Riveros, et al, 2016; Shaked, 2021) - devoid of the possibility of traumatic events, workload intensification for school leaders, the possibility of professional burnout and compassion fatigue for professional leaders, it is reasonable to consider that school leaders may

benefit from role-based trauma response education that takes into consideration the professional toll of traumatic events, as well as the possibility of growth, leading to how they see their roles in education. In the next chapter I will describe some implications that come from this study.

Summary

In this chapter, I described in what ways school leaders in this study experienced PTG after a traumatic event in their school community. I provided an overview of my survey and the role of the PTGI in the survey. I described how participants explained their own PTG considering expectations that are placed on school leaders. Further I addressed the negative impacts of trauma on interview participants, and how school leaders may be at risk for psychological harm because they face crisis, trauma, and adversity on a somewhat routine basis in their roles. In the next chapter I will discuss the implications of my research.

CHAPTER TEN

Implications and Conclusions

Introduction

This chapter will address the implications coming out of the study, *School Leaders' Experiences Leading After a Traumatic Event: A Posttraumatic Growth Perspective*. To begin, I will discuss how the findings spoke to the research questions. Second, I will share my reflections on the process and discoveries in the study. Third, I will discuss the implications of the study and provide some recommendations made by school leaders. Fourth, I will discuss the contributions this study offers to theory. And finally, I will provide last words on the work of school leaders.

My Initial Premises from Chapter One

When I began this study, I postulated several possible explanations for why adequate school operations occurred immediately after a traumatic event. The first was that schools were afforded additional and, frequently, outside support to assist with organizing responses, as well as to assess and meet needs that surfaced in the aftermath. The second was that school leaders retained the energy required to respond with some effectiveness for that period. Baranowski and Gentry (2010) acknowledged that people in crisis situations are often able to maintain energy, focus, and attention for a time before they became fatigued or exhausted. The third was that the traumatic event was the primary focus of considerable activity and attention. This attention was directed to the formal response and facilitating the school or district return to a measure of routine (Cameron, 2019; Elbedour et al., 2021; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Fourth, the role of the school leader was heavily emphasized immediately after the event and before the critical periods began. They were often given explicit directions and support about how to respond to the event, subsequent plans, and decisions (Cameron, 2019).

Adequate initial responses in schools appeared the norm for most of the school leaders in this study, particularly those who had some connection with the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR). Most school leaders described steps they and their district took to respond. Isabella indicated that she helped activate their district's TERT response (Tragic Event Response Team) and began calling teachers immediately after learning of the suicide death of one of their students. Jeanette opened her school immediately after the fatal van accident so that students, staff, and community members could meet and hear accurate information in a timely and supportive manner. Shelly described ongoing leadership meetings with the school, and district supports, to plan responses based on the needs being assessed in the student body. Once initial responses were completed (approximately one week in most cases) school leaders described levels of support from district offices as significantly reducing. Most of the time the support was aimed at the staff and students. Only Lars and Rick had districts that provided specific support to them as school leaders. Rick had ongoing conversations with a district leader, and Lars' district leadership found a therapeutic resource to support him. Jeanette and Shelly's districts were available to respond to school needs and their questions and queries about next steps in their processes of recovery.

Research Questions

The first research question I posed for this study was, *in what ways do school leaders experience posttraumatic growth after a traumatic event in their school community?* In response to the first question, this study began with a survey that included the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). As indicated, the survey participants did not indicate a high degree of posttraumatic growth overall. The survey could not completely answer the first question; rather, it considered *whether* the survey sample of administrators experienced posttraumatic growth, not

in what ways might they have experienced growth. A significant benefit of the survey was that it was sent to a large group of potential participants and provided a sample of interview participants where the concepts of growth could be explored.

The interview participants provided details about areas of growth they experienced. Overall, they indicated some noticeable areas where they grew. From a PTG perspective, all individuals in the sample identified growth to some extent in, a changed sense of self, a changed sense of relationships, or an altered philosophy about life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). As indicated in chapters six and seven, an altered philosophy about life seemed to flow through my categories of personal and professional transformations, and relationship transformations.

The first sub-question for this study was, *how do leaders draw on personal, professional, and school system resources to manage through the first year after a traumatic event in their system?* The school leaders who were interviewed identified leaning on spouses, close friends, and colleague-school leaders for support. Most school leaders indicated there were people within their schools or districts that they could trust and rely on. Co-administrators were referenced frequently as supports through traumatic events. Jeanette, Rick, Lars, and Shelly described specific support from their districts, although for Jeanette and Shelly, the support was largely aimed at assisting them as they supported school staff, students, and the community. Lars and Rick indicated a somewhat more personal approach from their districts. Overall, districts did not appear to be effective or eager supports for school leaders themselves. Further, it did not appear that school leaders expected much personal support from districts even though districts employed them, and as employers, were obligated to ensure occupational health and safety for all employees, including psychological safety. The range of supports from districts was varied (from

virtually no acknowledgement of the traumatic event in Maria's case, to an ongoing personal interaction in Rick's case).

The second sub-question for this study was, *how does leading through a traumatic event affect school leaders' approach to leadership or their understanding about themselves as a leader?* School leaders with a great deal of experience like Katrine and Jeanette, were already confident in their leadership styles and perspectives. Even so, both were touched by trauma and identified that they developed in how they extended extra compassion and care to the families, students, and communities they served. For Maria, Brianne, and Rick, a trauma-informed leadership framework developed and became a focus of their leadership and how they led their schools. Ruth discovered school leaders became community leaders in smaller communities, no matter what they wished personally. This realisation caused her to be particularly conscious of her life-choices, decisions, and expressed perspectives as she believed she was always being observed by the community. Lars indicated developing in the areas of compassion and empathy, which he indicated enhanced his ability to work with students, teachers, and parents. Elise re-confirmed her commitment to physical safety in schools, and enriched school-based safety protocols because of her experience. Shelly indicated she necessarily developed self-care-survival strategies including self-forgiveness, observing one's own accomplishments, and ongoing self-reflection as part of being a school leader. Isabella appeared to still be struggling with how she saw herself as a leader – she often described being placed in a reactive role, rather than a proactive one. While she did notice enhanced empathy and advocacy skills, her reflections on her exhaustion may have been due to the complications of the pandemic. Isabella did wonder if the stress and strain of school leadership would result in eventual compassion fatigue for her.

Reflections on the Research

When I reflected on my research process, I noted several elements that worked satisfactorily, and some that I would amend for a future study. Connecting with the NACTATR to send out my survey was advantageous because they are a credible organization that supports many North American schools. In addition, they have a large pool of professionals connected to education on their email distribution list. Thus, I was able to access survey and interview participants with ease.

Another satisfactory element was the phase two interviews with participants. I interviewed school leaders from different provinces, diverse school configurations, a variety of experience levels, and ages. After the results of the survey indicating low posttraumatic growth (PTG) in the sample, I was uncertain if I would observe evidence of posttraumatic growth with interviewees. As discussed in the previous chapter I used the term "growth" in my interviews and most school leaders described areas of positive change, while not all resonated with the word growth. It was difficult to untangle whether a single traumatic event projected participants into growth, as all but one participant described numerous disruptive, upsetting, distressing, and sometimes traumatic events in their tenure as school leaders. With some participants, particularly Maria, Rick, and Brianne, they identified core incidences that significantly catapulted them into a trauma-informed leadership paradigm, although Maria did not have the language of *trauma-informed* early in her school leadership career. For most other interview participants, their growth appeared to happen more incrementally and through a variety of adverse and learning experiences.

It must be noted that I made a change in my phase two participant selection. I had originally designed my study to include only interview volunteers who had encountered a

traumatic event between one and six years prior to data collection. Upon reviewing the volunteers, I realized I would not reach my lower limit of six interview participants if I retained my initial parameters. By extending my parameters, I was afforded the opportunity to interview a broader group of participants, with diverse stories and experiences. I believe the decision to include all volunteers who were able to participate in the interview portion of the study enhanced my findings.

There were also aspects of the study that I would change. While I would be unlikely to use the PTGI with school leaders in the future, I do believe the notion of professional and personal growth and development coming out of adversity, hardship, and trauma is a viable research topic with school leaders. The PTGI itself is focused on a single life-altering event, and most interview participants had numerous impactful events in their careers as school administrators. Upon reflection, I believe my statement for the PTGI section of the survey was too broad to be used with that measure. My question was, *indicate for each of the statements below the degree to which this change occurred in your life as a result of the school-based crisis (traumatic event) when you were a principal*. While I had a definable sample group as Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) espouse, the array of possible traumatic events a principal can be confronted with is vast, and possibly too diverse for use in a study like the one I designed. As indicated in the previous chapter, the PTGI has been used with cancer survivors (Cordova et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2017; Rahmani et al., 2012; Widows et al., 2005), natural disaster survivors (First, et al., 2011; Xu & Liao, 2011) veterans (Angel, C.M., 2016; Tedeschi, 2011), and medical professionals (Ogińska-Bulik & Kobylarczyk, 2014) to name a few. On the surface, conducting a PTGI study with school leaders seemed reasonable as they are an identifiable group. However, because the events they encounter may be dramatically different in severity, intensity, longevity,

and community impact, the survey portion may have produced more explicable results by identifying a type of event in my stump statement rather than by leaving it open.

Most school leaders who were interviewed for this study described many distressing events. If that was also the case for survey participants, it is not certain if the PTGI by itself (especially sent out to a broad group of unknown school leaders) was suitable for that population and discriminative enough for their actual work. A more encompassing approach for research with school leaders might be the Cognitive Growth and Stress Model (CGSM) proposed by Brooks et al. (2017) that I described in the chapter eight. I discovered elements of both self-identified growth and stress in my interviews with school leaders. It is possible that by using the measures from the CGSM, I may have had more alignment with the quantitative and qualitative elements of a relatable study. Another obvious study might be to conduct research around the many disruptive, crisis, and traumatic events leaders administrate through across the course of their career, seeking insight about how to support school leaders, embolden districts to be better equipped employers given the potential occupational hazards, and learn how school leaders define growth for themselves.

I did not have notable racial diversity with my phase two interview participants. This is a limitation to this study. Further, I did not have school leaders who served Federally funded First Nations schools, which is also a limitation. It is my understanding that the NACTATR has fewer Band schools on their distribution list than provincially and state-funded schools. It is also my understanding that they do not typically market their trainings to schools outside of the public provincial and state sectors, so charter and privately funded schools were not represented. School leaders with other-than-pubic-service perspectives may have enhanced my findings.

Implications of the Research

This study was largely focused on the impact of adverse, crisis, or traumatic events in schools on school leaders, and how growth may have developed from those experiences. School leaders' daily work changes when a traumatic event occurs (Brown, 2018; Lane, et al., 2021; Tarrant, 2011a), at least for a time following the event. While researchers like Leithwood and Sun (2012), Robinson (2010), and Shaked (2021), focus on leadership competencies, and instructional leadership, these appear to be somewhat limited perceptions about the skills needed for school leaders, if routine disruptive events like most school leaders in this study encountered (Brown, 2018; Cameron, 2019; Kolski, et al., 2014; Tarrant, 2011a; Webber & Mascari, 2018).

Researchers such as Jutras et al. (2020), Lim and Pollock (2019), Pollock, et al. (2015) and Pollock et al., (2019) described workload intensification for school leaders. However, this notion did not seem to be encompassing enough to describe the type of work experienced by school leaders immediately following traumatic events (Cameron, 2019). While interview participants in this study did not deny workload intensification, especially connected to mental wellness concerns for students (Katrine, Isabella, Ruth, Elise, and Shelly in particular), they did not equate a traumatic event with workload intensification as described in the literature (Pollock et al. 2015).

While a traumatic event changed the daily work of interview participants in this study, it also influenced students, staff, and at times, the community. When this occurred, interview participants became compassionate and empathetic caregivers galvanized to address the needs present (Noddings, 2012). They often put their own needs aside to be responsive. At times, school leaders encountered exhaustion and overwhelm but were compelled to continue

responding. Elements of emotional exhaustion were identified in participant stories, somewhat indicative of professional burnout or compassion fatigue (Lane, et al., 2021).

Emotional demands and emotional work have been explored with school principals (Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Fernett, 2010; Maxwell & Riley, 2016; Skaalvik, 2020). These terms describe the emotional disbursement professionals expend in their daily work. When emotional demands are high, and well-being is lower, there is the possibility for professional burnout (Maxwell & Riley, 2016). As indicated with the workload intensification discussion, emotional demands and emotional work do not fully explain the work of school leaders when they respond to crisis connected to their schools.

School principals described high expenditures of emotion surrounding the target events and the aftermath discussed for this study. Bakker et al. (2014) and Sonnetag (2017) indicated the possibility of significant performance-based symptoms when burnout surfaced, including poorer executive functioning, memory and attention difficulties, increased mistakes, and more conflicts in the workplace. While emotional demands and emotional work were not explicitly linked to single serious traumatic events in the literature, it is expected that adding a traumatic event to the work of a principal who already feels the effects of emotional demands may well increase the possibility of professional burnout or a desire to leave the profession (Fernett, 2010; Skaalvik, 2020). While each interview participant found ways to cope with the traumatic event and its repercussions, all indicated they were changed in some way by the event, and the impact was something beyond the typical emotional demands of school leaders. Thus, this study supported the concept of emotional demands and emotional work for school leaders, while pushing the boundaries to say that these descriptions were not extensive enough. Therefore,

seeking more insight about the impacts of adverse events layered on top of principal work is necessary.

When there was a major school-related disruption for the participants in this study, and schools returned to some level of normalcy (classes resumed and external support were no longer available in buildings), school leaders continued to address the aftermath. While several districts seemed to provide reasonable support to schools immediately following an event and within the first week or so, this dropped off substantially. Some school leaders identified resources and interventions for teachers, students, and the community, but these were largely absent for school leaders who had distinctly different roles from teachers, district personnel, and external supports.

Interview Participant Recommendations

When I asked what districts could do to supports school leaders in the aftermath of traumatic events, the participants in the study indicated the following. Maria shared that it would have been helpful to have an identified individual check-in with her following the events in her school. In Maria's estimation, the individual would be someone where an established relationship existed, who understood schools and understood collective and individual trauma. Elise went one step further, indicating that a dedicated and knowledgeable person assigned to respond to school leaders after events would be helpful and aid in developing hopefulness through challenging times.

Isabella concurred that planned check-ins would support school leaders after disruptive events. Katrine believed that districts should assign a professional to be a contact for school leaders after a school-based traumatic event. Katrine noted that a school district in her province had posted a position dedicated to supporting school leaders. In Katrine's view this district had

an accurate perspective that school leaders have distinctive roles that require unique and devoted attention and support.

Ruth highlighted the need for school leaders to debrief after traumatic events. Rick reconfirmed that his deputy superintendent's visibility in the school and him personally reaching out to Rick ongoing was valuable. Brianne thought that acknowledgment by districts about how difficult traumatic events were for school leaders was vital. She indicated that acknowledgement could be verbal, with time off, or even remuneration if deemed appropriate. Lars shared that districts should have principal supports already in place in the event of a crisis. He identified the possible need for time off, or an intensive retreat resource like he experienced. Jeanette underscored that crises do not have clear end points, and if school leaders continue to have needs (in this case around students and school staff), districts need to respond with resources so that the weight of the need does not rest solely on school leaders. While these recommendations were somewhat general, they did point to districts being prepared with skilled personnel to support school leaders relationally and practically after traumatic events occurred.

The first implication from this study is that the current premise that the work of school leaders can be simply encompassed within current leadership standards and frameworks is less than adequate (English, 2012; Riveros & Wei, 2019). The second implication is that principal workload intensification, while a valid concern, does not fully explain what happens in the workplace and for the school administrator when they lead through a traumatic event (Pollock et al., 2015). Third, like workload intensification, emotional demands and emotional work do not seem to fully explain the experiences of school leaders who lead through traumatic events connected to their schools (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). Fourth, because school leaders are caring for students, families, school staff, and at times, the community, not just after an event, but beyond,

they may be at risk for professional burnout and compassion fatigue, which may result in personal and organizational impacts including required time off, or school leaders leaving the profession (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Finally, school leaders in this study offered some recommendations about what they would deem helpful following a traumatic event. These recommendations largely revolve around districts being aware of the personal impact of leadership during trauma, and preparing suitable intervention or support options, including a knowledgeable and available support person to assist school leaders.

Contributions to Theory

There are three areas where I believe this study contributes to theory. The first concerns the current understanding about PTG. The second is about workload intensification. The third contribution relates to current leadership and the work of school leaders.

Posttraumatic Growth

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006; 2013; 2014), and Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996; 2004) described posttraumatic growth as a naturally occurring process that arises for some people after they experience a traumatic, or seismic event. Single serious traumatic events happened for the interview participants in this study, and most described personal growth. However, school leader stories about the target event were mixed with additional adverse, crisis, and traumatic events. Growth was not always explicitly tied to the single event that was described in the stories provided in chapter five. For most school leaders, growth seemed to emerge across the accrual of events. This study opens the door to the possibility that growth may come out of accumulated events across one's administrative career, and this specific brand of PTG may be an intriguing area of study for educational leadership scholars. While growth coming out of more than one

adverse situation is not unacknowledged (Brooks, et al., 2017), this study brings the concept to the fore.

Workload Intensification

This study adds to the workload intensification discussion for school leaders (Jutras, et al., 2020), revealing it is not just the 24/7 demands, mandates by governments, and growing needs of students and families (Lim & Pollock, 2019). It is also that some school leaders face serious adversity that disrupts the typical routine of school, requires crisis management, and longer-term recovery practices to help the school or district return to a semblance of normalcy. This increased work for school leaders is not simply task focused. It involves the expenditure of emotion, and at times, may have a significant impact on a principal's psychological well-being.

While Covid-19 was not a consideration when I designed this study, it became a topic in interviews for participants who were still school administrators. Most saw it as exacerbating concerns that already existed in the student population including poverty, mental wellness, impacts from domestic violence, substance abuse and dependence, risk for suicide among other concerns. Elise, for example was especially concerned that recovering from the impacts of Covid-19 would additionally strain an already strained workforce of educators. As a leader in her school, this additional pressure was expected to impact her as well. It is likely that the pandemic had an impact on how administrators saw their roles during interviews.

The literature points to schools as being places where traumatic events occur (Brown, 2018; Elbedour, et al., 2020; Gouwens & Lander, 2008; Kataoka, et al., 2009; Kolski, et al., 2014; Liou, 2014; Mutch, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2018; Schreiber, et al., 2012; Tarrant 2011a & 2011b; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Based to the interview participants in this study, some who were seasoned administrators, responding to ongoing crisis or trauma are likely to continue to be

a routine part of that role. Therefore, expanding the description of workload intensification for school leaders to include a category for leading during and after traumatic events, is reasonable.

Understanding the Work of School Leaders

As indicated, the work of school leaders is complex and dynamic. At the current time, leadership standards and instrumental competency frameworks are deemed *the* work of school leaders (Robinson, 2010; Riveros, et al, 2016; Shaked, 2021; Sun & Leithwood, 2015), despite some critics of the competency framework imperative (English, 2012; Riveros & Wei, 2019). The standards revolve around school leaders' setting the vision for the school, supporting teachers, managing the workplace and workforce, as well as, increasing student retention and achievement. However, there is little in the way of human-relational, crisis management, or self-care skills within current competency frameworks despite school leaders in this study referencing these frequently. Competency frameworks appear to assume school leaders already have the necessary personal engagement skills (i.e., listening and empathy), conflict management, base line mental health, self-reflection, stress-management, and crisis response skills necessary to respond to traumatic events from the onset into the recovery and school recouperation phases. While school leader competencies and standards are relevant and necessary, expanding the current scope of school leadership frameworks to include crisis or trauma response standards, and consider how posttraumatic growth may play a role is considered valuable.

The interview participants in this study referenced the term leadership generally, and *instructional leadership* specifically denoting the expectations of districts (through university and professional training and department of education mandates) to engage in such related practices as school leaders. The participants indicated that instructional leadership necessarily needed to be put aside during crises and trauma, and some appeared to express anxiety that the

real work of school leaders was paused. As indicated, most interview participants also shared that they did not lead through a single traumatic event in their leadership career, but led through numerous ones, with varying degrees of intensity, severity, and frequency.

This study adds knowledge to the discussion about leadership competency frameworks and standards. Some of the school leaders expressed anxiety about not meeting the expected standards of school leadership as crises averted their attention from instructional leadership to crisis management. Revisioning and expanding school competency frameworks may allow leaders to see ways where instructional leadership and crisis management overlap. Instead of stopping instructional leadership, and starting crisis management, it may be beneficial for school leaders to experience places where they merge and complement one another.

Given that crises and trauma may be somewhat routine for some school leaders, identifying competencies in the areas of crisis management, burnout mitigation, and trauma-informed recovery may round out standards making them even more applicable to the work of school leaders. Revisioning competency frameworks may help reduce anxiety for some school leaders and increase competence during situations where school leaders must respond to the urgent needs from a crisis or trauma.

Implications for Policy

As far as I am aware, there is no literature describing policies and policy procedures that speak directly to crisis management by school leaders. Policy problems are those that have the corresponding elements of a) being negative; b) having some elements of solvability; and c) being addressed using public resourcing (Alexander, 2013). The stories of school leaders in this study highlight that traumatic events in schools are negative and have the possibility of imparting a profoundly disruptive impact on a principal's wellbeing, and at times on some of their

relationships. Second, school leaders in this study provided some recommendations about what districts could do to help mitigate some of the adverse effects of leading through traumatic events. Third, because the school leaders in this study were from publicly funded provincial school districts, the onus is on districts funded by the public to take reasonable care to support their employees when faced with overwhelming situations outside of their control yet requiring their diligent focus and attention, often for extended periods. While support is essential during a traumatic event, personal and relational symptoms often do not surface until after the event is considered over. This can be seen in the experiences of Jeanette, Isabella, Maria, Katrine, Rick, Shelly, and Brianne.

While interview participants had some recommendations about how districts could support them following a traumatic event, a main policy issue appeared to be that there is virtually no acknowledgement that a lack of support even exists, or that a lack of support may have negative results for school leaders and schools (should they require leaves to recover or decide to leave the profession entirely; Maxell & Riley, 2016). It seemed that personal and professional fall-out some school leaders experienced after a traumatic event was not acknowledged as a problem by districts, making it a real, and potentially resolvable issue for those who employ school leaders.

There are some options for addressing the policy issue of acknowledging that school leaders face risk when leading through a traumatic event. The first is for districts to simply dismiss, neglect, or avoid the subject. This appears to be the status of most of the districts who employed the school leaders in this study. As indicated in the participant interviews, there was often overt support provided for students, school staff, and even the community; however, specific principal support was only provided when a *dialed-in* supervisor made a conscientious

decision to reach out to the school leader. No school leader in this study described taking a medical or stress leave following a traumatic event, but it is not unreasonable to consider that medical leaves owing to stress may occur for some school leaders following a traumatic event. Medical leaves and sometimes resignations that arise from compassion fatigue result in lost professional knowledge, experience, community equity, and valuable personnel for school districts.

The second alternative is to understand what options exist to support school leaders after a traumatic event. There are professional careers where vicarious or secondary trauma, and the costs of such are identified and explored. For example, child welfare workers are identified in the literature as professionals where burnout periodically occurs because of the job strains (Hazen, et al., 2020). Lawyers and mental health professionals are also deemed at risk for vicarious trauma (Maguire & Byrne, 2016). Medical professionals as a group are considered susceptible to the potential for vicarious trauma (Ogińska-Bulik et al., 2021). Counsellors too are a body of professional who are deemed vulnerable to secondary trauma because of their jobs (Manning-Jones, et al., 2017).

While school leaders are not always exposed to an actual event in the moment it occurs, like lawyers, mental health workers, child welfare workers, and counsellors, they are exposed to the content of traumatic events. They are often exposed from a variety of perspectives, including teacher, parent, student, social media, and media perspectives. Unlike most counsellors, lawyers, child welfare, and mental health workers, school leaders tend to stay in the environment where the reminders of the event exist. These reminders, not only for school leaders, but for students and staff may remind them of their experiences, and re-expose them to the thoughts, feelings, and nervous system responses they had at the time. Sometimes traumatic events occur right

inside school buildings (like in Brianne's situation). Other times momentous and not easily forgotten gatherings occur in school buildings immediately after an event (like in Jeanette's situation). At still other times, reminders of the loss come through school doors for days (like in Isabella's situation where hoodies were imprinted with the deceased student's image). These kinds of reminders mean that school leaders are not easily able to escape reminders or potential triggers of events. Lawyers, mental health workers, and others do not often work in the very places where traumatic events and sequelae remain across time. Education policy makers may seek information about how other professionals who are vulnerable to trauma are supported through policy.

Districts may wish to canvas their own principal groups, explore their needs, and devise policy that responds to the needs raised by school leaders when they consider traumatic events. From a policy standpoint, districts may need to be reminded that some of their most valuable assets (Lane, et al., 2021) in responding to crisis and trauma are their school leaders. Because of the potential cost from professional burnout and compassion fatigue (Bakker, et al.; 2014; Lane et al., 2021), employers may wish to consider how they respond to a central figure, the principal, when traumas occur in schools. Recommendations from school leaders in this study may assist with policy discussions aimed at supporting school leaders when crisis or trauma arise in schools.

While districts have responsibility in supporting their central employees during and following traumatic events, districts do not function in isolation. Ministries of education need to be educated on the needs that arise for schools and school districts after traumatic events. They need to understand that crisis and trauma are common enough, that schools are unlikely to be immune, and therefore school district employees, including school leaders will not be

invulnerable to impacts. While ministries of education do not have direct influence on school leaders, they do have a role in supporting district direction and providing financial resources. Because of their oversight and financial responsibility in education, ministries of education are vital in supporting districts and by extension, school leaders, to maintain student learning and student and staff welfare, which is their overarching mandate.

Ministries of education are also distinctly positioned to work with other ministries that might have a role in crisis and trauma response in schools. Ministries of health, where mental health services typically reside, should also be well informed about the impact of community-based traumatic events. Ideally with ministry of health support, mental health should be foregrounded in conversations about ministry's role during community responses following a traumatic event that impacts a school or schools in an associated district.

Mental health agencies have historically functioned as passive recipients of community clients who seek individual mental health treatment. It may behoove ministries of health and mental health agencies to expand their parameters and their historical service-delivery model. If health ministry's work with their ministry partners in education to strategically plan responses that are preventative and proactive (community-based mental health crisis response, or psychological first aid), and when needed, reactive (working directly with a school community, and coordinating with emergency response plans already designed and agreed upon between health and education), it is more likely that students, staff, the community, and school leaders will fare better in the aftermath. Primary health may also be included under ministry of health supports, especially if a disaster decimates a community.

As indicated, when ministries proactively work together, supports for students, schools, school leaders, and districts are much more likely to be available when the need arises, rather

than relevant stakeholders scrambling to respond after an event occurs. It is also likely that learnings have occurred in provinces and states about what responses worked well after a traumatic event, and what responses were less effective. An intersectoral working group may be a fruitful endeavor where the application of local learnings may benefit future responses that ultimately impact the personal and professional lives of school leaders.

From a policy standpoint, ministries or departments of education at the governmental level need to be: 1)involved in comprehending the complex intrapersonal and interpersonal implications for public servants when responding to crisis and trauma; and 2) involved in providing support structures to districts during traumatic events based on recommendations coming out of available literature (Brymer, et al., 2009; Kolski & Jogsma, 2014; Weber & Mascari, 2018), while remaining aware that traumatic events sometimes have longer-term sequelae.

Implications for Practice

School leaders who interviewed for this study indicated both a personal toll following a traumatic event in their school, and some areas of personal and professional growth. Both have practice impactions. Departments of Educational Leadership may consider incorporating areas of study addressing traumatic events in schools, the role of administrators, and support strategies for school leaders following events. Providing future administrators education about compassion fatigue, professional burnout, and the impacts of workload intensification, including traumatic events, may provide a greater awareness about the realities of acquiring a principal position than what education about competencies, standards, and leadership frameworks can provide alone.

Skills and Supports

It may be beneficial to re-vision the work of school leaders, offering a more holistic perspective, acknowledging that many school leaders require additional skills and supports beyond the current competency frameworks. Incorporating training from the fields of disaster mental health, mental wellness, and crisis management in schools (Cameron, 2019; Elbedour, et al., 2020; Kataoka, et al., 2009; Kolski, et al., 2014; Liou, 2014; Schreiber, et al., 2012; Webber & Mascari, 2018) into principal development may better prepare school leaders to respond to traumatic events in ways that competency frameworks alone will not. Acknowledging that workload intensification includes leading through adversity, suggests that a personal and professional toll may occur for school leaders. Thus, personal self-reflection, self-care, and mental wellness strategies may need some prominence when preparing school administrators either at post-secondary or district levels. An expanded picture of the realities that some school leaders face, may result in school leaders having a clearer understanding of their role, the potential risks, and potential mitigating factors (Tarrant, 2011b).

Participants in this study identified some interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that they either developed out of traumatic events, or that grew because of traumatic events. These included, listening, empathy, expressions of compassion, leaning on friends, family, and professional colleagues (co-administrators, administrators in other schools, district supports), personal self-reflection, and self-care. These interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are not those explicitly described in competency frameworks for school leaders. Intentionally assisting school leaders develop these skills may aid them should they lead through traumatic events in their schools.

As indicated in the policy discussion, districts may benefit from comprehending the potential impacts of compassion fatigue and professional burnout (Lane, et al., 2021) on their

key responders when a traumatic event impacts a school. By doing so, they may find practical resources that can buttress the effects of leading through trauma on school leaders. There are also potential personal costs for school leaders when the risks are not acknowledged, and support is limited following traumatic events in schools. School leaders themselves may be the best informants to understand needs and reasonable interventions given their unique roles in schools and districts.

The school leaders who interviewed for this study indicated that support from a connected, trained, and available professional would likely assist them following a traumatic event in their school. From a posttraumatic growth perspective, Calhoun & Tedeschi (2013) described a process called, “facilitating posttraumatic growth through expert companionship” (p. 23). This concept does not deny the reality of adversity and offers the possibility of reconstructing a narrative aimed at “increased wisdom, wellbeing and adjustment” (p. 17). The concept of expert companionship reflects the need for some level of expertise in recovery from trauma and adversity and the concept of companionship or working together to find well-being should the individual be open. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) indicated some necessary expert companion functions: a) a primary focus on companionship; b) incorporating empirically based trauma treatments with an expert companion PTG perspective; c) assisting individuals revise their narrative to adjust for their changed view of the world should they choose to do so. The expert companionship model clearly fits within the realm of psychotherapy, where school divisions are unlikely to have broad-based proficiency. Nevertheless, the concept of an expert companion who is both trauma-informed and knowledgeable about educational leadership was a suggestion participants offered when they described their recommendations for districts.

University and College school leadership development programs have a significant role to play in developing skills in future school leaders. As indicated from interview participants, most training in educational leadership did not include classes about managing the after-effects of a traumatic event in schools, nor did they include information or skill acquisition about developing self-care support strategies to help mitigate stress and overwhelm. Graduate leadership education is often focused on general school management, casting and enacting a school vision, and instructional leadership. University and College school leadership development programs may consider developing courses and programs that address the effects of individual and collective trauma (Baranowski & Gentry, 2010) and the possible impacts of trauma on learning, relationships, as well as short and long-term school functioning. Training for school leaders might address types of support available for leaders (district, union, EFAP, community resources), as well as assisting in destigmatizing the emotional and mental toll that leaders typically face after leading through a traumatic event.

University and College school leadership development programs have a crucial role in educating future leaders about normal responses to trauma (anywhere from exhaustion and mental fatigue, to posttraumatic growth, to possible full-blown post-traumatic stress symptoms). Further, that these symptoms are not a sign of weakness, and can be addressed with targeted support. This learning may also provoke future leaders to challenge their school districts through a dissemination of trauma-awareness that they glean in post-secondary leadership training. As school leaders are exposed to and accepting of this knowledge, they may become a collective force urging their district employers to support their central leaders following traumatic events. This collective response may help protect those individual leaders who feel vulnerable sharing

personal experiences with employers who do not yet have the knowledge, awareness, and skills to support their employees.

Not all schools are in centers where mental health supports are readily available. However, for those who are, it is necessary for districts to pre-emptively build strong, collegial connections with their local mental health and primary health agencies. For those in rural or northern areas, districts may explore online mental health supports which have continued to grow since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Rural and northern communities are urged to find consistent and dependable supports with licenced mental health clinicians who have graduate training, supervision, and experience in supporting individuals coming out of collective trauma, as well as those who present with individual symptoms related to stress and trauma.

Future Research

There are several areas where future research may be considered. First, this study incorporated both principals and vice/assistant principals in the sample. Studying PTG qualitatively with each group rather than combined, may increase refinement for the implications, and bring valuable insights to the field. Second, using the Cognitive Growth and Stress Model (CGAS; Brooks, et al., 2017) may be a valuable approach for studying school leaders because it considers that individuals may encounter more than one adverse event, and highlight that both stress and growth are possibilities. In the Brooks et al. (2017) study, the central events were categorized as accidents, natural disasters, serious attacks or threats, serious illness, bereavement, among others, which is not unlike the interview participants in the current study. Finally, it may be valuable to study the experience of a school leader as they lead through a single traumatic event itself (Tarrant, 2011a & 2011b).

Summary

This study explored posttraumatic growth for school leaders after a traumatic event occurred in their schools. The first phase of the study involved a survey, which had nine demographic questions and the twenty-one items from the original PTGI. One-hundred-and-nineteen individuals started the survey, and ninety-six most of the survey. Overall, the sample of participants who completed the survey indicated relatively low posttraumatic growth. From that survey, twenty-two individuals volunteered to engage in one-on-one interviews. Ten volunteers (five principals and five vice/assistant principals) participated in phase two of the study.

Posttraumatic growth may be possible for school leaders who led through a traumatic event. However, the PTGI was not a particularly informative measure for this study. Its real value involved the successful recruitment of interview participants. It is also possible that the survey participants, like most interview participants, experienced numerous adverse, crisis, or traumatic events in their careers as administrators, and it may have been difficult to untangle those experiences and identify growth coming from a single event.

In interviews, participants identified some changes coming out of the events they described. These were organized into three categories in my analysis: a) personal and professional transformations; b) relationship transformations; and c) school district impacts on school leaders. Concerning PTG, all school leaders expressed some change in a sense of self, a sense of relationships, and an altered philosophy about life. The adjustment from the formal PTG perspective is that most administrators in the study did not seem to grow from a single serious event, but from an accumulation of school-based events. An understanding of trauma as it surfaced in schools and communities seemed to be central learning for most administrators

(Baranowski & Gentry, 2010), and some developed a trauma-informed school perspective that developed into a changed practice.

Interviews with participants seemed to reveal that most districts were ill-equipped and unprepared to support their key leaders after traumatic events in schools. While a training program like the Traumatic Events Systems Model of Crisis and Trauma Response (TES; Cameron, 2019) clearly identifies principals in a pivotal response role, the TES is focused on system (school or district) functioning and helping systems address the aftermath given the uniqueness of traumatic events, school dynamics, and communities. Webber and Mascari (2018), and Kolski, et al. (2014), also mention principals, but focus on their response role, not the short and potentially long-term impacts of trauma on these vital members of response teams.

Growth could not account for all the changes participants experienced. There were significant negative impacts for some school leaders in personal, professional, and relational domains. Exhaustion and overwhelming stress were identified. The need for support from friends, family, colleagues, and districts were also identified. Friends, family, and colleagues were recognised as reliable supports for most, while districts appeared less insightful or capable of supporting key employees during the aftermath of a traumatic event.

Research implications involve encouraging departments of Educational Leadership to consider how they may support future school administrators by giving them course-based options about traumatic events in schools, the roles of administrators in these events, and how they may protect themselves from the possibility of compassion fatigue or professional burnout. Districts may serve their central trauma response employees better by having some breadth of understanding about traumatic events and crisis management in schools. By supporting leaders,

they may better protect key employees who serve the interests of students, school staff, families, and communities.

Last Words on the Work of School Leaders

It was a privilege to engage with and learn from the interview participants in this study. They communicated an eagerness to share their experiences, even though for some, the memories produced challenging emotions. Even then, they persisted and expressed their desire to share their experiences. In the interviews, school leaders described some of the most challenging and heart-rending work they deal with in schools. Some of that work was related to leading through a traumatic event, and some of it reflected the ongoing crises that they are confronted with as leaders in their schools.

School leaders face some of the same personal fallout that other front-line workers like emergency responders, and social service workers face. Unlike those professions, school leaders often stay in the milieu where reminders of the trauma, or the actual event occurred. School leaders have an enormous leadership role without crisis, trauma, or adversity. However, when these arise, they are thrust into a realm where they have little pre-existing knowledge, and sometimes few quickly available resources, or district supports. Interview participants demonstrated many of the human-competencies needed to navigate disruptive events in schools. They exhibited features of compassion, sacrifice, dedication, resilience, and hope, which was a testament to their character, diligence, and leadership in the face of adversity.

Appendix A

Overview and Posttraumatic Growth Inventory

We provide to researchers this information about the measures we have published in relation to posttraumatic growth (PTG). You may note that the PTGI was first published and the term first used by us (Tedeschi & Calhoun) in the 1995 book *Trauma and Transformation.* However, the version we have used was published with a revised response format in *Journal of Traumatic Stress* in 1996. The expanded version, the PTGI-X was published in *Journal of Traumatic Stress* in 2017. Other measures have been published in order to research PTG in children, and to provide a measure of both positive and negative outcomes in the aftermath of trauma, and to assess other variables that are central to our model of PTG processes. That model is also reproduced here. The references that follow are a selected list that includes some work with researchers outside our department with whom we collaborate, and our students in our research lab.

In Reciprocation

There is no charge for the PTGI and these other measures, and there is no charge for the reproduction of the scale for use in research.

We welcome the use of our scales in not-for-profit research. However, these inventories are not to be reproduced for any kind of general distribution and may not be used in for-profit enterprises.

In reciprocation, we would like you to send us a gratis copy of any manuscripts, theses, dissertations, research reports, preprints, and publications you prepare in which our materials, or any version of them, is used. Both R. G. Tedeschi and L.G. Calhoun can be contacted at:

Department of Psychology - UNC Charlotte - Charlotte, NC 28223 USA. Email to rtedesch@uncc.edu.

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory

Indicate for each of the statements below the degree to which this change occurred in your life as a result of your crisis [**or researcher inserts specific descriptor here**], using the following scale.

Optional Demographic Questions:

1. What was your age at the time of the traumatic event?
2. How do you identify your gender?
3. How long were you a school principal before the identified traumatic event occurred?
4. Were you in an urban or rural school at the time of the event?
5. How long were in your school before the identified traumatic event occurred?
6. What grades were in your school during the time of the traumatic event?

PTGI

0= I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis.
1= I experienced this change to a very small degree as a result of my crisis.
2= I experienced this change to a small degree as a result of my crisis.
3= I experienced this change to a moderate degree as a result of my crisis.
4= I experienced this change to a great degree as a result of my crisis.
5= I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis.

1. I changed my priorities about what is important in life. (V)
2. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life. (V)
3. I developed new interests. (II)
4. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance. (III)
5. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters. (IV)
6. I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble. (I)
7. I established a new path for my life. (II)
8. I have a greater sense of closeness with others. (I)
9. I am more willing to express my emotions. (I)
10. I know better that I can handle difficulties. (III)
11. I am able to do better things with my life. (II)
12. I am better able to accept the way things work out. (III)
13. I can better appreciate each day. (V)

14. New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise. (II)
15. I have more compassion for others. (I)
16. I put more effort into my relationships. (I)
17. I am more likely to try to change things which need changing. (II)
18. I have a stronger religious faith. (IV)
19. I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was. (III)
20. I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are. (I)
21. I better accept needing others. (I)

Note: Scale is scored by averaging all responses. Factors are scored by adding responses to items on each factor. Items to which factors belong are not listed on form administered to participants.

PTGI Factors

Factor I: Relating to Others (6 8 9 15 26 20 21)
Factor II: New Possibilities (3 7 11 14 17)
Factor III: Personal Strength (4 10 12 19)
Factor IV: Spiritual Change (5 18)
Factor V: Appreciation of Life (1 2 13)

Tedeschi, R.G., & Calhoun, L.G. (1996). The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma., *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 9*, 455-471.

Appendix B

March 29, 2021

Dear Kevin,

Thank you for agreeing to assist me with my doctoral research. The North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response has numerous contacts with North American School principals [school leaders], and through your support, I am grateful I am able to access them for this study. I achieved approval for my study on March 26, 2021, from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB).

I've had the privilege of speaking with Pat Rivard about the phases of my study - phase one being an expanded, online version of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun 1996). The authors granted me permission to use the survey in February of 2020.

I have provided Pat a mock-up of the survey exactly as it will appear to study participants. I will also provide him my Certificate of Approval from the Beh-REB. I will send a brief bio, introductory information for survey participants and a survey link.

If you have questions, please contact me directly at: 306-292-6142; cap630@usask.ca, or, my supervisor, Dr. Paul Newton at, pmn380@mail.usask.ca.

Sincerely,

Coralee Pringle-Nelson, M.Ed., R.Psych., Ph.D. Candidate, Educational Administration

Cc: Mr. Pat Rivard

Appendix C

Interview Guide for Phase Two

Preamble

Hello [ ],

Thank you for expressing your interest in an interview for the study, "School Principals Experiences of Posttraumatic Growth". In a short period of time, there has been a great deal of enthusiasm for the study. The interest is more than I anticipated, and I am unable to interview all those who volunteered. My objective is to interview as diverse a sample as possible to capture a range of experiences of leading through a traumatic event as a school principal.

To protect the anonymity of all study participants, I cannot access the survey demographics section which would otherwise help me decide on a diverse sample. Thus, I am asking if you would kindly provide the following information as a potential interview participant.

- How long ago was the traumatic event?
- How long had you been in the school prior to the event?
- How long had you been in your role (VP/AP or Principal) when the event occurred?
- Were you a VP/AP or principal at the time of the event?
- How long did you stay in the school after the event?
- How would you describe the school you were in during the event (rural, urban, suburban, community, northern, etc.)?
- In what Province or State did the event occur?
- What grades were in the school at the time of the event?

Again, I am grateful for your interest in this study. A sincere thank you for taking the time to provide your responses and emailing them back to me. I will be in contact in a timely manner after I hear back from those who have volunteered to be interviewed.

Sincerely thanks,

Coralee Pringle-Nelson, M.Ed., R. Psych.
Ph.D. Candidate, Educational Administration
University of Saskatchewan

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Please share a brief summary of the traumatic event that occurred when you were in a principal role in your school district.

2. How did you view school leadership before the event -what were some practices or competencies you saw as integral to school leadership?
3. How did you see school leadership after the event? What were some practices or competencies you saw as vital after the event?
4. How did this event change how you think about yourself as a school principal?
5. How did the event change you as a leader?
6. How did the event impact your relationships with school staff?
7. How did the event affect relationships with students and parents?
8. How did the event affect your relationships with your school district?
9. In what ways did you draw on personal resources during the first year/s after a traumatic event?
10. How did you draw on professional resources during the first year after the traumatic event?
11. In what ways did you see personal growth occur after the crisis?
12. What contributors to the growth did you observe?
13. In what ways did your school district enable your personal recovery process?
14. Was there a time when it occurred to you that you had grown or changed beyond your pre-trauma functioning? How would you describe that?
15. In your experience, how do system practices, policies, processes, or resources inhibit posttraumatic growth for the school leader after the event?
16. In your experience, how do system practices, policies, processes or resources enable posttraumatic growth in the school leader after a traumatic? For example, was there any acknowledgement or support around the 5 critical periods identified in the TES?

17. In your experience, do you think there is a difference between “crisis leadership” immediately following the event and to the end of the first year? If so, how would you explain that?
18. What are your recommendations for supporting leaders after a traumatic event?
19. What advice would you give to leaders to help them navigate their system after a traumatic event?
20. Do you have any final questions or comments?

Appendix D

Informed Consent for Survey Participants

My name is Coralee Pringle-Nelson and I am a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of Educational Administration. I am studying the experiences of **school principals (VP/AP or principal) after a school-based traumatic event.**

The online version of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) you are about to complete was created using the Survey Monkey platform and licensed through the University of Saskatchewan. It is hosted by the United States of America, but the data is stored in Canada. It is considered to be a secure platform for collecting survey information. You may find information on SurveyMonkey's privacy policy here:
https://help.surveymonkey.com/articles/en_US/kb/surveymonkey-gdpr

The North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response, on behalf of Coralee Pringle-Nelson distributed the survey. The survey is voluntary, anonymous and you may discontinue at any time without any penalty of any kind. You may choose to answer only those questions you are comfortable with. **By submitting the survey, you are agreeing to participate and have your responses aggregated with other participants.**

The survey has **31-items and will take approximately 8-11 minutes** to complete.

The risks of participating in this survey may include unpleasant thoughts or feelings associated with a traumatic event. Should you require support, please contact:

- Your organization's EFAP provider;
- The **Canadian Mental Health Support Line**: 1.844.751.2133 or access this link, https://www.workhealthlife.com/?lang=en-CA; or,
- For individuals from the **United States**, contact **1-800-273-TALK (8255)** to reach a 24-hour crisis center or **text MHA to 741741** at the Crisis Text Line.

The potential benefits include providing information to assist education leaders and their systems understand more about supporting leaders after traumatic events.

At the end of the survey, you will be asked whether you are interested in participating in a 60-90 minute interview to explore your experiences as a school principal leading through a traumatic event. If you wish to volunteer, you will be redirected to a page where you can fill out your contact information. Your survey results and your personal information will not be associated in the system. If you wish to participate, you will be contacted by the researcher.

The data will be stored on secure cloud storage at the University of Saskatchewan with Dr. Paul Newton for five years as per the University policy. The data will be presented in a dissertation in partial fulfillment for a Ph.D. in Educational Administration (Coralee Pringle-Nelson). Data may also be used in articles, reports, books, or presentations. A summary of findings will be provided to the NACTATR.

Participants interested in learning the outcome of the study are welcome to contact the researcher (Coralee Pringle-Nelson) at the email address below and a summary of the research will be provided.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office: ethics.office@usask.ca; 306-966-2975; out of town participants may call toll free 1-888-966-2975. Participants in the US may contact the office collect at 1-306-966-2084.

Should you have questions or concerns, please contact the researcher or Dr. Paul Newton (Ph.D. supervisor) using the information at the bottom of this page.

A sincere thank you for completing this survey.

Researcher: Coralee Pringle-Nelson, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Education Administration
Contact: cap630@usask.ca
Supervisor: Dr. Paul Newton, Professor,
Department of Education

Appendix E

Informed Consent for Interview Participants

You are invited to participate in a research project called *Understanding School Principals' Experiences of Leading Through a Traumatic Event: An Interpretive Description.*

Please read this form carefully and ask questions that arise for you.

Researcher

My name is Coralee Pringle-Nelson and I am a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Saskatchewan in the department of Educational Administration. I am studying the *experiences of education leaders after a school-based traumatic event*.

Researcher: Coralee Pringle-Nelson, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Education Administration.
Contact: cap630@usask.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Paul Newton, Professor, Department of Education Administration
Contact: paul.newton@usask.ca

Purpose and Procedure

You are receiving this communication because you provided your contact information after you completed the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory sent to you from the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response on my behalf. This study is now in its second phase, where volunteers are being sought for individual online interviews using Webex as per University of Saskatchewan recommendations for online interviews. **All Webex data will be routed through Canadian servers; however, participants must be aware that there is no guarantee of privacy with the platforms used for this research.** Webex's privacy policy can be found here.

While Webex (audio and video recording) is planned for use in this research, participants may opt for a phone interview where only the audio will be recorded. Participants may request the phone method option prior to the scheduled interview. The recordings will be saved to a personal laptop that only the interviewer has access to. It is password protected and data is encrypted. Data will then be transferred to Dr. Newton's OneDrive storage and deleted from the interviewer's laptop.

You are invited to participate in one individual 60 -90 minute interview based on the following criteria:

- You speak English;

- You were a principal when a traumatic event occurred that affected your school, and, you remained the principal during the recovery period following the event;
- The traumatic event occurred between 1-6 years ago;
- You are willing to participate in two online interviews about your experience after the traumatic event occurred; and,
- You are willing and able to provide informed consent to participate.

Confidentiality

This study asks interview participants to share their experiences of leading through a traumatic event that affected their school. Interview participants identities will be not be disclosed. Participants will be identified using a pseudonym in the transcript and final reporting. Individual quotes may be used; however personal identifiers will be removed or altered to protect anonymity. **Prior to the scheduled interview, participants are asked to find a private and confidential space where they feel comfortable being interviewed. Participants must agree not to make any unauthorized recordings of the content of an interview during data collection.**

Storage of Data

Consent forms with interview participants names **and the master-list** will be stored separately from all recording transcripts for **five-years post-publication**. Throughout the study all information will be securely stored using University of Saskatchewan cloud storage under the direction of Dr. Paul Newton. At the completion of the study all consent forms, transcripts and recordings will be stored securely and retained by my supervisor in the Department of Educational Administration in the College of Education at University of Saskatchewan, Canada. Data will be retained for five years **post-publication**, after which it will be deleted and destroyed following University of Saskatchewan guidelines.

Risks and Benefits

Risks for participating in these interviews are considered minimal. However, individuals may find recalling distressing events unpleasant. Should recalling events prove highly distressing, the interview will be discontinued, and participants will be encouraged to contact a local mental health provider for support; or, you may contact:

- **Your organization's EFAP provider;**
- **The Canadian Mental Health Support Line: 1.844.751.2133 or access this link, https://www.workhealthlife.com/?lang=en-CA; or,**
- **For individuals from the United States, contact 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to reach a 24-hour crisis center or text MHA to 741741 at the Crisis Text Line.**

The potential benefits of being involved in this research include providing information to assist education leaders and their systems understand more about supporting leaders after traumatic events.

Right to Withdraw

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are invited to answer only those interview questions that you feel comfortable with. Despite agreement to be interviewed, you may withdraw at any time prior to, or during the interview. Participants may request the recording be turned off at any point in the interview without giving a reason.

All interview recordings will be transcribed using Otter.ai. Otter.ai's privacy policy can be found here: https://otter.ai/privacy. Otter.ai's Terms of Service can be found here: (https://otter.ai/terms). Otter files at rest are encrypted using 256-bit Advanced Encryption Standard (AES). They use Secure Sockets Layer (SSL)/Transport Layer Security (TLS) to protect data in transit between Otter apps and the servers located in North America. **Because otter.ai's servers are in the United States, search and seizure by United States authorities is possible.** SSL/TSL creates a secure tunnel protected by 128-bit or higher AES encryption.

To ensure accuracy, you will be asked to review the transcripts from your interviews. You will receive each transcript when it is completed and will be asked to review it and provide signed approval for each transcript. You may identify answers, statements or comments that you make in the interview that you would like removed. Should you decide you no longer wish to participate in the study, your data will be removed prior to your approval of your transcripts. Once you have approved your transcripts, you may no longer withdraw your responses as analysis will have begun.

Questions or Concerns

You are invited to ask questions concerning the research during any point in the process. You may contact the researcher and the researcher's supervisor using the contact information provided if you have additional questions.

This research project was approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on (March 26, 2021). Questions about your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Research Ethics Board at this number 306-966-2084, or at these numbers: 306-966-2084 (local), 1-888-966-2975 (national/international). You may contact the office collect if you do not live in Saskatoon, SK, Canada. or at these numbers: 306-966-2084 (local), 1-888-966-2975 (in Canada but outside Saskatoon). Participants in the US may contact the office **collect** at 1-306-966-2084.

Consent to Participate

By signing this form, you agree you have:

- Read and understood the information provided;
- Been offered an opportunity to ask questions, and, those questions have been adequately answered;
- Agreed to provide consent to participate in two interviews, understanding that withdrawal of consent may occur up until the time-frame outlined above; and
- A copy of this Consent Form after signing.

Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant:

Date:

Name of Researcher: Coralee Pringle-Nelson

Signature of Researcher:

Date: May 3, 2021

Appendix F

School Principals' Experiences of Posttraumatic Growth Survey

My name is Coralee Pringle-Nelson and I am a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of Educational Administration. I am studying the experiences of **school principals (VP/AP or principal) after a school-based traumatic event.**

The online version of the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) you are about to complete was created using the Survey Monkey platform and licensed through the University of Saskatchewan. It is hosted by the United States of America, but the data is stored in Canada. It is considered to be a secure platform for collecting survey information. You may find information on SurveyMonkey's privacy policy here:
https://help.surveymonkey.com/articles/en_US/kb/surveymonkey-gdpr

The North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response, on behalf of Coralee Pringle-Nelson distributed the survey. The survey is voluntary, anonymous and you may discontinue at any time without any penalty of any kind. You may choose to answer only those questions you are comfortable with. **By submitting the survey, you are agreeing to participate and have your responses aggregated with other participants.**

The survey has **31-items and will take approximately 8-11 minutes** to complete.

The risks of participating in this survey may include unpleasant thoughts or feelings associated with a traumatic event. Should you require support, please contact:

- Your organization's EFAP provider;
- The **Canadian Mental Health Support Line**: 1.844.751.2133 or access this link, https://www.workhealthlife.com/?lang=en-CA; or,
- For individuals from the **United States**, contact **1-800-273-TALK (8255)** to reach a 24-hour crisis center or **text MHA to 741741** at the Crisis Text Line.

The potential benefits include providing information to assist education leaders and their systems understand more about supporting leaders after traumatic events.

At the end of the survey, you will be asked whether you are interested in participating in a 60-90 minute interview to explore your experiences as a school principal leading through a traumatic event. If you wish to volunteer, you will be redirected to a page where you can fill out your contact information. Your survey results and your personal information will not be associated in the system. If you wish to participate, you will be contacted by the researcher.

The data will be stored on secure cloud storage at the University of Saskatchewan with Dr. Paul Newton for five years post-publication as per the University policy. The data will be presented in a dissertation in partial fulfillment for a Ph.D. in Educational Administration (Coralee Pringle-Nelson). Data may also be used in articles, reports, books, or presentations. A summary of findings will be provided to the NACTATR.

Participants interested in learning the outcome of the study are welcome to contact the researcher (Coralee Pringle-Nelson) at the email address below and a summary of the research will be provided.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office: ethics.office@usask.ca; 306-966-2975; out of town participants may call toll free 1-888-966-2975. Participants in the US may contact the office collect at 1-306-966-2084.

Should you have questions or concerns, please contact the researcher or Dr. Paul Newton (Ph.D. supervisor) using the information at the bottom of this page.

A sincere thank you for completing this survey.

Researcher: Coralee Pringle-Nelson

School Principals' Experiences of Posttraumatic Growth

1. How long were you a school principal (in total) before the traumatic event?

- 0-5 years
- 0-6 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 20+ years

2. How long ago was the event?

- Approximately 1 year ago
- Between two and four years ago
- Between five and six years ago
- Other (please specify)

3. How long were you a principal in the school before the traumatic event occurred?

- Less than one year
- Between one and five years
- Between six and ten years
- More than ten years

4. How long did you remain in the school after the traumatic event occurred?

- Less than one year

- Between one and five years
- Between six and ten years
- More than eleven years

5. What was your leadership role at the time of the traumatic event in your school?

- Principal
- Vice/Assistant Principal

6. How would you identify the community in which you served as a principal during the traumatic event?

- Rural
- Northern
- Inner City
- Urban
- Suburban/Bedroom Community
- Other (please specify)

7. What grades were taught in your school during the time of the traumatic event?

- K-8
- Middle school (608)
- Middle and secondary school
- Secondary School
- K-12
- Other (please specify)

8. What was your age at the time of the traumatic event?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-65
- 65+

9. How do you identify your gender? Open response

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI)

Indicate for each of the statements below the degree to which this change occurred in your life as a result *of the school-based crisis (traumatic event) when you were a principal*, using the following scale.

0= I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis.
1= I experienced this change to a very small degree as a result of my crisis.
2= I experienced this change to a small degree as a result of my crisis.
3= I experienced this change to a moderate degree as a result of my crisis.
4= I experienced this change to a great degree as a result of my crisis.
5= I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis.

10. I changed my priorities about what is important in life.
11. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life.
12. I developed new interests.
13. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance.
14. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters.
15. I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble.
16. I established a new path for my life.
17. I have a greater sense of closeness with others.
18. I am more willing to express my emotions.
19. I know better that I can handle difficulties.
20. I am able to do better things with my life.
21. I am better able to accept the way things work out.
22. I can better appreciate each day.
23. New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise.
24. I have more compassion for others.
25. I put more effort into my relationships.
26. I am more likely to try to change things which need changing.
27. I have a stronger religious faith.
28. I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was.
29. I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are.
30. I better accept needing others.

31. *Thank you for completing the PTGI.* If you are interested, please indicate your willingness to participate in a one-on-one interview to share your experiences of leading through a school-based traumatic event.

If you indicate yes and *next*, you will be directed to a *separate page unconnected to the survey* to fill out your contact information. If you indicate *no* and *next*, the survey will close.

- Yes
- No

Appendix G

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory – School Principals Responses

	I did not experience this change	I experienced this change to a very small degree	I experienced this change to a small degree	I experienced this change to a moderate degree	I experienced this change to a great degree	I experienced this change to a very great degree
I changed my priorities about what is important in life.	11	13	24	24	18	6
I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life.	15	10	24	22	18	7
I developed new interests.	34	17	23	13	8	1
I have a greater feeling of self-reliance.	27	14	18	26	6	5
I have a better understanding of spiritual matters.	44	11	15	16	6	4
I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble.	15	10	15	29	20	7
I established a new path for my life.	51	14	7	17	3	4
I have a greater sense of closeness with others.	28	22	14	22	8	2
I am more willing to express my emotions.	34	17	18	22	4	1
I know better that I can handle difficulties.	7	16		30	32	11
I am able to do better things with my life.	36	11	21	21	6	1

I am better able to accept the way things work out.	18	24	17	19	16	2
I can better appreciate each day.	16	16	20	24	14	6
New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise.	40	17	16	14	7	2
I have more compassion for others.	19	13	11	23	21	8
I put more effort into my relationships.	24	15	20	23	10	4
I am more likely to try to change things which need changing.	18	16	19	24	15	3
I have a stronger religious faith.	59	8	16	7	3	3
I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was.	14	15	16	34	10	7
I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are.	20	10	20	34	9	3
I better accept needing others.	25	18	24	19	8	2

Note: Statistical adjustment was made for question 19 which offered a 5-point rating scale rather than 6.

Appendix H

I chose to include the contents of an entire email attachment I received from Jeanette following our interview. The reason I chose to include it was Jeanette's comment that I was the first person she had shared the entirely of her experience with. She had hopes that her experience would support another generation of school principals should they experience something like the event and the aftermath she led through. I trust this inclusion honors the sacrificial work of Jeanette as a now-retired school leader.

Comments sent by Jeanette after her interview (June 24, 2021)

Hi. I finally got my computer working so am sending in my response to your note taking late but hopefully not too late. Your notes are accurate to our discussion. I didn't realize I said 'like' so much, lol. I think it is a pause button, giving me time to quickly frame a thought. I say quickly because my thoughts seem to be somewhat scattered. Perhaps that comes from never having spoken of this event before. If I may I would like to summarize what I think were the main reasons that we were able to transition from trauma to a new yet functioning system. Without bragging or hiding my head in the sand, I will say with confidence that we came through as well or better than most. I say it with the same confidence that I told the trauma counsellor that we were an open school.

The number one reason, I believe, that we came through as well as we did is one that is not easily replicated. I believe it was the degree to which we structured our school around teaming. I say it is not easiily replicated because it is not a popular design among high schools. High schools kinda fancy themselves as pre university and therefore want to model themselves after them: not a great model in my mind, but one that is virtually impossible to change. We were able to do it because of a provincial directive requiring all high school to implement the change and because of the successful implication of middle school philosophy already in place our community. I came from a middle school background and worked hard for fourteen years to nurture the change at the high school both as a vice principal for two years and as principal for twelve years. A lot of the model fell by the wayside and returned to the old model when I left.
We had grade 9/10 teams. Aver two hundred grade 9 and 10 students were divided up into three teams, The Outer Limit, The Adventurers and The Crow's Nest. They entered one team in grade nine and remained on that team for two years. Six or seven teachers were responsible for all of their learning, most of their discipline, and just about everything else they needed physically, emotionally and intellectually. They left the team for specialties such as music, Technology, Phys Ed and Healthy living. This gave the team teachers time to have a weekly meeting where they discussed the needs of students and developed plans for them. They made contact with

parents, met with parents, social workers, resource teachers etc. Each team had a team leader, someone who stepped up for a period of time. Team leaders changed and leadership within the school grew. More and more people were used to taking on responsibility and working with there peers both as a team member and a team leader. It was hard work and not always popular, but it was what we did. One veteran grade 11/12 Academic English teacher volunteered to teach on the Outer Limits Team. He also volunteered to step up as team Leader at the outset. He has since told me on several occasions that he never worked so hard but he never enjoyed teaching more. He worked with a great team, knew his students better than ever before, learned a lot about teaching and had fun doing it.
While the grade 9/10 teams were functioning other teaming was happening throughout the school. We had 2 Pays Ed teachers who share the gym, we had three Technology teachers who worked together in the Broad Based technology Lab, we had two 'shop' teachers who shared the shop area in our basement, we had two guidance cousellors, three grade 11/12 Department heads and an administration team made up of me, two vice principals and the team/ department leaders, we had grade 11/12 science teachers clustered in one area of the school, we had crisis response teams, we had one official staff room for all staff but we also had team/department staff rooms scattered through out the building. The teams did a lot of team building activities within their teams but we also did a lot of whole school team building activities over the years. Teachers who taught on grade 9/10 teams were not relegated to teaching on a team for life. They moved on to grade 11/12 positions. They took their experiences and skills with them to the next level. This and so much more is what we had become prior to the accident.

The second thing that I believe got us through was leadership. From the Department of Education, to District Office to the school, we had a solid foundation in leadership. The most important however was the school leadership. I stress School Leadership. Number one, no one could save us but ourselves, so we had to lead the rest of the players so they could help us. No one took over for us. No one told us what we should or shouldn't do. They did what they could from their end to ease our burden and the provided support when we asked for it. And we didn't ask for a lot. Leaders within the school stepped up and looked after the kids. The guidance counsellors, vice principals and I did our best to look after the staff, We decided what we thought we needed and we knew we would be supported when we verbalized our needs. People were used to woking together, looking out for each other and stepping up to take responsibility when they were able. Teaming build strong leadership within the staff. It was hard but we were not alone. We had each other and we had support at the top.

The third thing that helped us through was our participation in and knowledge of the Crisis Response protocol. From the night of the accident, we were able to pull together our Crisis Response team and hit the ground running before the sun rose on the next day. The protocol remained an important resource to us throughout the transitioning. Each tragedy is unique and there is no book to tell you everything you need to do, but having District, school and community members trained in the protocol gave us a common agenda, a common language and a sense of doing important work towards our recovery. It was also comforting to have Kevin's number in my plan book, but just knowing his teachings and that he was there if we needed him was often enough.

There are many other things I could add but I think these three were the most powerful and perhaps unique to our school. I believe they were at the heart of our success but unfortunately the least likely to be replicated, largely because they do not fit the model of pre university. From experience I can say that these philosophies are not embraced by high schools and if not nurtured fall by the wayside quite quickly. They different. They require commitment and nurturing: hard to do if you don't believe in them.

I am at my cottage tonight but I will go to my house tomorrow morning to send you the consent form for our interview.

Jeanette

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