PERSPECTIVE ON INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP THROUGHOUT A PANDEMIC

SANDI DARLENE HUGHES
Bachelor of Education, **University of Lethbridge, 2012**

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SANDI HUGHES

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Dr. Pam Adams	Associate Professor	Ph.D.
Dr. Carmen Mombourquette	Associate Professor	Ed.D.
Thesis Co-Supervisors		

Dr. Carolyn Cameron	Lecturer	Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member		

Dr. Lyle Hamm	Associate Professor	Ph.D.
External Examiner		
University of New Brunswick		
Fredericton, New Brunswick		

Kevin Wood	Assistant Professor	Ph.D.
Chair, Thesis Examination Committee		

Dedication

To my husband Liam who has been an endless source of support throughout this process. Also, to Baron and Bella who, mostly, make excellent writing partners.

Abstract

This study investigated the primary research questions of: *What is the nature of instructional leadership on practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?* It was conducted through qualitative methodology using semi structured interviews of two principals and two teachers. The themes identified by participants as being the most effective leadership practices during the pandemic included: fostering effective relationships with the school community, maintaining relational trust, focusing on the wellness of staff, and uniting the staff to work together towards a common vision of what is best for students. These leadership practices are also supported by literature and the LQS. Whether it is another pandemic, a time of crisis, or simply supporting one staff member who is going through a tough personal time; focusing on these leadership practices will help a principal through the situation. As Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) claimed, principals have an impact on teachers' emotions, motivations, commitments, beliefs, and in how supported they feel in their practice which in turn impacts student learning. Through fostering effective relationships with the school community, maintaining relational trust, focusing on the wellness of staff, and uniting the staff to work together towards a common vision of what is best for students; principals can engage in effective instructional leadership.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This study sought to find a deeper understanding of instructional leadership practices and their influence on teacher instructional practice, utilized throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The education system has encountered unforeseen challenges throughout the pandemic and this study will focus on the timeframe of March 2020 to June 2022. This chapter presents the problem, purpose, and questions that guide this study. In addition, the researcher's perspective is outlined before a synopsis of the entire proposal is presented as a conclusion.

To find a deeper understanding of the pandemic's effects on education, it is important to understand COVID-19 itself. COVID-19 is the disease caused by the coronavirus (World Health Organization, 2020). The first human cases of COVID-19 were reported in Wuhan City, China in December 2019. Human to human transmission fostered the spread of the virus. Cases of COVID-19 began to be identified in several countries around the world. On March 11, 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic, defined as an event in which a disease affects a large number of people spread across several countries (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). On Sunday March 15, 2020 the Government of Alberta announced the immediate closure of all schools and daycares due to the unprecedented threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Mulcahy, 2020). On that day there were 56 reported cases of COVID-19 in Alberta (Mulcahy, 2020). All school staff showed up to work on Monday March 16, 2020 with a lot of questions and concerns. While K-12 schools closed to students, teachers and other school staff were expected to continue regular day to day operations and administrative work. This meant that teachers were expected to continue teaching their students, but not in the traditional face-to-face classroom approach that many teachers were familiar with. This required a lot of flexibility and quick thinking. Instruction continued to occur through various modes of

delivery such as online instruction or paper packages. All students in Alberta learned at home for the remainder of the 2019/2020 school year with the government's decision to keep schools closed. This necessitated educators to navigate the unprecedented and unknown reality of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On March 20, 2020, the Government of Alberta provided some clarity around what learning was expected to look like while schools were closed. The government announcement outlined the specifics of content delivery for different age groups of students. Specifically, for students enrolled in Kindergarten to grade three, educational content was to focus on literacy and numeracy (Government of Alberta, 2020b). Teachers were to assign an average of five hours of work per student per week and there were expectations for teachers to collaborate with students and their parents on the delivery of materials (Government of Alberta, 2020b). For students in grades four through six, content was to focus on numeracy and literacy with science and social studies to be incorporated through cross-curricular learning. The average of five hours of work per week and expectations to collaborate with parents remained the same. In both cases, the government's expectation for educators to collaborate with students and parents were made explicit in the announcement.

There are multiple school jurisdictions within Alberta. The Alberta School Boards Association is divided into six zones. This study focussed on one school division within Zone 6. Zone 6 encompasses the southern part of the province and is divided into ten separate school divisions. Prairie Rose School Division (SD), Medicine Hat SD, Medicine Hat Catholic Board of Education, Grasslands SD, Palliser SD, Livingstone Range SD, Horizon SD, Westwind SD, Holy Spirit Catholic SD, and Lethbridge SD are all located within Zone 6. While students learned from home from March to June 2020, different teachers from different school divisions

experienced different work environments throughout that same time period. Individual school divisions had the autonomy to decide if they would implement a work from home policy for staff members or if they would continue to require staff to physically go to their respective schools every day. Even within Zone 6, there was not a consistent approach to implementing such a policy. Some school divisions implemented a work from home policy and others did not. Individual contexts for teachers varied greatly with the change in work environment potentially impacting how instruction was provided and how instructional leadership supports were provided as well.

In June the 2019/2020 school year ended, and all educators and the general public awaited an announcement for what school would look like in September. On July 21, 2020, the Minister of Education, Adrianna LaGrange, announced that schools would open and resume near normal operations with health measures in place. On that day 1,193 active cases of COVID-19 had been reported in Alberta (CBC News, 2020). The return to school with health measures in place is referred to as Scenario One (Government of Alberta, 2020a). Within Scenario One, all students attended school in-person while respecting existing public health measures that minimize the transmission of COVID-19. The government acknowledged that this scenario was not without risk of disease transmission and cases and outbreaks within schools were expected (Government of Alberta, 2020a). Some health measures from the government under Scenario One included:

- the required use of masks for all staff and for students in grades 4-12;
- routine health screening for all school community members;
- enhanced cleaning and sanitizing;

- strict stay at home policy for anyone in the school community with symptoms related to COVID-19;
- minimization of visitors and guests inside the school;
- discouragement of large group activities;
- cohorting students when possible;
- enhanced hand hygiene routines;
- avoidance of sharing items or equipment;
- guidance of foot traffic within the school building

and other measures that fostered physical distancing such as reorganizing classrooms (Government of Alberta, 2020a). The government provided the list of health measures included within Scenario One and then school divisions created their own re-entry plans in accordance with the government's list as well as utilizing knowledge about their specific contexts. Once school divisions had created their re-entry plans then individual schools created their re-entry plans that were in alignment with both their school division's plan as well as the government's expectations.

Throughout the 2020/2021 school year, in-person learning at school was available to most students. Exceptions included students who chose to continue learning at home or who missed school due to illness or quarantine requirements. Teachers demonstrated flexibility in their approach to instruction. Foot traffic control, enhanced hand hygiene practices and sanitization of classroom objects became the new normal in classrooms. With all the health measures in place under Scenario One, some aspects of classroom instruction had to adapt in order to be compliant. Even at the time of this writing and with schools reopening to near normal operations the COVID-19 pandemic continued to present constant change and challenges to all.

The Problem

With the ever-evolving social, political, and educational complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and principals were challenged to adapt their practices to frequent changes in context. Teachers, principals, and all stakeholders in education faced substantive change at the exact same time. Teachers have an obligation to provide effective instruction to their students and principals have an obligation to provide instructional leadership support for their teachers (Alberta Education, 2020a, 2020b). Principals were challenged during this time to support teachers adopting unique and unconventional instructional practices (Adams, Mombourquette, & Allan, 2020). The timeline in the background section provided a glimpse at how quickly change occurred throughout the pandemic. In this situation where everything was changing so quickly, how did leaders continue to support their teacher's instruction? Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, everyone had their own struggles to contend with. Edwards and Gammell (2017) stated that principals must address the human element in order to create structures that foster capacity building. The respect and balance of addressing the human element, while continuing to hold high expectations for quality instruction, assessment, and student learning took on an added level of importance when considering the role of the principal throughout the pandemic.

In the schools involved in this study, it would be typical for all students and staff members to be present in the same building during the same hours. From March to June 2020 schools were closed to students. That provided a significant change in how instruction was delivered to students. Dependent on context and in collaboration with parents, instruction was delivered through online platforms, video chat, phone calls and/or through paper packages that were sent home. This required teachers to be very flexible and develop a new approach to instruction. Parents were now expected to play a prominent role in the education of their child in

collaboration with their child's teacher, especially for their elementary school aged children. Teachers quickly became a large source of support for families. On top of providing support, teachers also worked to provide a meaningful educational experience for the students themselves. Obstacles faced by teachers and parents will be explored in more depth in the literature review in Chapter Two.

Similarly, principals navigated the COVID-19 pandemic as well. They experienced the crisis and changes, often at the same time as teachers and as principals they were expected to make decisions and forge a direction going forward. Principals and the general public learned about the closure of schools at the same time from a live announcement from the Government of Alberta on March 15, 2020. Principals were quickly bombarded by questions from staff and parents while they awaited information and clarification from system leaders themselves. Throughout this period of uncertainty principals needed to stay steady and guide their school community over many hurdles. The experiences of certain principals will be explored in the literature review in the next chapter. While individual contexts and experiences varied greatly across Alberta, this study sought to understand the nature of instructional leadership practices on elementary instructional practices throughout COVID-19.

Once school resumed to in-person instruction in September 2020, there was more change for principals through which to guide their teachers. Students were allowed back in the building with numerous public health guidelines in place to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 within schools. Teachers were unsure if or how they could continue some of their preferred instructional strategies including guided reading, math centers, and home reading programs to name a few. While necessary, these public health measures provided new and complicated logistics for the innerworkings of a classroom. Principals had to create a re-entry plan for their school. They had

to present the plan to staff and address any questions or concerns that arose. Despite the thought and effort put into the creation of these plans, there was the potential of oversight or room for misinterpretation.

Throughout the March 2020 to June 2022 timeline, many individuals in a school community were affected by the pandemic in a variety of ways. Some lost their jobs, others suffered from mental illness, and unfortunately, some lost loved ones to COVID-19. While individual contexts varied greatly between individual schools and school divisions, the constant was that all were impacted by the change. The changes, in turn, impacted principals and the ways in which they met their mandate of instructional leadership. This research study sought to better understand leadership throughout a crisis. Specifically, instructional leadership as enacted by principals that impacted how teachers taught their students throughout the pandemic. At a time when many individuals in a school community are being affected by the pandemic in a variety of ways, principals needed to balance respecting the human element and maintaining high expectations for quality instruction. The purpose of this proposed study is explained in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

Purpose

Teachers have an obligation to provide effective instruction to their students and principals have an obligation to provide instructional leadership support for their teachers (Alberta Education, 2020a, 2020b). Principals were challenged during this time to support teachers adopting unique and unconventional instructional practices (Adams et al., 2020). In response to this problem this study is interested in uncovering and understanding the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction throughout March 2020 to June 2022. Using case study methodology, this study sought to examine instructional leadership

practices within a school division in Zone 6 in Southern Alberta. For the case study, principals and teachers were interviewed. This will contribute towards a better understanding of how both principals and teachers perceived instructional leadership specifically during a time of crisis and substantive change such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions in the interview focussed on both at-home learning from March to June 2020 as well as after in-person learning resumed under the restrictions of Scenario One for the 2020/2021 school year. More in-depth information around the case study itself is presented in Chapter Three.

While the COVID-19 pandemic may have specific elements to it, it is both a crisis and a time of substantive change. While not all educators may experience a second pandemic, it is likely that principals and teachers alike will encounter a crisis or a time of substantive change again in their careers. These situations do not have to occur on a global scale to be very real for a specific school, school division, or individual educator. This study will be useful for teachers, informal leaders, and principals. It will provide insight into instructional leadership during a crisis.

Guiding Questions

The primary question for this research study is, *What is the impact of instructional leadership practices on elementary teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* This question is at the heart of the study. The pandemic posed frequent changes and challenges to the education system, including the closure of schools from March to June 2020, forced the reconsideration of how instruction is delivered, set new expectations to collaborate with parents in new ways, and planning for in-person instruction under Scenario One with imposed health and safety measures (Government of Alberta, 2020a). Both teachers and principals had to demonstrate flexibility as they adapted to these new realities.

A secondary question is, *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?* While it is beneficial to learn from mistakes this study is interested in highlighting successful instructional leadership practices. Collecting both the teacher and principal perspectives is important in answering this question. Collecting both perspectives will allow for analysis of similarities or differences between what teachers and what principals believe are beneficial instructional leadership practices and if there will be similarities or discrepancies in their perceptions. Answers from both parties were compared in order to develop a deeper understanding of valued instructional leadership practices for both parties. Practices that both principals and teachers believe to be effective and/or helpful will be important to point out as these same practices could help readers through their own challenging time in education. This could be helpful information for all educators; to foster an understanding of how different instructional leadership practices are perceived by their colleagues.

Teachers have an obligation to provide effective instruction to their students and principals have an obligation to provide instructional leadership support for their teachers (Alberta Education, 2020a, 2020b). Principals were challenged during this time to support teachers adopting unique and unconventional instructional practices (Adams et al., 2020). In response to this problem this study is interested in uncovering and understanding the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction throughout March 2020 to June 2022. The primary and secondary research questions support the collection of data from participants that will address the problem and the purpose driving this study. The first question broadly addresses the nature of instructional leadership during COVID-19 pandemic. The secondary question will then focus attention on participant-identified effective and helpful

instructional leadership practices. This information can provide the reader with deep understanding of both instructional leadership throughout the pandemic as well as what was identified by teachers to be the most effective and/or helpful. Different practices are more or less effective in different contexts and readers may benefit or relate to different instructional leadership practices in different ways.

Researcher's Perspective

In July of 2019 I began my Master of Education in Educational Leadership degree. By the time schools closed in Alberta in March 2020, I had completed an internship as well as a few courses. As my understanding of leadership and the role of a principal was developing, I was fascinated to observe leadership practices throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and its' ensuing crisis. Throughout this period, I taught children in grade two and was the learning support teacher at a rural elementary school. The amount of new information, policies, and decisions that often seemed to be occurring on a daily basis were unprecedented. I observed leaders around me dealing with the constant unknown and change. I was intrigued by how quickly schools had to change their entire approach to educating children. Educators had to think quickly, collaborate with students and parents, and create meaningful learning opportunities through a brand-new platform. Throughout the pandemic there were frequent announcements and updates from the government or local school division which amounted to a lot of information to keep up with. Clear communication became even more important as principals kept school community members up to date but not overwhelmed. Flexibility has always been a good trait in educators, and it became more important than ever before.

Throughout March to June 2020, I had the opportunity to work from home and I chose that opportunity most of the time. I came to school when I deemed it operationally essential for

me to be physically in the building and there were several reasons that I made that choice. The technology in my class was insufficient to create video lessons, provide verbal feedback, and do other things that I wanted to do to support my students online learning. In my school's rural community, internet speed and access can fluctuate greatly and was not very dependable for video chats. I also have the luxury of a home office with good technology and high-speed internet. While working from home, from my perspective, was beneficial for my instructional practice it did change other dynamics in the work environment. There were no informal discussions with colleagues or my principal. Conversations were often virtual and had to be scheduled. While I do not feel like it weakened any of my relationships with staff members, my colleagues and I had been working together for five years, it may have influenced them in some ways. We did not have any new staff members during the school closure, but we did have a new staff member join us for September 2020.

At my school, despite the number of government policies, division wide policies, continued learning plans, and other documents intended to support teachers, confusion around expectations persisted. Educators faced many decisions and complexities of the profession that they had never encountered before. All these documents intended to support educators had room for interpretation. So many decisions, while guided by the Government of Alberta or school divisions, were delivered by my principal who interpreted the message, made decisions about how these directives were to be applied in the context of their school, and then communicated a direction going forward to teachers and the larger school community.

As an aspiring principal, I would sometimes look at the original documents and wonder how I would interpret them and if I would make the same decisions. I often wondered about the process leaders undertook to guide staff through the chaos. As a result, I became very interested

in the ramification of COVID-19 on the education system and, specifically, how leaders ensured students continued to receive a high-quality education. I am curious to learn about what struggles teachers believe they faced during this time period as well as what support they perceived they received from their principals that had a positive impact on their instructional practice. Decisions made by leaders throughout the pandemic had the ability to alleviate or exacerbate situations for teachers. Educators had to be extremely flexible and learn to adapt to an ever-changing reality. While the exact same COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to occur, there are always times of hardship, crisis and substantive change. I hope that this study and its findings can be useful in the future to educators experiencing a challenging time. There are both lessons and warnings to be learned from history that can be applied when making decisions about the future (Meacham, 2020). The study sought to uncover the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in order to both better understand the situation and to guide future decisions that educators will make regarding instructional leadership throughout challenging times.

This research is timely in terms of asking educators to reflect on their recent professional experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. While this study pertains directly to ramifications of teaching and leading during COVID-19, there is potential for some data to be generalized and applied to future times of crisis. As an aspiring principal, I am likely to encounter a crisis of some kind. Hopefully the learnings from this study will help guide me and my colleagues through a crisis. Some educators may identify with elements of the study and find some of the findings applicable and useful in their own contexts. Times of crisis and substantive change will occur again, perhaps not on the global scale of COVID-19, but on a provincial,

community, or individual scale. As a future principal, I desire to have a better understanding of what is needed to support staff through such times.

Summary

The completed thesis consists of an abstract followed by five chapters. This first chapter provided an overview of the study, including the problem, purpose, and guiding questions that drive this research study. My perspective as a researcher is included to provide my motivations, context, curiosities, and potential biases. The second chapter is comprised of a literature review outlining the existing research relevant to this study. It begins with a clarification of key terms relevant to the research questions and topic of the study. Defining these key terms provides clarity and context for the following sections which explore existing literature on the topics of teacher instruction, instructional leadership, and what is already known regarding COVID-19's impacts on the education system as it pertains to the study. This research project involved conducting a case study of a school division within Zone 6 in the province of Alberta. The third chapter explains the choice of research methodologies as well as outlining the research process from beginning to end. Connections between the chosen methodologies and the purpose, problem, and guiding questions in this study are made. The process for collecting and analyzing data throughout this case study is presented. All my choices regarding how I conducted my research is explained and substantiated by research and key authors. The third chapter concludes by reviewing and assuring how this study adhered to all ethical considerations. Chapters four and five were written after the research was complete and the data was analyzed. The guiding questions are answered, and the findings are linked back to the literature review in chapter two before presenting future directions and recommendations based off the information gained from this study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter offers an overview of existing literature relevant to understanding the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted elementary teacher instruction throughout March 2020 to June 2022 of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first section of this chapter defines key terms that provide clarity and continuity to the language used throughout the study specific to the questions: *What is the impact of instructional leadership practices on elementary teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?* After these key terms have been presented, an in-depth examination of relevant literature is presented, beginning with the concept of teacher instructional practice and its' relevance to student learning and achievement. Next, the concept of instructional leadership including a brief historical context of the concept as well as focusing on effective instructional leadership. Lastly, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is discussed through both the teacher and the principal experiences.

Key Terms

Definitions of educational terms can, at times, be unclear or inconsistent and vary between authors. To provide consistency in the language used in this research study, definitions of five key terms will be operationalized. These terms include instructional leadership, teaching practice, principal, at-home learning, and in-person learning.

Teaching Practice

The term teaching practice refers to the actions a teacher takes to support student learning. These actions can include but are not limited to instruction, intervention, providing extra support, formative and summative assessment, and planning for student needs. Teachers in

Alberta have an obligation to utilize current, comprehensive, and effective strategies during their planning, instruction, and assessment to meet the diverse learning needs of their students as outlined in the *Teaching Quality Standard* (*TQS*) (Alberta Education, 2020b). The concept of teaching practice is elaborated on in the literature review.

Instructional Leadership

Throughout this study, a definition proposed by Robinson (2010) will be utilized: "Instructional leadership refers to those sets of leadership practices that involve the planning, evaluation, coordination, and improvement of teaching and learning" (p. 2). Thus, instructional leadership encompasses what a principal does to impact the quality of instruction that students receive in their school which will positively impacting student learning. There are a variety of behaviours, attributes, and actions that principals may take that are within this definition of instructional leadership and these are elaborated upon in the literature review.

Principal

The *Education Act* defines a principal as "a teacher designated as a principal or acting principal under this Act" (Government of Alberta, 2020c, p. 14). In Alberta, the principal of a school must hold leadership certification in alignment with the *LQS*. Furthermore, all principals in Alberta must meet and adhere to the *LQS* as all principals must hold leadership certification which is governed by the *LQS* (Government of Alberta, 2020c).

At-Home Learning

At-home learning will refer to one of two scenarios that occurred during throughout the social and health parameters of the COVID pandemic. The first was when schools were closed to in-person learning between March and June 2020 and learning was still taking place through a variety of means such as online delivery or paper packages exchanged between school and home.

Paper packages provided an offline learning option while at-home learning was taking place. While paper packages would have been created differently by different teachers, one example would be a compilation of worksheets for the student to complete. The second scenario included anytime when a student had to transition back to at-home learning due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and relevant health restrictions; this scenario took place on numerous occasions throughout the 2020/2021 school year. While at-home learning constituted a unique and specific educational model prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, at-home learning for purposes of reference in this study is defined as pandemic-induced at-home learning scenarios.

In-Person Learning

In-person learning will refer to classroom instruction inside a school where both the teacher and the students are physically in the same classroom, regardless of health restrictions at that present time. For this study, any in-person learning would have taken place throughout the 2020/2021 school year.

Student Engagement

This study will utilize a definition from Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) which states that student engagement is a broad term that encompasses three dimensions: social engagement, academic engagement, and intellectual engagement. Thus, student engagement considers a students' sense of belonging at school, their participation in academic and non-academic activities, and their personal investment in their learning. The dimensions are elaborated upon in the literature review.

Review of Literature: Teaching Practice

In Alberta, the *Teaching Quality Standard (TQS)* is a government-mandated policy document that applies to all teachers. This Ministerial Order holds all teachers accountable to the

Minister of Education (Government of Alberta, 2021) and provides a framework for key aspects of the teaching profession including, but not limited to, teacher preparation programs, teacher certification, professional learning opportunities, and the supervision and evaluation of professional practice. The *TQS* comprises a variety of important skills, behaviours, and attributes of effective teachers, described amongst six competencies:

1. *Fostering Effective Relationships*
2. *Engaging in Career-Long Learning*
3. *Demonstrating a Professional body of Knowledge*
4. *Establishing Inclusive Learning Environments*
5. *Applying Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Metis, and Inuit*
6. *Adhering to Legal Frameworks and Policies* (Government of Alberta, 2021).

All six competencies are interrelated and are equally important and while all apply in various ways to this study, Competency Three is most pertinent. The Competency - *Demonstrating a Professional Body of Knowledge* - is evident when "a teacher applies a current and comprehensive repertoire of effective planning, instruction, and assessment practices to meet the learning needs of every student" (Alberta Education, 2020b, p. 5). In the *Education Act*, the first listed responsibility of a teacher is to "provide instruction competently to students" (Government of Alberta, 2020c, p. 131). The literature presented in this section focuses on teacher instructional practice in a typical in-person classroom without any COVID-19 related health restrictions. The topics of instructional strategies and student engagement and influences on teacher instructional practice are explored.

Instructional Strategies and Student Engagement

Three instructional strategies and the importance of student engagement will be introduced in this section. The instructional strategies are modeling, allowing students to interact with curricular content, and providing frequent feedback. There are many other instructional strategies out there. These three were chosen as they are proven to be effective, are common in elementary schools, and are instructional strategies that may be difficult to adapt in an at-home learning environment or within an in-person learning environment depending on the current health restrictions. Since this study is interested in how principals provided instructional leadership support throughout the COVID-19 pandemic so that teachers could continue to provide effective instruction to their students, it is important to provide a brief overview of these common and effective instructional strategies as well as the importance of student engagement. The strategies and the research presented are based in a pre-COVID educational environment.

Modeling, as an instructional strategy, is a twofold process that includes demonstrating a desired behaviour while simultaneously describing the actions and ongoing thought process (Harbour, Evanovich, Sweigart, & Hughes, 2015). Through modeling, teachers can help students understand what they are doing and why they are doing it (Harbour et al., 2015). Modeling typically leads to a gradual release of responsibility, as students are ready, through guided practice and eventually leading to independent practice. This gradual release of responsibility allows for a teacher to fluctuate the support they offer to best meet the needs of their students. For example, a teacher can work closely with a group of students who still need guided practice while allowing another group to engage in independent practice.

Harbour et al. (2015) also recommended providing opportunities to interact with curricular content and providing feedback as effective instructional strategies. Put simply,

lessons should be interactive, and students benefit from receiving frequent feedback from their teacher. Planning interactive lessons also increases student levels of engagement (Ding & Sherman, 2006). Students learn and reach higher levels of achievement when they are engaged, interacting with lesson content, and receiving quality constructive and positive feedback from their teacher.

Ding and Sherman (2006) examined the relationship between teacher instruction and student achievement. They found that student achievement is a result of a variety of factors which can include teacher effectiveness, student motivation, parental involvement, funding, socioeconomic standing, and the quality of leadership and involvement of principals. They also found evidence that supports the notion that learning is a reciprocal relationship; that effective instructional practice is dependent on student characteristics just as student learning is dependent on effective teaching. It is important that teachers recognize the importance of a student's involvement in their own learning and pursue instructional strategies that target student engagement, motivation, parental involvement, and model a love of learning themselves (Ding & Sherman, 2006). Learning is an interactive process where the students need to be involved and engaged (Ding & Sherman, 2006).

Willms et al. (2009) proposed a definition for student engagement which took a broad term and broke it down into three dimensions: social engagement, academic engagement, and intellectual engagement. Social engagement considers a students' sense of belonging at school and participation in the school community in non-academic activities. Academic engagement considers a students' participation in the formal requirements of school. Intellectual engagement considers the serious emotional and cognitive investment a student places in their own learning; including the utilization of higher-order thinking skills to further their learning. The term student

engagement then, considers all three of the dimensions to be happening for a student to be engaged. Willms et al. (2009) and Ding and Sherman (2006) are in agreement over the importance of student engagement.

The importance of student engagement is corroborated by Harbour et al. (2015). Student engagement is a predictor of student achievement and there are strategies teachers can use to increase their student's levels of engagement. These strategies include modeling desired behaviours, providing opportunities to interact with curricular content, and providing feedback (Harbour et al., 2015). Increasing student engagement has been demonstrated to increase student achievement among students of various ages and abilities (Harbour et al., 2015). They found that students who were engaged in their learning achieved higher levels of academic, behavioural, and emotional success at school. They also demonstrated a link amongst student achievement, teacher support, and student achievement with both elementary and secondary aged students. In a typical in-person learning context a teacher can gauge their students' levels of engagement through observations and interactions in the classroom. This may not have been the case during the COVID-19 pandemic as teachers and students went between at-home learning and in-person learning throughout March 2020 to June 2022. With student engagement being an important part of learning, how did teachers and principals pivot to foster student engagement throughout the pandemic?

Modeling, interaction with curricular content, and providing frequent feedback have been highlighted in this literature review as effective instructional strategies because they have been proven to be effective, are common in elementary schools, and are instructional strategies that may be difficult to adapt in an at-home learning environment. The importance of student

engagement was also highlighted as it has also proven to be effective and may have been challenging for teachers to monitor during at-home learning.

Influences on Instructional Practice

A variety of factors influence the nature of a teacher's instruction for students. These factors may include years of education, years of experience, content knowledge of curriculum, personality traits of the teacher, student demographics and characteristics, the quality and availability of instructional leadership, and their ability to foster positive relationships (Ding & Sherman, 2006; Hattie, 2015). While these factors may influence the nature of a teacher's instructional practice, teaching is not that simple or straightforward. For example, a teacher may not have many years of experience but may still have a positive influence on the students through their classroom instruction. Conversely, a teacher may have a strong understanding of pedagogy and content knowledge yet may still struggle to have a positive influence on students in their class. Effective quality instruction mandated through the *TQS* and the *Education Act*, is the most influential school-based factor associated with student achievement (Alberta Education, 2020b; Edwards & Gammell, 2017; Government of Alberta, 2020c). Other school-based factors that have been found to impact student learning include relationships between students and school staff, learning environments, and a student's interest in particular subjects (Winheller, Hattie, & Brown, 2013). The most influential factor is, however, quality teaching (Edwards & Gammell, 2017). This section briefly explores these and other factors that can influence the quality of a teacher's instructional practice; further exploration of this topic occurs in the instructional leadership section of the literature review.

Hattie (2015) asserted the importance of instructional leaders, often principals, working with their teachers to build their capacity and improve their instructional practice. He noticed

that teachers did not always make the connection between their own teaching practice and their students' achievement, however, he asserted that there is a strong connection between the two. He proposed that teachers needed to pay more attention to student engagement, setting learning intentions, and watching for success criteria to be fulfilled. Teachers need to monitor their students for their understanding of learning and their progress (Hattie, 2015). Hattie's assertions are supported by Donohoo, Hattie, and Eells (2018) who proposed that both teachers and principals in an effective school environment fundamentally believe that they need to evaluate the effect of their practice on student learning. They view student success or failure as directly connected to what actions an educator did or did not take (Donohoo et al., 2018). Conversely, if a teacher perceives that there is very little they can do to affect student achievement these negative beliefs can pervade a school's culture (Donohoo et al., 2018). This caution aligns with Hattie's (2015) assertion that effective instructional leaders fundamentally believe that they need to evaluate the effect that everyone in their school has on student learning and need to engage in a relentless search and analysis of evidence of student achievement. How instructional leadership can influence teacher instructional practice will continue to be explored in the next section of the literature review.

Review of Literature: Instructional Leadership

Regardless of circumstances or contextual variables, teachers have an obligation to provide effective instruction to their students and principals have an obligation to provide instructional leadership support for their teachers (Alberta Education, 2020a, 2020b). These responsibilities were challenged during the pandemic as both teachers and principals needed to adopt unique and unconventional instructional practices (Adams et al., 2020). In order to better understand both the challenges presented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the required

adaptations of both teachers and principals this case study is centered around two guiding questions. *What is the impact of instructional leadership practices on elementary teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?* This section of the literature review will focus on instructional leadership. The *Leadership Quality Standard (LQS*) will be introduced as it pertains to the context of being a principal in Alberta and then the historical context of the concept, followed by expanding on instructional leadership by exploring *effective* instructional leadership.

While Alberta teachers must adhere to the *TQS*, principals in Alberta must adhere to the *LQS.* The *LQS* is a is a government-mandated policy document that applies to all principals and it describes the professional expectations that principals must meet in order to create conditions under which teachers can do their best work (Government of Alberta, 2021). The *LQS* comprises a variety of important skills, behaviours, and attributes of effective principals, described amongst nine competencies:

1. *Fostering Effective Relationships*
2. *Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning*
3. *Embodying Visionary Leadership*
4. *Leading a Learning Community*
5. *Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Metis and Inuit*
6. *Providing Instructional Leadership*
7. *Developing Leadership Capacity*
8. *Managing School Operations and Resources*

9. *Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context* (Alberta Education, 2020a).

All nine competencies are interrelated and are equally important. While they all apply to this study, Competency Six is most pertinent. The Competency - *Providing Instructional Leadership*- is described as "a leader ensures that every student has access to quality teaching and optimum learning experiences" (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 6). In the *Education Act*, the first listed responsibility of a principal is "must provide instructional leadership in the school" (Government of Alberta, 2020c, p. 132). Thus, it is essential for principals in Alberta to develop a clear understanding of instructional leadership as they are responsible for providing it to their staff and by so doing ensure that all students are provided with optimum opportunity to learn.

Historical context

The term instructional leadership has been referred to for several decades, although the definition, perception, and interpretation of its meaning has changed overtime. While this study will adhere to the definition of instructional leadership provided in the key terms, an historical overview reveals contrasting perspectives on what characterizes the concept. In the 1980's the concept of instructional leadership began to emerge as an area of research in the literature on effective schools (Hallinger, 2005). At that time, effective instructional leaders were perceived to be directive with the ability to build a positive and effective culture in a school (Hallinger, 2005). Instructional leaders were also perceived to be in the minority of principals who prioritized classroom visits as a way of initiating discussions with the teachers about curriculum and instruction (Hallinger, 2005). While these perceptions were unique at the time, the term instructional leadership itself was still poorly defined in the 1980's. Throughout the 1990's some research focused on instructional leadership and its potential connection to effective schools.

By the early 2000s, a body of literature emerged that indicated a connection between instructional leadership and student achievement (Robinson, 2010). This literature prompted policy makers to acknowledge the unique features of an instructional leadership paradigm with clearly defined roles, attributes, and behaviours (Robinson, 2010). While Robinson viewed instructional leadership as lacking a clear and concise definition; Adams, Mombourquette, and Townsend (2019) said that historically there have been a variety of definitions and viewpoints on instructional leadership. Numerous researchers have examined instructional leadership and many have attempted to break the concept down into several characteristics, actions, or behaviours that a principal enacts when preforming instructional leadership (Adams et al., 2019). The term instructional leadership has been in literature for decades but a new emphasis on the concept has been occurring recently; in Alberta, this new emphasis is at least in part due to the explicit expectation of instructional leadership found in the *LQS* (Adams et al., 2019; Alberta Education, 2020a).

Effective Instructional Leadership

Principals are responsible for guiding their schools through challenges posed by an increasingly complex environment. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) indicated that through implementation of instructional leadership practices principals must support teachers as they respond to the increasing diversity of student characteristics including cultural background, income disparities, medical diagnoses, and variation in learning capacities. Since 2019 in Alberta, principals have also been faced with a new professional practice standard and a new draft curriculum. In addition, principals must also now react to the changes imposed by society's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) found it is important to develop an understanding of effective school leadership as it has significant effects on student

learning, second only to the effects of quality teacher instruction and curriculum. They also found that the nature of a principal's impact on student learning is through the actions they take to establish conditions that support teachers and help students succeed; in essence actions that align with the concept of instructional leadership.

Robinson (2010) contended that, "instructional leadership refers to those sets of leadership practices that involve the planning, evaluation, coordination, and improvement of teaching and learning" (p. 2). To engage in these leadership practices principals must possess an understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, instructional strategies, and interventions. Instructional leadership practices are constrained by a leader's knowledge of relevant classroom management techniques as well as pedagogical content (Robinson, 2010). According to this understanding of instructional leadership, effective instructional leaders must have experience and expertise in being an effective teacher.

Robinson (2010) distinguished between instructional leadership and effective instructional leadership, the second being more likely to improve student learning and achievement. She argued that instructional leadership can have a considerable or a relatively small impact on student achievement. Three interrelated characteristics comprised effective instructional leadership: (a) using deep leadership content knowledge to (b) solving complex school-based problems, while (c) building relational trust with staff, parents, and students (Robinson, 2010). By doing these three, instructional leadership moves from being an act of compliance to one of effectively impacting teaching and learning. In agreement with Robinson, Cranston (2011) adds that relational trust is foundational to the functioning of a school. Essentially, all school community members (parents, teachers, and principals) need to trust that everyone is doing their job to the best of their ability because schools are entrusted with

facilitating learning in all students (Cranston, 2011). This relational trust allows principals to have deep and meaningful discussions with teachers regarding their instructional practice, student engagement, and student achievement (Cranston, 2011).

Hattie (2015) found that effective instructional leaders are focused on students. Some actions that effective instructional leaders take include attending to teachers' and their impact on student learning, attending to instructional challenges, being present in classrooms, aligning professional learning to enhance student learning, holding high standards, and ensuring that the school's culture is conducive to learning for all (Hattie, 2015). These findings invoke imagery of a principal being present and engaged in all aspects students' learning while also sharing curricular and pedagogical expertise with teachers. While the image of an active and hands-on principal is enticing, Hallinger (2005) found that few instructional leaders demonstrate these behaviours. The exception to that finding is in elementary schools where principals can impact classroom instruction through modeling as opposed to direct supervision and evaluation. Even with the best of intentions there are many barriers that principals face in terms of being present in classrooms.

Hattie (2015) expanded on this notion of effective instructional leadership adding that it isn't simply focusing on student learning but rather a relentless search and analysis of evidence of that learning. He suggested that effective instructional leaders understand the need to focus on teaching practice and its' impact on student learning and believe they need to evaluate the effect that everyone in their school has on student learning. An important distinction in the mindset of effective instructional leaders is that they view levels of student success as contingent on what the teachers and principals in the building did or did not do; and they view themselves as agents

of change (Hattie, 2015). Other qualities of effective instructional leaders noted by Hattie included:

- Viewing student assessment as feedback on their actions;
- Listening to student and teacher voice;
- Setting challenging goals for themselves and staff in order to maximize student outcomes; and
- Learning from mistakes and creating an environment where teachers and students can learn from mistakes without losing face.

Instructional leadership is all about the students and it is equally about choosing what not to do as it is choosing what to do (Hattie, 2015). When school teams examine evidence of student learning this can lead to changing how some teachers teach, stopping ineffective programs, mentoring relationships being developed amongst staff, and creating an ongoing discussion around professional learning to maximize teachers' impact on all students (Hattie, 2015).

Leithwood et al. (2008) claimed that principals have an impact on teachers' emotions, motivations, commitments, beliefs, and in how supported they feel in their practice. Some factors that impact a teachers' emotions and practice include morale, job satisfaction and commitment, stress, and their own sense of efficacy (Leithwood et al., 2008). This is important as it has been demonstrated that teachers emotions have an impact on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2008). When teachers have a low sense of efficacy, they can feel discouraged and frustrated, which can have a negative impact on student performance (Ashton, 1984). Principals have the ability to have a positive or negative impact on many of these factors as Leithwood et al. (2008) explained, leaders were quite influential on teachers' commitment, resilience, and effectiveness. Identified

leadership strategies for supporting staff in these areas include modelling desired behaviours and providing individualized support and consideration (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Adams et al. (2019) found that principals are the most influential leaders in the system, and it makes sense since principals work closely with their teachers. They explained that the actions of principals which are most conducive to improving student achievement include: systematic monitoring of student progress, classroom visits, teacher observations, and generating a common vision amongst staff. They proposed that instructional leadership can be thought of as what a principal does that produces teacher instructional growth and thus leading to improved student learning.

Review of Literature: Teaching, Learning and Leading during COVID-19

The research explored so far was conducted and focused on education prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific instructional strategies and instructional leadership strategies were highlighted and briefly explored. This section of the literature review will focus on what has already been learned regarding teaching, learning, and leading throughout the pandemic. COVID-19 has been a global phenomenon, during which time schools closed across Canada in a timeframe similar to those throughout the world. While COVID-19 impacted all schools, each school was affected in different ways and no two schools dealt with the same set of issues. Accordingly, a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting schools was not possible nor desirable (Starr, 2020). Yet, schools did share some similar experiences such as transitions between in-person learning and at-home learning as well as following similar health restrictions. It is possible to glean meaning from coming to know the experiences of others who were going through the crisis at the same time. The sustained and ever-evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has demanded that teachers and principals be flexible in their approaches to supporting

student learning. Throughout this section of the literature review, the topics of teacher instructional practice, challenges for inclusive practices, leadership, and the human element are explored. As teacher instructional practice and instructional leadership are central to this study and have been explored pre-COVID, it is important to understand how the pandemic has influenced these practices. Inclusive practices and the human element are other pertinent topics that are relevant to expand our understanding of teaching, leading, and learning during COVID-19.

Teacher Instructional Practice

The role played by teachers changed during the pandemic. Kaden (2020) claimed that "many teachers experienced the single most traumatic and transformative event of the modern era" (p. 1). Many teachers were now working in isolation from home. Many teachers struggled to adapt their lessons for at-home learning. Teachers had to not only provide the curriculum to students but also to develop new skills and attitudes so they could participate in at-home learning. Feelings of isolation and loneliness affected all members of the school community as everyone was affected by this pandemic and corresponding new health concerns and health restrictions (Kaden, 2020).

Literature identifies several challenges and concerns with the ways at-home learning was initiated in response to COVID-19. Many schools opted for online programming, if they had the resources and the school community who had the ability to participate in an online environment. This created a need for some teachers to quickly learn new technology and pivot their instructional practice to be effective in this new at-home learning environment (Kaden, 2020). Other schools opted for paper packages that were sent home for students to complete. This sudden change in learning environments meant a change in the role of teachers and how they

provided instruction. During conventional models of in-person learning, teachers commonly model, provide interactive opportunities for students, monitor student engagement, and provide feedback and guidance to students. Teachers became aware that their typical in-person instructional strategies, formative and summative assessment practices, and classroom management techniques were not applicable or effective throughout at-home learning due to various context and factors (Fournier, Scott, & Scott, 2020; Kaden, 2020). These factors include the chosen mode of at-home learning, the student's independent learning skills, parental support available at home, and motivation to participate in learning. Specifically, at-home learning presented challenges for teachers in regards to supporting and monitoring the needs of all students (Fournier et al., 2020). Effective in-person instructional strategies such as modeling, providing interaction with curricular content, and providing frequent feedback to students had to be rethought (Harbour et al., 2015).

Dependent on how a specific at-home learning environment was setup; the above strategies may have been possible while having live classes over a video chat platform. If other environments were setup that allowed for less interaction between teachers and students, it would have been more difficult to continue to use the same instructional strategies. If, paper packages were the chosen mode of learning during at-home learning, the teacher was completely absent during the student's work time, rendering them unable to model how to complete a task or to enrich the thinking process of their students. Feedback given to a student well after they completed a task can have less impact on that student's learning compared to feedback provided to the student during the work process (Harbour et al., 2015). A student, completing a paper package at home, is also missing out on interactive experiences that a teacher could offer during in-person learning or perhaps in an online at-home learning environment.

For some students, without being physically present with their teacher, their parents were now their first source of educational support. Some parents were able to be home with their children every day, others were not. Even if parents were home, their ability to support their child's learning was impacted by several factors, including proficiency in their child's language of instruction, their level of education, their stress levels, and demands of the changes to their own work. Many of the youngest learners required parental and/or adult support to access the at-home learning opportunities offered by their teachers. Any student on an instructional support plan was also likely to face challenges with these skills (Fournier et al., 2020). Taken together, students with high levels of need, low levels of home support, or those who were very young faced further disadvantage through at-home learning as necessitated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fournier et al., 2020). In April 2021, a survey regarding the experience of educators in Alberta during COVID-19 found 76% of teachers reported that many students in their classes were struggling with learning due to the pandemic (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2020).

Online instruction was a common mode of instruction throughout periods of at-home learning. While online instruction is not new, it was not the normal mode of instruction for teachers whose experience was in providing in-person instruction. Effective online learning is the result of a careful instructional design and planning, however, the pandemic-induced at-home learning from March to June 2020 was temporary in nature, unplanned, and was occurring within a crisis situation (Fournier et al., 2020). To be successful in an at-home learning environment, students need previously developed computer skills, independent learning skills, and academic skills (Fournier et al., 2020). In most elementary grades, students may be lacking or still developing such skills. Since elementary students may not have the necessary independent learning skills to be successful; adult support was necessary. As explored above, parents had

varying levels of ability to support their child's learning. Teachers could provide support via phone calls or video chat platforms but dependent on the age and ability of the student, someone needed to connect the student to the teacher via the online learning environment to begin with.

Benefits.

For some learners, at-home learning was preferable to in-person instruction. At-home learning environments offered self-paced coursework, flexibility with daily schedule, and the ability to repeat lessons as needed (Fournier et al., 2020). However, these benefits have been typically associated with rich online learning environments as opposed to pandemic induced at-home learning (Fournier et al., 2020). A rich online learning environment is one that was not setup hastily in response to a global pandemic. Teachers would have formal training in online teaching, both teachers and students would have stable internet access, and both teachers and students would have necessary technology and accessories (Fournier et al., 2020). Essentially, effective online learning is a product of careful planning and instructional design (Fournier et al., 2020). Sine this study is focused on pandemic induced at-home learning, it is difficult to gauge whether these benefits sustained through the pandemic.

Challenges for Inclusive Practices

As explained above, some students may or may not have possessed the necessary skill sets to participate in at-home learning environments. Students also had varying levels of support at home. What is true for all students is that the pandemic induced move to at-home learning was a big change in their lives. Many schools in Alberta are inclusive, which means that students with special needs are in classes with their peers and receive necessary supports to help them experience success. Students with special needs are defined as those who need special education programming due to their communicational, intellectual, behavioural, learning, or physical

needs, or a combination of these characteristics (Government of Alberta, 2006). In Alberta, teachers are expected to meet the needs of all learners (Alberta Education, 2020b).

Within the above parameters, inclusion is relatively new in Alberta. For example, until the 1950s, children who were hard of hearing or who had visual impairments were often sent out of the province (Jahnukainen, 2011). But, by 1992, most students with special needs attended a regular classroom fulltime (Jahnukainen, 2011). This represented an important shift in mindset in education in Alberta over just 42 years. By 2004, the *Standards for Special Education* was published which provided special education requirements to meet the needs of all learners; this was applicable to all school boards in Alberta excluding charter schools (Government of Alberta, 2004). When COVID-19 began in 2020 the *Standards for Special Education* had been around for 16 years. While many teachers had experience teaching in inclusive classrooms, few, if any, had previous experience in supporting students with special needs during a pandemic-induced shift to at-home learning.

In 2006, two years after the *Standards for Special Education* was published, the Government of Alberta stated that all students with special needs must have an individualized program plan (IPP) or an instructional support plan (ISP) (Government of Alberta, 2006). The need for ISPs arose from the growing rate of special needs students attending regular classrooms. The intention of the ISP document is to ensure that classroom instruction meets the needs of an individual learner with special needs. The document must contain a student's strengths and needs, current level of achievement, assessment data, goals, list of support services, relevant medical information, classroom accommodations, transition plans and a parent signature (Government of Alberta, 2004). Especially in elementary school, many students who have an ISP have goals regarding their speech and language, fine motor, gross motor, or emotional regulation

skills. Offering activities to support a student's development in these areas became a challenge during at-home learning. Time for these activities was not outlined to parents in communication from the Government of Alberta. The messages provided by government solely focused on the importance of literacy and numeracy (Government of Alberta, 2020b). Additionally, access to a student's entire learning team was not necessarily available. In Alberta, educational assistants were laid off in March 2020 shortly after schools were closed. This included speech and language assistants, whom in many schools run the speech and language program and who have specific training in this area that many teachers do not have.

A principal in rural Ontario shared her perspective of supporting staff through the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic with Fournier et al. (2020). The principal quickly identified three issues that accompanied the closure of schools and the transition to at-home learning: (a) teachers had not been trained in online teaching, (b) there was unreliable access to internet and computers in their school community, and (c) the complexities of the pandemic were compounded when considering students with special needs and/or students from high-risk households. The principal recounted the experience of supporting a grade two student throughout the closure of schools. In March 2020 the student's classroom teacher had established an online learning environment for her students in response to COVID-19 health and safety regulations and out of necessity the transition was rapid. This student was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum, had a one-on-one educational assistant for constant support throughout the day during in-person learning, and was unable to participate in online learning during school closure due to not having internet access at home. The student's sole parent was facing their own health problems and was unable to establish and support an at-home learning environment for their child. Initially, this seemed like an impossible situation to navigate. This student's unique

situation became an important opportunity for the principal to demonstrate their active belief that all children can learn; and that this belief is true at all times and under all circumstances. The principal saw that the student's classroom teacher was overwhelmed from setting up and working with their online learning environment. The principal then turned to the student's regular assistant who was willing to take on the task. The principal and support staff member referred to the students' ISP and began to create a plan for authentic learning during the school's closure. They came up with low-tech, hands-on, creative, and alternative tasks that were in alignment with curricula as well as goals from the student's ISP.

The findings of this student's story include the importance of relationships, trust, and communication. The student's parent remained a vital member of their learning team in spite of their own health challenges. "This was no time to forget the crucial role that she could play as an important partner in her child's education" (Fournier et al., 2020, p. 22). The principal modelled and demonstrated trust and respect in collaborating with parents while avoiding patronization and remaining mindful of the power differential between educators and parents. Even though this story takes place in Ontario, it is exemplary of the collaboration between educators and parents that the Government of Alberta expected during at-home learning (Government of Alberta, 2020b).

It is also exemplary of the principal engaging in instructional leadership. They saw this student's teacher was already overwhelmed so they stepped in and demonstrated Competency Four and Competency Six of the *LQS* (Alberta Education, 2020a). The principal modelled the belief and expectation that learning can continue for all students despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This story represents the beliefs of educators cannot change or fluctuate due to a crisis situation. "The core values and beliefs which guide our ethical actions must not

change" (Fournier et al., 2020, p. 22). The principal collaborated with the student's educational assistant and utilized her expertise in pedagogy and curriculum to ensure the continuation of meaningful learning experiences for this student. COVID-19 caused principals to look at these responsibilities differently as they worked to support their staff and to protect the most vulnerable students.

Leadership

While there were challenges for implementing inclusive teaching practices, there were also challenges presented to education at large and to principals specifically. After schools had been closed to in-person learning, Adams et al. (2020) found Albertan principals identified four such challenges: (a) mental health of the entire school community, (b) technology, (c) handling the logistics of the situation, and (d) the sheer speed and depth of change that contributed to an overwhelming sense of uncertainty. Principals reported high levels of anxiety in their school communities and emphasized the need for them as the leader to remain calm and thoughtful. This situation caused principals' to feel frustrated, futile, and fearful of the way that decision making was out of their control (Adams et al., 2020). Furthermore, principals identified the importance of routine throughout the pandemic to provide a sense of normalcy. The study's findings indicated that principals relied on three practices to maintain a sense of meaning, purpose, and identity as they faced the challenges of the pandemic: (a) committing to established structures that were effective, (b) emphasizing the creation and utilization of professional relationships, and (c) maintaining a focus on clear communication.

A principal's ability to create a plan with a clear sense of direction that is also flexible enough to adapt for changes in the environment was found to be beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). This method of planning allows for both short and long term

planning and promotes a constant search for new ideas and reassessing the intended direction of the plan (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). This finding is similar to Hattie's (2015) view that instructional leaders needs to constantly evaluate, reassess, and seek evidence of success. The leader understands that while the intent of the plan may not change, how the plan is implemented or what it looks like it likely to change (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). Principals need to set the direction during uncertain times because, "As a leader there is a choice to be overwhelmed by the context, or to try and shape the context to promote organizational success" (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020, p. 28).

There are other connections between many traits of successful leadership during times of chaos and traits of effective instructional leadership. For example, Robinson (2010) proposed that instructional leaders needed to (a) have and utilize a deep leadership content knowledge to (b) solve complex school-based problems, while (c) building relational trust with staff, parents, and students. Her concept of instructional leadership is congruent with the view of effective leadership through the pandemic proposed by Gurr and Drysdale (2020). Principals who possess a deep understanding of these aspects of leadership are more likely to lead their schools successfully through uncertain times (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020).

The Human Element

COVID-19 presented challenges to both teachers and principals in terms of providing a variety of supports to students who needed them. These needs ranged from access to technology, inclusive supports, food, and access to mental health supports. Principals worked to provide families with internet access or devices such as computers or tablets (Kaden, 2020). For certain families, principals also had to consider the logistics around exchanging paper packages. On top of learning needs, principals worked to address other important needs that some families had. For

example, principals worked to expand existing foodservice programs to continue supporting the most vulnerable families within the school community (Kaden, 2020).

While it is agreed upon that principals need to set the direction for their teachers, it is also essential for them to consider the human element in their decision making, defined by Edwards and Gammell (2017) as attending to human factors whether they are simple or complex. An example of a simple human factor is teachers require time to transition between teaching and meetings (Edwards & Gammell, 2017). An example of a more complex human factor is whether a teacher has a healthy work-life balance (Edwards & Gammell, 2017). If principals do not attend to these factors, other structures and tools will have a limited impact (Edwards & Gammell, 2017). Conversely, when principals account for teachers' needs, this can intensify improvements from structures and tools put into place (Edwards & Gammell, 2017). During uncertain times such as COVID-19, there are a variety of human factors for principals to consider when making decisions and problem solving. For example, according to Adams et al.'s (2020) findings, Albertan principals reported concerns for the mental health of their school community and found high levels of anxiety in their schools. Principals should be mindful that teachers are experiencing the pandemic two ways: personally, and professionally. A teacher's emotions and wellbeing have an impact on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2008). Principals influence teachers' commitment, resilience, and effectiveness: if teachers feel valued and their needs are being addressed, a school is more likely to see collaboration, problem solving, and good quality teacher instruction (Edwards & Gammell, 2017; Leithwood et al., 2008). Further, it has been found that when these human factors are addressed, teachers are more willing to do what is necessary to support colleagues and enhance student learning (Edwards & Gammell,

2017; Leithwood et al., 2008). So, if principals can support the needs of teachers, then teachers are more able to continue to provide quality instruction to meet the needs of all their students.

Leithwood et al.'s (2008) and Edwards and Gammell's (2017) findings that a teacher's emotions and wellbeing has an impact on student learning coincide with The Alberta Teachers' Association (2020) data collected three times throughout the 2020/2021 school year. The *Pandemic Pulse Survey* gained insight on the experiences of over 2800 teachers and principals in Alberta during COVID-19 (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2020). In September 2020, shortly after in-person classes with health restrictions had resumed, they found that 94% of respondents reported feeling fatigued, 95% of respondents reported feeling stress and 81% of respondents reported anxiety.

In April 2021 The Alberta Teachers' Association (2020) followed up with the same group of respondents from September during which 93% reported fatigue, 91% reported stress, and, most concerningly, 65% of respondents were extremely concerned about teacher mental health. Half of all respondents reported feeling hopeless. It is apparent with these results that teachers and principals in Alberta were being impacted negatively by the trauma and fear associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ninety percent of Alberta classrooms had students moved into quarantine or isolation due to either COVID-19 or exposures (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2020). These students, and their teachers, had to continually transition from in-person learning to at-home learning periodically throughout the 2020/2021 as necessary. An Albertan school principal, who participated in the survey, reported that each COVID-19 case caused three hours of work for them and office staff. This is a considerable amount of extra work, and no extra time or compensation was provided. A respondent reported that, "There is an overwhelming sense of

frustration and hopelessness – like everything is out of control" (The Alberta Teachers' Association, 2020). These findings emphasize the importance of principals attending to the human factor as one important strategy of instructional leadership during the pandemic.

Summary of Literature Review

Teachers have an obligation to provide effective instruction to their students and principals have an obligation to provide instructional leadership support for their teachers (Alberta Education, 2020a, 2020b). Principals were challenged during this time to support teachers adopting unique and unconventional instructional practices (Adams et al., 2020). Accordingly, this study sought to uncover and understand the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction throughout March 2020 to June 2022.

Teachers have a legal obligation to provide competent instruction that meets the needs of all learners and to be cognizant of the inter-relationships between teacher instruction and student achievement (Alberta Education, 2020b; Government of Alberta, 2021). Learning is reciprocal; effective instructional practice is dependent on student characteristics just as student learning is dependent on effective teaching (Ding & Sherman, 2006). Implementing a variety of instructional strategies, supports, and targeting student engagement are effective strategies for teachers to utilize (Ding & Sherman, 2006; Harbour et al., 2015). Modeling is an effective instructional strategy for teachers and an effective instructional leadership strategy for principals (Hallinger, 2005; Harbour et al., 2015; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). The same finding was echoed in the study by Adams et al. (2020), in which principals reported the need to remain calm, thoughtful, and stick to familiar and effective routines. Effective school leadership has a significant impact on student learning, second only to the effects of quality teacher instruction;

so it is important to look at both teacher instruction and instructional leadership (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

A principal's impact on student achievement is more indirect than a teacher's impact, yet principals can invoke instructional leadership strategies to influence teacher's instructional practices (Mulford, 2008). Although instructional leaders should focus on students and their learning needs, they can also focus on and deeply understand teachers' instructional practices (Edwards & Gammell, 2017; Hattie, 2015; Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson, 2010). Effective instructional leaders are also able to problem solve, can build relational trust, and cultivate a school culture conducive to student and staff learning while holding high expectations for all (Hattie, 2015; Robinson, 2010).

Hallinger (2005) found that principals in elementary schools were most likely to implement hands-on instructional leadership practices. Pandemic-necessitated at-home learning caused a need to re-examine these practices. Teachers and principals had to demonstrate flexibility and creativity in order to support students throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The importance of respecting and addressing the human element always but especially during challenging times such as the pandemic was explored as well.

The literature review provided in this chapter establishes a foundation and context for what is already known about teachers' instructional practice, instructional leadership practices, and information that has emerged regarding COVID-19 and its impact on the above practices. This study seeks to develop an understanding of effective instructional leadership strategies throughout the pandemic in a select elementary school within Zone 6 of Alberta. Accordingly, it explored two primary research questions: What is the impact of instructional leadership practices on elementary teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic? What were teachers' and

principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?

In the upcoming Chapter Three, the research methodology is described, including the ontological and epistemological foundations that bind the study as well as the data collection and analysis frameworks that have been applied to the case study. The chapter also includes a timeline for the process of this study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

From March 2020 to June 2022[1], the education system encountered unforeseen challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these numerous challenges, teachers had an obligation to continue to meet their professional responsibility to provide effective instruction to their students; likewise, principals had an obligation to provide instructional leadership support for their teachers (Alberta Education, 2020a, 2020b). Specifically, principals were challenged during this time to support teachers in adopting unique and unconventional instructional practices (Adams et al., 2020).

This window of time provided a unique opportunity to examine the larger phenomenon of leadership, and specifically, instructional leadership. Accordingly, this study sought to understand the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction throughout March 2020 to June 2022 by revealing the unique contexts and situations that the participants of the study experienced. Since this study chronicled participant experiences, a qualitative methodology informed by an interpretivist approach was utilized (Lin, 1998; Stake, 2010). Specifically, a case study was conducted in a school division within Zone 6 in the province of Alberta (Baskarada, 2014).

Two primary research questions guided this study: *What is the impact of instructional leadership practices on elementary teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?* To answer these questions, data was collected from principals and teachers through a semi structured interview as defined by Mertler (2020). The data was analyzed following a three stage coding procedure as

[1] This will constitute the experiential window that participants will be asked to reflect upon.

recommended by Neuman (2014). This chapter concludes by reviewing the ethical considerations of this study before presenting a research plan with estimated timeline for completion.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research methodology. This section of the chapter briefly explores the use and choice of qualitative methodology, the case study research method, the interpretivist stance, and the limitations of the above. Qualitative research methodologies rely on human perception and understanding; in contrast, quantitative research methodologies rely heavily on linear attributes, measurements, and statistical analysis (Stake, 2010). Baskarada (2014), in alignment with Stake's opinion, stated that "qualitative research does not usually employ statistical procedures or other means of quantification, focusing instead on understanding the nature of the research problem rather than the quantity of observed characteristics" (p. 1). He also pointed out that qualitative researchers tend to assume that social reality is a human creation and that as qualitative researchers need to interpret and contextualize significance and meaning from people's practices and beliefs. Stake (2010), in agreement with Baskarada, added that qualitative research "is interpretive, experiential, situational, and personalistic" (p. 14). Pacho (2015) added to Baskarada's and Stake's contentions that the purpose of qualitative research is to seek a better understanding of a complex situation. This understanding of qualitative research methodologies made it a clear choice for this study as we sought to understand the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction in an elementary school throughout March 2020 to June 2022. As explored in the first two chapters, this is complex situation that is well suited for qualitative research methodology.

Qualitative research methodology is often used in education as education is a cultural process that can be complex to study (Wolcott, 1973). Stake (2010) inferred that qualitative methodology is suitable for studying teaching because it is not necessary to separate the knowledge of practice from professional knowledge. Cooley (2013), in agreement with Wolcott and Stake, stated, "indeed, the richness of detail provided by qualitative research gives insights into the complicated nature of teaching and learning that would be missed through other means" (p. 250). Qualitative research may have its roots in anthropology but now it is used by numerous educational researchers and even teachers through action research (Cooley, 2013). Cooley contends that this growth is positive as it has helped build an understanding of the complexities of everyday educational predicaments. Qualitative research methodology was the right choice for this study to enable an exploration of a complex situation in education.

Case Study

Stake (2010) suggested utilizing a qualitative methodology to concentrate on how things work in a particular context, at a certain time, and with certain people. In alignment with this suggestion, a case study was a suitable choice for examining the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction throughout March 2020 to June 2022. Case study research involves intensive analysis of a singular entity (Baskarada, 2014; Mertler, 2020). For this study that means the analysis of a rural school division. Baskarada (2014) defined a case study as "a method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance, obtained by extensive description and analysis of the instance, taken as a whole and in its context" (p. 7). Case study research allowed the development of a thorough understanding of instructional leadership within the targeted timeframe. Some research problems, such as the one in this study, cannot be adequately understood or explained by

isolating particular variables and this is where a case study research method allows for a level of understanding explanation not possible through some other methods (Merriam, 1985).

Case studies are often conducted in the field of education (Baskarada, 2014; Ferreira, Andrade, & Almeida, 2020). Merriam (1985) contends that this is partially due to the recognition of the advantage of using a case study for educational research which is that it allows for a better understanding of the process or dynamics of certain aspects of practice. "In any case, case studies are particularly well suited to building extensive and in-depth descriptions of complex social phenomena" (Baskarada, 2014, p. 2). This makes it a good choice for use in education as classrooms are complex and it can be challenging to separate all the separate things that are happening simultaneously. This case study examined one rural school division in Zone 6 in Alberta. It is not intended to be a study of a wholly typical school division. The findings of this study represents the experiences and recollections of the participants involved.

The Interpretivist Stance

Within qualitative research there are two traditional stances: positivist and interpretivist (Lin, 1998). According to Lin, positivism seeks to identify qualitative data with ideas that can be tested or identified in other cases. In contrast, interpretivism seeks to connect qualitative data with ideas that are specific to a case (Lin, 1998). Lin compares positivism and interpretivism through how the data can be viewed and interpreted after a study as well, "while both in the end can comment about general principles or relationships, positivist work does so by identifying general patterns, while interpretivist work does so by showing how general pattern looks in practice" (Lin, 1998, p. 163).

Interpretivism implies that access to reality is influenced by social constructions such as language, culture, and shared meanings (Dudovskiy, n.d.). These same social constructions may

have influenced how educators experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, communication regarding the closure of schools and the implementation of COVID-19 restrictions in schools involved and depended on the use of language, values, shared meanings, and understandings. Lin (1998) contended that the lens of interpretivism can help understand concepts in relation to a specific context as well as conscious or unconscious understandings that people may hold in relation to their actions or beliefs. She suggested that interpretivism can capture a particular time so that peoples' actions become intelligible. As this study focused on a specific timeframe, interpretivism aided in developing an understanding and explanation of educators' experiences particular to the nature of instructional leadership practices impacting teacher instruction.

The COVID-19 pandemic created a unique context for this study. Teachers and principals were challenged to adapt their practices to frequent changes in context due to the ever-evolving social, political, and educational complexities of COVID-19. An interpretivist stance acknowledges that reality is complex and "stresses the dynamic, constructed, and evolving nature of social reality and rejects the positivist notion of knowledge being grounded in the objective and tangible, instead, it seeks to understand social reality through the eyes of those being studied" (Chowdhury, 2014, p. 434), thus making it an appropriate choice for this study. An interpretivist stance is also appropriate for this case study as the focus is exploring this one school division thoroughly as opposed to a positivist stance that would focus on a more general, big picture of the situation (Lin, 1998).

As discussed in the literature review, instructional leadership is a broad concept, and it is subjective. Interpretivism will allow participants' preferences, perspectives, motivations, and actions to be uncovered (Lin, 1998). Different principals will engage in instructional leadership

practices in different ways and different teachers will perceive these practices differently. These differing perspectives on educational practices is partially due to the intertwined relationship between reality and social constructions. All participants of this study, due to a variety of contextual variables, may have experienced a different understanding of the same situation. All data collected during this study will represent each participant's perspective, experiences, and recollections that reflect their understanding of reality. Since this study followed qualitative research methodology, interpretivism was a suitable approach to gather and understand preferences, perspectives, motivations, and actions that are not easily made numeric (Lin, 1998).

Limitations and Researcher Biases

For researcher biases, I was a teacher throughout the March 2019 to June 2020 timeline. I have first-hand experiences dealing with the shutdown of schools as well as teaching during at-home learning and teaching in person while following COVID-19 restrictions. I have perceptions of instructional leadership provided to me throughout this timeline. These will not be shared with participants. For the 2021/2022 school year I moved into a Vice Principal role, so I also have some admin experience during the pandemic. While I do work in Zone 6 in the province of Alberta, participants who are offered an opportunity to participate in this study will not be direct coworkers of mine.

A benefit of having first-hand experience teaching during the pandemic is that I am familiar with all the health related restrictions and I know the "language" of teachers. Wolcott (1973) voiced that conducting a study where you do not know the "language", acronyms, or dialogue of participants in your study, can be a disadvantage for the researcher. He also voiced that knowing the language in education was beneficial when interviewing participants because it

limited the number of follow-up questions he needed to ask in order to understand what the participant was telling him. When I conducted this study, I had the same benefit.

This thesis provides an understanding of participant perspectives on instructional leadership practices within their school during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically within the March 2020 to June 2022 timeline. Consistent with an interpretivist research stance, the data collected via interview was subjective based on the participants' experiences and perspectives. While information from this thesis may be applied to other situations with professional discretion, it truly only represents the experience and perspectives of the participants. The participants' memory or their perspectives and biases could be considered sources of error for the data that would prove difficult to confirm or deny.

This study focused on exploring the experiences of teachers and their principal in one school division in Zone 6. It is not the intention of this study that the findings represent a wholly typical school division nor the experiences of all educators throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As explored in the literature review, while COVID-19 was a global phenomenon, which impacted all schools, each school was affected in different ways and no two schools dealt with the same set of issues. Following the interpretivist stance of this study, any conclusions are specific to the person or context studied and cannot be generalized (Lin, 1998). Any generalizations that a reader may make is dependent on their own knowledge and discretion. For example, a reader may identify with the context of a participant school and some of the conclusions may resonate with them or be transferrable to their own practice.

This study is in accordance with Mertler's (2020) principle of beneficence which states "that research should be done in order to acquire knowledge about human beings and the educational process; in other words, it should benefit someone or some group of people" (p.

112). Ideally, some readers will be able to extrapolate the findings of this study to their own contexts. The reader may be in a similar context themselves or some of the conclusions may resonate with them and could lead to an improvement of their teaching or leadership practice. The identified instructional leadership practices may also contribute to a broader conversation about leadership practices. The principle of beneficence also identifies the ethical responsibility of ensuring that research is not conducted as a means of doing harm or to find fault in a situation (Mertler, 2020). While this research seeks to uncover effective instructional leadership practices during the pandemic, it does not seek to blame, judge, or emphasize the mistakes and learnings of educators throughout this challenging time.

Data

This section of the chapter outlines my intentions as a researcher regarding data. Trustworthiness, participant selection, data collection and interview questions, and data analysis and interpretation is explored. There are of course elements that are out of my control that I may need to respond to. For example, Wolcott (1973) voiced that when he conducted a case study at a school he realized how loud and busy schools can be. On recordings he made, there was often a lot of background noise. Should this have happened in my recordings, I would have needed to use my discretion on which background noises may be ignored or which may be a piece of data to include on the transcript. Member checking, as explained below, helps corroborate my discretion. Wolcott (1973) also mentioned that his interviews were constantly interrupted. He had only one in 15 interviews that went uninterrupted. I would need to remain patient and flexible if my interviews had been interrupted as well. While this section outlines my intentions, any responses to unforeseen challenges that arise will be documented and explained in chapter four.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research the data is narrative, words in the form of an interview transcript for this study. When considering the validity of qualitative data, it is important to be concerned with its trustworthiness (Mertler, 2020). Trustworthiness is established by examining the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of qualitative data (Mertler, 2020). Credibility includes establishing that the results of the study are credible or believable from the perspectives of the participants (Mertler, 2020). It was my duty as a researcher to consider and incorporate the context of the selected school division which will help accurately reflect the participants' perspectives. I completed what Mertler (2020), Merriam (1985), and Schwandt, Lincoln, and Guba (2007) refer to as a member check as this increases the study's credibility. Member checking involves showing the participants the transcript of their interview for them to read over and ensure that the transcript accurately reflects their ideas and perspectives (Merriam, 1985; Mertler, 2020). This action corroborates my transcription of the data with those that provided the raw data; it helps eliminate and/or reduce any research bias during the transcribing process as well as enhance the credibility and the confirmability of collected data and ultimately the results presented in the thesis (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Mertler, 2020). Confirmability is the process of establishing the objectivity and neutrality of the collected data (Mertler, 2020). If a situation occurred that during a member check a participant would like to modify the transcript, it would have been negotiated between the participant and the researcher. Schwandt et al. (2007) proposed that the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee, when properly established, is one of respectful negotiation, joint control, and reciprocal learning.

Transferability involves providing a rich and detailed context for the study so that a reader can easily identify with the context of the selected school (Mertler, 2020; Schwandt et al.,

2007). This study does not intend to provide generalized findings, rather this study provides a clear and detailed understanding of the selected school. This will help a reader identify and connect with the selected school and perhaps be able to utilize some of the findings in their own context. Schwandt et al. (2007) also propose that there is no context-free truth and generalizations should not be the goal of the researcher, instead researchers should acknowledge that their findings are context-bound and specific. It may be possible to apply findings in other contexts, but this requires a rich and detailed description of the context of the selected school (Schwandt et al., 2007).

Dependability is the need for the researcher to account for changes in the context of the study (Mertler, 2020). I ensured I document changes to provide a rich and detailed picture of the selected school division in my findings. For this study this includes providing a breakdown of changes in health restrictions that schools faced throughout the March 2020 to June 2022 timeline. While analyzing the data I increased dependability by leaving a chain of evidence (Merriam, 1985; Schwandt et al., 2007). This chain of evidence clearly reveals how conclusions were drawn from the data (Merriam, 1985). It will allow someone other than myself to judge the validity of findings presented from the data I collected and it will also make it possible for another researcher to reproduce this study at a later date (Merriam, 1985). This chain of evidence enables all readers of my thesis to review and evaluate my findings for themselves which increases dependability as well as confirmability (Mertler, 2020; Schwandt et al., 2007).

Data Saturation

The selected school division is a useful and rich source of information because it furthers my understanding of instructional leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. However the results may not be statistically significant if data saturation is not reached (Government of

Canada, 2018). Reaching data saturation is defined as when there is enough information to replicate a study, when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Mason, 2010). Failure to reach data saturation has an impact on the quality and trustworthiness of a research study; however, there is no one size fits all approach to reaching data saturations because of the thousands of types of research designs that exist (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Mason, 2010). Leaving the chain of evidence in my final thesis ensures the study could be replicated in the future (Merriam, 1985). I also ensured that I fully completed the coding of collected data. This process is explained later in this section of the chapter.

As for all additional and/or new information for data saturation, that depends on the number of participants in the study. All eligible principals and teachers were invited to participate in the study; only staff who met the criteria outlined in participant selection, can offer a valid perspective for this study. Some staff may be unable to participate, if for example, they are a new teacher who has only been employed at that school for the 2021/2022 school year. Since this represents the experiences of educators in a rural school division in Zone 6 of Alberta, ultimately the number of willing participants will be accepted. As for numbers of participants, qualitative studies typically require a smaller sample size than quantitative studies (Mason, 2010). Ideally, the sample should be large enough to represent the diverse perspectives of a group of people, however the sample can be too large and the data then becomes repetitive and superfluous (Mason, 2010). As this study is interested in a rural school division, it is likely to have a small staff and having too many participants will not be an issue. Mason (2010) suggested that instead of asking: *How many interviews are enough?* the focus should be on reaching data saturation and acknowledging there will be constraints to any study. The constraints could

include time, energy, and availability of participants (Mason, 2010). “Sometimes a researcher has no choice and must settle for a theoretical scheme that is less developed that desired” (Mason, 2010, p. 292).

I asked the same base questions of all teachers which positively contributes to data saturation as well (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I am ultimately limited by the number of willing participants. However, with the above considerations, data saturation is attainable for this study. There will be enough information to replicate this study, all possible information will be gathered from willing participants, and all coding will be completed which satisfies the definition of reaching data saturation from (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Mason, 2010).

Participant and Site Selection

There are some criteria that schools and participants needed to meet to be considered for this study. As this study focused on the experience of elementary educators; the school must be an elementary school located in Zone 6 in Alberta. The school must have experienced both at-home learning and in-person learning while COVID-19 health restrictions were in place. The school staff must have been compliant with COVID-19 restrictions in a realistic and honest way that reflects the needs of their school’s community. This could include providing online instruction and/or providing paper packages for students who had barriers to accessing a virtual classroom. The principal and teachers will have been in their positions throughout the March 2020 to June 2022 timeframe. They were all been employed in the same school division located and continue to be employed for the 2022/2023 school year when interviews occurred. I was interested in working with a school that fits these criteria because as mentioned above I spoke the “language” of these educators and have first-hand knowledge of the health restrictions that they endeavoured to comply with. I consulted with the superintendent of the selected school division

to identify schools with participants who met the criteria outlined above. More information about the school division and the participants is in chapter four. The information provided is general and nonidentifying while still providing some important context for the study.

contacting participants.

After the superintendent of the selected school division suggested a school, I approached the principal to gain their consent for participation in this study. Initial contact was a phone call during which I explained the purpose of this study and answered any immediate questions they had. Following the phone call, if they were willing to consider participating, I sent an email with the informed consent letter found in Appendix A as well as my contact information. They could contact me via email or phone with any questions or concerns they may have regarding the study. After getting a few principal participants, I asked them to reach out to their staff to help find teacher participants. The same process was followed in terms of communicating information around the study to potential teacher participants.

Data Collection

Data was collected from participants through semi-structured interview process that allowed me to ask probing or clarifying questions of participants in the study. This approach is recommended by Mertler (2020), who stated that, "when gathering truly qualitative data, interviews are probably best conducted following semi-structured or open-ended formats" (p. 134). These interviews aimed to obtain unique information and perspectives held by the participants and to learn more about instructional leadership practices throughout COVID-19. Through semi-structured interviews I intended to document my participants' experiences, recollections, and their understanding of teaching or leading throughout COVID-19. Depending upon the responses participants provide to my questions, it was crucial for me to have the ability

to ask a probing or clarifying question to thoroughly develop an understanding of their perspective. The principal and teachers will be interviewed regarding their experiences specifically focusing on the two primary research questions.: *What is the impact of instructional leadership practices on elementary teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?*

In a semi-structured interview format, it is possible to have inconsistency in the data collected because participants may have been asked different probing questions or none at all. Since this study is interested in gaining an understanding of participant's perspectives on instructional leadership and acknowledges that these perspectives rely on social constructs, the flexibility of being able to ask additional questions to really develop a deep understanding of a participant's experience is of more importance than consistency in the data collected.

Josselson (2013) elaborated upon the notion of representing participants' perspectives and contended that interview data does not create a picture of an objective reality. However, the aim of the interview is to obtain a rich and detailed picture of the participants' reality that will depict the schemas or constructions through which the participant engages the world (Josselson, 2013). "Interestingly, consistency is not a concern when collecting qualitative data; it is typically more desirable for the researcher to have some flexibility and to be able to ask clarifying questions…" (Mertler, 2020, p. 134). Following Mertler's (2020) message, the potential inconsistency in data collected through a semi-structured interview was appropriate for this case study.

The interviews took place either virtually via Zoom or in person at a school location of the participants choosing. If the interview took place via Zoom, it was videorecorded. If the

interview took place in-person, then I used my phone to record the audio of the interview. These recordings are the data collected from the interview and were transcribed for data analysis. I transcribed the interviews for data analysis. Any video or audio recordings will be kept on my personal home computer which is password protected and I am the only person who has access to it.

The letter of informed consent that all participants received, read, and return a signed copy of is attached in Appendix A. As explained in the letter, the interview took about 45 minutes of the participant's time. The participants did not benefit or receive renumeration for their participation. There are no anticipated risks or discomforts in their participation related to the research. There are no hierarchical power imbalances associated with me collecting this data. I am not associated with the school involved in this case study. I do not hold any position of hierarchical power that could cause a power imbalance perception with any participants in this case study.

In accordance with all ethical considerations, several steps will be taken to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Participants who agreed to be interviewed will not be identified by name nor will the name of their school or school division be used. All the data collected in this study will be kept in a locked cabinet or on a password-protected computer, and only the researcher will have access to them. I transcribed all recorded interview notes myself. Collected information from interviews will be retained for three years from the completion of the study before being deleted.

While there are no anticipated risks to participants, research shows that participants can benefit from their participation. deMarrais (2004) observed that participants of qualitative interviews can get a sense of satisfaction for contributing to a study that can lead to increased

knowledge. She also stated “they may also benefit from the experience of having someone listen to and appreciate their views or their experiences” (p. 61). Since the COVID-19 pandemic has posed numerous challenges to educators, participants may appreciate having time to debrief with a fellow educator and having the opportunity to contribute to a larger body of knowledge that other educators can benefit from. This interview would provide an outlet for participants to share their experiences and perspectives.

Data collected through interviews will rely on participant’s memories and perspectives as well as their interpretation of these past experiences within a socially created context. High quality data collected in this study will provide an understanding of the participants’ viewpoint which includes their subjective experiences and responses. This case study represents the viewpoint of participants within the context of their school.

interview questions.

Once participants completed and submitted the letter of consent in Appendix A to me, I emailed them a letter which is attached in Appendix B. This letter explains the problem, purpose, and supply some key definitions, such as instructional leadership, that is crucial to clarify before the interview. All participants had an opportunity to ask questions about the letter prior to setting up the interview. There are two sets of base questions for the interviews. One set for the principal and one for the teachers.

For the school principal, questions included:

1. How many years of experience do you have teaching? How many years of experience do you have as a principal?
2. How many years have you been working at this school?
3. Explain your approach to instructional leadership. (Outside of the COVID-19 pandemic.)

4. COVID has provided many opportunities and challenges to leaders. Describe your insights you have about your experiences as a school leader throughout this time.
5. What level of contact did you have with teachers throughout this study's timeframe? Was this different than before the pandemic?
6. Explain how your approach to providing instructional leadership throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Did it change, how so?
7. Describe your experiences with providing instructional leadership during at-home learning. What were some challenges you faced during this time? Were there any benefits or lasting changes to your instructional leadership practice that came from this time?
8. Please reflect upon and share your experiences with providing instructional leadership during in-person learning with COVID-19 restrictions in place. How did health restrictions impact how you provided instructional leadership?
9. What specific instructional leadership practices did you utilize throughout this timeframe? Which do you believe were most beneficial to enhancing teaching practice? Which practices were not as effective?
10. Is there anything else regarding your experience as a school leader throughout COVID-19 that you would like to share?

For teachers, questions included:

1. How many years of experience do you have teaching?
2. How many years have you been working at this school?
3. What level of contact did you have with your principal throughout this study's timeframe? Was this different than before the pandemic?
4. Please share some of your favourite instructional strategies that you liked to use in your classroom prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. COVID has provided many opportunities and challenges to teachers. Describe your insights you have about your experiences as a teacher throughout this time.
6. Please describe your experiences with teaching during at-home learning. What were your experiences with teaching during in-person learning with COVID-19 restrictions in place? Did you use some of your same favourite instructional strategies?
7. Please describe your experiences teaching in-person with health restrictions in place. How did health restrictions impact how you provided instruction to your students?
8. Explain the types of instructional leadership support you received from your principal. How was instructional leadership you received from your principal different or the same throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?
9. Describe the instructional leadership practices you felt were effective for you and your class during this time? Which did you perceive were less effective?
10. Is there anything else regarding your experience as a teacher throughout COVID-19 that you would like to share?

Potential follow up questions, if utilized, for principals and teachers may be: tell me more, or can you elaborate upon…, or can you share an anecdote or story that represents your experience with this? My goal as the researcher would be to use these optional follow up questions to get more information from the participant. This helped ensure that my findings can answer the guiding questions of this study as well as help provide that rich and detailed context for readers to connect with.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Baskarada (2014) stressed the importance of having clear and succinct guideline laid out in order to execute a case study well; these guidelines for data analysis are critical to the execution of this study. According to Neuman (2014), analyzing data refers to examining the data and organizing it into patterns, topics, or larger concepts. When analyzing any data, it is essential to code the data and this refers to organizing the data into conceptual categories (Neuman, 2014). According to Neuman there are three stages in coding data.

The first stage is called open coding. Open coding is performed during the first pass of the data to "locate themes and assign initial codes in a first attempt to condense the mass of data into categories" (Neuman, 2014, p. 481). During open coding, the focus is on the raw data; in the case of interviews, the raw data is comprised of the written transcripts. When reading the transcripts the first time, I looked for central or repetitive terms, names, events, or themes (Neuman, 2014). Data can be coded according in a variety of sizes; words, phrases, sentences, or entire responses can be coded under a particular concept. It is important to remain open to creating new themes or concepts as well as changing initial codes (Neuman, 2014). It is possible that some collected raw data will not be coded if it does not fit into a larger concept or if it is seen as irrelevant. This data will not be discarded but it will not be colour coded during this stage.

Neuman (2014) suggests that a list should then be created. "Such a list serves three purposes:

1. It helps to see the emerging themes at a glance.
2. It stimulates us to find themes in future coding.

3. We can use the list to build a universe of all themes in the study, which we reorganize, sort, combine, discard, or extend in further analysis" (Neuman, 2014, p. 482).

The second stage is axial coding (Neuman, 2014). The focus during this stage shifts from the raw data to the concepts and themes that were identified during open coding. "While axial coding, you ask about causes and consequences, conditions and interactions, strategies and processes" (Neuman, 2014, p. 483). The coded data is further analyzed to identify key concepts and connections. Concepts identified during the first stage could be clustered together or divided into smaller concepts dependent on what is found throughout the analysis. Some themes may be dropped or may be examined in more detail. As initial codes are clustered together it is important to look for evidence that supports core themes in order to build a dense web of support in the qualitative data. "The connection between a theme and data is strengthened by multiple instances of empirical evidence" (Neuman, 2014, p. 484).

The third and final stage is selective coding (Neuman, 2014). Prior to commencing this stage, all major themes in the data have been identified as these will guide the process. "Selective coding involves scanning all the data and previous codes, looking selectively for cases that illustrate themes, and making comparisons after most or all data collection has been completed" (Neuman, 2014, p. 484). All data and identified concepts are re-examined during this stage. Pieces of data that are exemplary or essential to supporting the broader concepts are highlighted as evidence.

For example, a teacher may speak about modeling as one of their preferred instructional strategies. Modeling, as an instructional strategy, is a twofold process that includes demonstrating a desired behaviour while simultaneously describing the actions and ongoing thought process (Harbour et al., 2015). They may discuss how they prefer to use modeling while

teaching in-person but struggled to use modeling in an effective way throughout periods of at-home learning. Modeling would have been identified in the initial open coding stage as an important term. During axial coding, the focus would be connecting the term modeling with other instructional strategies that the teacher or other teachers mentioned in their interviews. I would ask questions such as: *Do one or all teachers value modeling as an instructional strategy? Did one or all teachers struggle with effectively using modelling during at-home learning? Did a different teacher perceive themselves to be able to use modeling effectively during at-home learning; if so, why?* Then during the selective coding stage, I began looking for cases that really illustrated the findings regarding modeling as an instructional strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After the three stages were completed, as a final stage I compared themes between teacher and principal responses because one of the guiding questions in this study is *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?* It is beneficial to look for commonalities and differences between principal and teacher responses. Their perceptions may or may not be in alignment with one another. In this study if both teachers and principals agree on the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices, then the data can be reported as substantiated. If the participants disagree on something important, the different views will be looked at closely.

Ethical Considerations

As the researcher, it is my responsibility to ensure this study adhered to the ethical standards of the Tri-Council Guidelines and the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act and any applicable school district research policies once a school has been selected

(Government of Canada, 2018; Province of Alberta, 2020). The ethics application for this study went through the University of Alberta's online ethics system which is called ARISE (University of Alberta, 2022). The protocol number for this study is Pro00122395. ARISE stands for The Alberta Research Information Services System and it provides a secure online process for the human research application this study requires (University of Alberta, 2022). ARISE replaced the formerly utilized paper-based forms and processes. This application thoroughly explains this study's adherence to the University of Lethbridge's guidelines and expectations. Free, informed, and ongoing consent from all participants is integral to all research, as is ensuring that all participants are respected. For example, when conducting the member check participants may wish to modify their responses on the transcript. Any modifications will be negotiated between the participant and the researcher. There is no renumeration for participation. Concern for participant welfare was addressed by providing participants with sufficient information for them to assess the risks and/or benefits of participating in this study. Participants will remain anonymous throughout the process of this study. None of the data shared will identify participants, their school, school division, or any students or families that they work with; personal identifying information will remain confidential, and pseudonyms were provided and utilized. All data collected and information shared will be controlled and kept private by myself. All video and audio recordings will be stored on my personal home computer. This computer is password protected and I am the only person who has access to it. The only identifying information in the study will be that they were employed at an elementary school in Zone Six in the province of Alberta from March 2020 to June 2022. There are no anticipated risks or discomforts for participants related to this research. While participants will not be renumerated for their participation there are other benefits they may experience. Participants may gain a sense

of satisfaction for contributing to a larger body of knowledge as well as utilizing the interview as an outlet to share their experiences and perspectives from the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (deMarrais, 2004).

Research Plan

Figure 1. A tentative timeline for this project.

While COVID-19 may require a certain flexibility of timelines in the research plan, the following is a tentative schedule of research activities.

Summary

Throughout the period from March 2020 to June 2022, the education system encountered unforeseen challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and teachers had an obligation to provide effective instruction to their students and principals had an obligation to provide instructional leadership support to their teachers. In response to this problem this study is interested in uncovering and understanding the impact of instructional leadership practices on instruction during that fifteen-month time frame. These are important and timely topics to study. Quality teacher instruction is the most influential factor on student achievement and the second most influential factor is instructional leadership from the principal (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). It is also important to collect data regarding educators' experiences during the pandemic while it was relatively fresh in their memory.

The questions guiding this study are: *What is the impact of instructional leadership practices on elementary teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?* This study sought to answer these guiding questions while utilizing a qualitative research methodology influenced by Stake (2010) with an interpretivist approach influenced by Lin (1998). A case study research method from Baskarada (2014) was conducted in a school division. Data was collected through semi structured interviews (Mertler, 2020). Interview data was analyzed by following a three stage coding procedure as described by Neuman (2014). Trustworthiness of the data is ensured as described in chapter three (Merriam, 1985; Mertler, 2020; Schwandt et al., 2007).

Times of crisis and substantive change will occur again, perhaps not on the global scale of COVID-19 but on a provincial, community, or individual scale. As a future principal, I desire

to have a better understanding of what is needed to support staff through such times. The learnings from this study will hopefully guide myself and/or my colleagues, and/or readers of my thesis through a time of crisis.

Chapter Four: Results and Findings

From March 2020 to June 2022[2], the education system encountered unforeseen challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these numerous challenges, teachers had an obligation to continue to meet their professional responsibility to provide effective instruction to their students; likewise, principals had an obligation to provide instructional leadership support for their teachers (Alberta Education, 2020a, 2020b). This study sought to uncover and understand the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction throughout March 2020 to June 2022 by portraying the unique contexts and situations experienced by participants. This chapter presents the findings in relation to this study's guiding questions. First an overview of the case study is presented, followed by an overview of each participant, a review of the data analysis process and then the findings in relation to answering the guiding questions of this study.

Determining the Sample Unit

In Fall 2022 the superintendent of Lodgepole Pine School Division[3], where this case study was conducted, sent out an email to all principals asking them to participate in this study. Two principals replied to me indicating their interest. Both principals approached their teaching staff with invitations to participate. One principal, Tom, had one teacher who was willing to participate. The other principal did not have any teachers willing to participate. However, another teacher in Lodgepole Pine School Division heard about the study through a colleague and reached out to indicate they were interested in participating. After reading the Participant Recruitment Letter in Appendix B and reading and signing the Participant Consent Form in

[2] This will constitute the experiential window that participants will be asked to reflect upon.
[3] All names including the school division, schools, and participants are all pseudonyms.

Appendix A, all four participants were interviewed, and all other ethical standards outlined in chapter three were followed. Profiles of these participants is described in the next section.

As my participants work at different schools within one school division, I broadened the boundaries of the case study as defined in chapter three to now include a case study of a rural school division rather than of one school site. I conducted my research in Lodgepole Pine School Division which is a rural school division that spans a wide geographical area in Zone 6 in Alberta. The school division provides education services to approximately 3500 students and a significant percentage of the students are English language learners. Due to its geographical location and unique student population, Lodgepole Pine School Division has a variety of schools. There are 20 schools of various grade configurations that are in rural communities. The grade configuration of each school reflects both the size and the needs of the school's community. Many schools in Lodgepole Pine School Division have small class sizes that have necessitated double or triple grading at times. There are also 23 other schools including some outreach schools, Hutterian Brethren schools, and one elite sports academy.

I was an elementary teacher when I was in the early stages of this study, so I was interested in the experiences of elementary teachers and principals throughout COVID. As a vice principal of a K-12 school, my research still addresses the original guiding questions in a broader educational context. Specifically, the study now addresses the questions: *What is the nature of instructional leadership on ~~elementary~~ teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?*

Participants

This study had four participants. Two of the participants worked at the same school; the other two work at two different schools. The participant perspectives represent three different rural schools within Lodgepole Pine School Division. Tom is the principal of a K-12 school called Manitoba Maple School. The school is in a rural community in which some students live in the town, but many students live out of town on surrounding farms and commute to school via a school bus. Tom has been a teacher for 20 years and has been principal at Manitoba Maple School for six years. Ira joined his staff in Fall 2019 when she made the move from teaching junior high social studies to teaching a combined grade 2/3 class. The 2022/2023 school year is Ira's tenth year teaching, and she has quite a bit of experience working in different rural schools within Lodgepole Pine School Division.

Mark is the principal of Laurel Leaf Willow School which during the timeframe of this study, was a K-9 school. Mark taught for ten years before becoming the principal of Laurel Leaf Willow School for the past ten years. Laurel Leaf Willow School is in a rural community where a higher proportion of students live in the community but some commute via school bus. Molly is a high school teacher who primarily teaches English and Drama. She has eight years teaching experience, all at rural schools. For the past six years Molly has been teaching at Jack Pine School which is in a rural community similar to Laurel Leaf Willow School. Table 1 presents this information for each of the four participants.

Table 1

Participant Information

School	Principal	Teacher
Manitoba Maple School	Tom	Ira
Laurel Leaf Willow School	Mark	
Jack Pine School		Molly

Findings

The methodology and ethical considerations presented in chapter three were followed. As I conducted interviews, I transcribed them myself to ensure there was no third-party breach of confidentiality. As I completed the transcription of an interview, it was sent to the interviewee for them to complete a member check to ensure that the participant agreed that the transcript accurately reflected their ideas, perspectives and experiences (Merriam, 1985; Mertler, 2020). The member check also enhanced the credibility and confirmability of the collected data. After the member check was complete, analysis began. This section presents an overview of data analysis process and specifics of the analysis process in reference to each participant. A list of themes and subthemes for each participant is presented in this section. In the next section entitled Results, the themes, and subthemes and how they answer the study's guiding questions are explored.

Data Analysis Process

The first stage in analyzing the data was open coding (Neuman, 2014). During this stage I read the transcripts and highlighted parts of the data that were important for answering the guiding questions of this study. Some data that I highlighted were simply one word, others were

phrases or a whole sentence. During this stage I highlighted everything in the same colour then I created a list where I wrote out all the chunks of data that I had highlighted in the transcript.

After creating the list, axial coding began (Neuman, 2014). I reviewed the list and began to sort the data into themes that emerged. Each theme was assigned a colour and I colour coded the data accordingly as I clustered it. I then rewrote the data into new lists with the identified themes as headings. This step helped me identify which themes could be clustered together or divided into smaller subthemes. A colour coding system continued to be used as concepts were clustered or divided. After the axial coding when I had the data sorted into themes, I made a list of themes that had been identified for each participant. Each concept had the raw data supporting it listed underneath. During the third stage, selective coding, I went back to the raw transcripts and looked for data that illustrated major themes that had been identified during the axial coding in order to identify exemplary quotes as well as to re-examine the data (Neuman, 2014). All data and identified themes were re-examined during this stage.

Tom

Appendix C shows an example of the open coding stage of data analysis on Tom's data. Data chunks that I thought might be pertinent for answering the guiding questions were highlighted in blue. During the axial coding, Appendix D, I initially identified six themes: leadership, routine, relationships, communication, instructional practice, and stress. As I started the selective coding process, presented in Appendix E, and I re-examined both the data and the identified themes, which lead to the list changing. For examples, the concept of leadership was divided into three more specific subthemes: trust, instructional leadership, and reaction to COVID-19. In addition, the initial concept of instructional practice was divided into either stress

or instructional leadership dependent on the chunk of data. The final list of themes and subthemes from Tom's data are:

- Leadership
  - Trust
  - Instructional Leadership
  - Reaction to COVID-19
- Routine
- Relationships
- Communication
- Stress.

Ira

Appendix F shows an example of Ira's data after the open coding had been completed. Data chunks pertinent to answering the guiding questions were highlighted in blue. During the axial coding, presented in Appendix G, I initially identified six themes: instructional practice, adaptations/flexibility, relationships, communication, trust/support, and leadership. Through selective coding, presented in Appendix H, I changed the list. Many of the themes initially categorized as adaptations/flexibility were places under the concept of struggle. Additionally, data chunks under the concept of instructional practice were added to the concept of flexibility. Also re-examining the data lead me to make relationships a subtheme under the broader concept of leadership. The final list of themes and subthemes for Ira are:

- Flexibility
- Relationships
  - Leadership

- Communication
- Trust
- Struggle.

Mark

Appendix I shows an example of Mark's data after the open coding had been completed. Data chunks pertinent to answering the guiding questions were highlighted in blue. During the axial coding, Appendix J, I initially identified six themes: instructional leadership, relationships, leadership: reaction to COVID-19, challenge, wellness, and culture.

Through selective coding, presented in Appendix K, the list of concepts changed. I took the three themes that had to do with leadership, instructional leadership, leadership: reaction to COVID-19, and culture, and focused on dividing those into more specific subthemes resulting in the large theme of leadership characterized by four subthemes: instructional leadership, school culture, reaction to COVID-19, and vision. Some of the data initially sorted into instructional leadership did move over into relationships but most of the other concepts stayed the same. The final list of themes and subthemes for Mark are:

- Leadership
  - Instructional Leadership
  - School Culture
  - Reaction to COVID-19
  - Vision)
- Relationships
- Challenge
- Wellness.

Molly

Appendix L shows an example of Molly's data after the open coding had been completed. Data chunks pertinent to answering the guiding questions were highlighted in blue. Molly made many mentions of health restrictions and those were underlined in pink during this stage as well. Ultimately, I did not do anything with the data underlined in pink. During the axial coding, Appendix M, I initially identified eight themes: expectations, relationships, instructional practice, challenging, technology, wellness, flexibility, and engagement. Through selective coding, presented in Appendix N, the list changed. For example, the themes of expectations, instructional practice, along with some other chunks of data clustered together under the concept of flexibility. Additionally, I changed the name of the concept of challenging to challenge and under that broader theme I added two subthemes: lonesome and principal workload. The concept of technology was disregarded as it did not contribute towards answering either of the guiding questions. The final list of themes and subthemes for Molly are:

- Relationships
- Challenge
  - Lonesome
  - Principal Workload
- Wellness
- Flexibility.

Results

All data was analyzed specific to answer the two research questions of this study: *What is the nature of instructional leadership on practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional*

leadership practices throughout the pandemic? This section presents the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data and include illustrative examples of how they answer both guiding questions. Table 1, below, offers a summary of the themes and subthemes identified in the data for each participant.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes from Data

Tom	Ira	Mark	Molly
❖ Relationships ❖ Stress ❖ Leadership ➢ Instructional Leadership ➢ Trust ➢ Reaction to COVID-19 ❖ Routine ❖ Communication	❖ Relationships ➢ Leadership ❖ Struggle ❖ Flexibility ❖ Communication ❖ Trust	❖ Relationships ❖ Challenge ❖ Leadership ➢ Instructional Leadership ➢ School Culture ➢ Reaction to COVID-19 ➢ Vision ❖ Wellness	❖ Relationships ❖ Challenge ➢ Lonesome ➢ Principal Workload ❖ Flexibility ❖ Wellness

The following themes represent participants' perceptions of the characteristics of effective instructional leadership combined with those characteristics that were perceived to be particularly necessary during the COVID era. The three main themes include relationships, leadership, and routine. Their subthemes are explored as well.

Relationships

The theme of relationships was identified by all four participants. Mark said, "One of the greatest things I can do for instructional leadership, this might seem weird, but is to have a phenomenal relationship with students." This sentiment was supported by all participants. Mark, Tom, and Ira all spoke about connecting with kids and having open Zoom calls where teachers and students could visit and play games together when they were physically apart. Ira's weekly Zoom calls were for community building, socializing, and "trying to create that classroom environment knowing that they [students] were struggling with isolation and that sort of stuff." Molly played a Would you Rather? game instead of traditional role call attendance during her Zoom calls to engage her students.

Tom, Mark, and Ira also all spoke about relationships with parents. When schools were shutdown, Ira made weekly phone calls to all her students' parents. She said that through that practice she was "able to improve my parent communication and relationships." Tom, Ira's principal, agreed that their parent relationships have improved throughout the timeframe of this study. Tom said that parents are more complimentary than they were prior to COVID-19 adding that, "it helped our parents know that we're not just reaching out for negative things." Manitoba Maple School also sent home Easter activities for their younger learners and Tom felt that this contributed towards improved parent relationships in their building. Mark focused on getting parent feedback and ensuring parents were a part of the conversation. At one point Mark had a meeting with several concerned parents. He broke the ice by making a joke, listened to their concerns, and explained his perspective. He told them he wanted to work together. After the meeting Mark felt he "had developed a stronger community with those people who are so anti-COVID or didn't believe in COVID or thought masks were not needed."

All four participants spoke about the importance of collegial relationships. Mark at Laurel Leaf Willow School mentioned their social committee started a WhatsApp group with challenges to send pictures, write poems or share jokes. He believed this practice "continued to build that culture as a staff and also to lighten the mood a little bit, it was heavy." Ira mentioned that one afternoon Tom and their staff played pickleball together. Pickleball, plus visiting over the intercom or physically distanced in the hallway were some ways of maintaining those collegial relationships and respecting everyone's comfort zone. Tom acknowledged that most of his teachers carpool and when that couldn't happen, they needed other ways to connect with their colleagues. Molly spoke about the significance of collegial relationships being especially important when staff where at home sick or isolating. Teachers were paired up to provide a connection to the outside world for staff who had to be at home. Molly mentioned that her principal checked in with the teachers at home to make sure they were doing okay and were in a positive mental headspace. She felt that this was an essential leadership practice as it helped teachers feel less lonely and teachers didn't feel forgotten about.

Leadership

Leadership was a theme that emerged from both principal participants. It also emerged as a subtheme for Ira. This section explores the theme of leadership as well as the subthemes that emerged which include instructional leadership, trust, reaction to COVID-19, school culture, and vision. First the subtheme of reaction to COVID-19 is explored as it was a subtheme from Mark and Tom's data. I placed chunks of data relating to leadership that were specifically in response to the pandemic under this subtheme. Both Tom and Mark acknowledged how within their school communities there were numerous perspectives, beliefs, and expectations on COVID-19 and the related health restrictions that were in place. Logistically, the health restrictions poised

an issue in terms of creating cohorts, scheduling recess, physical distancing in the building, etc. When I asked Mark about challenges in regard to health restrictions he jokingly replied "Ya know what, now you're making me relive the trauma here Sandi."

Aside from the logistical nightmare that COVID-19 posed, both Mark and Tom saw opportunities that the pandemic presented. Tom recognized from social media posts that his teachers felt some pressure to seize this "opportunity to reset the whole practice." Tom advised them to pump the breaks, slow down, and make good decisions. Tom also said "you can reset and recalibrate and tweak and change a lot easier than you thought you could." He added "it's not something that's beyond our abilities to change. Yeah, that was kind of the biggest thing, just trust your people, take your time, and it will be okay." Tom also expressed that the pandemic allowed him some opportunities to collaborate with fellow principals.

instructional leadership.

When asked about instructional leadership both Mark and Tom brought up classroom observations. Mark brought up the importance of visiting classrooms frequently and following up visits with a conversation with the teacher. He stated, "it's so exciting to work behind the scenes with teachers and then to see that come to fruition in a classroom." Both men reported joining their teachers' Zoom classes when schools were shut down. In rural schools, it is common that a principal still teaches. For example, in the 2022/2023 school year Tom teaches 0.6 and has admin time for the other 0.4 of his 1.0 contract. Tom reported that while schools were shut down from March to June 2020, he "had way more time to do principal stuff than I do otherwise." In contrast, once school resumed in September 2020 Tom was in classrooms less. Tom reported that he went into classrooms less while health restrictions were in place compared to before and after and he stated "goal one was kind of stay healthy and goal two was to make

sure everything was running as it should." Ira did report that Tom was in her class less often during that time period but she still felt that he was available, approachable, and supportive. Mark had the opposite experience. As a self-proclaimed extrovert he stated "I missed the kids so much I would say I was in the classroom more in September and that was for selfish purposes." The by-product of those visits was being able to observe teachers more as an instructional leadership practice.

When asked directly about instructional leadership Tom mentioned engaging his teachers in questioning and having them question and reflect upon their profession, motivations, and their reasoning for their pedagogical technique. He prefers to engage with his teachers that way as opposed to telling them how to do something. Similarly, Mark stated that he loves "to help those teachers see what their strengths are and areas where they want to grow." Since Mark and Tom both have a lot of meaningful discussions with their staff around pedagogy, it is important to note that they both reported that levels of communication with staff maintained or increased throughout the pandemic. Ira and Molly also both reported that levels of contact and communication with their principals maintained the same or increased during the same timeframe. In fact, communication emerged as a theme from both Tom and Ira's interviews. One example of Mark's instructional leadership practice shifting during the pandemic was how he helped teachers create paper packages to be sent home. Mark asked teachers if he could see those packages especially during the first couple weeks and especially from some of his new teachers to ensure there was good instructional practice happening. Mark recognized that many parents in his community did not speak English well so it was important to consider that and to get their feedback on what would work best for them.

From Molly's perspective as a teacher, she voiced the increased workload she witnessed her principal dealing with throughout the pandemic. Molly voiced that her principals were as supportive as possible but she "felt so badly for my admin sometimes because they had to be on constantly." Molly was very aware of how quickly announcements and changes to health restrictions came at times and that her admin were working late. Molly felt that her admin gave more of herself and that her admin had spread herself pretty thin to start with.

trust.

Trust was another theme and subtheme from participants. Tom spoke about trusting his people and valuing their professional judgement. Ira, one of Tom's teachers, echoed that Tom does indeed make her feel this way. They have mutual respect. Ira stated that "he [Tom] has the confidence in us to do what we needed to do." Ira felt very supported by Tom. Ira remarked that Tom was a "very effective administrator" in that he "leads by example" and "he is willing to go for bat for you and he is always there to support you." She mentioned a few incidents that occurred in their school within the timeframe of this study and that she felt Tom had dealt with them very well. These incidents included a child being send to school when they were sick as well as some older students refusing to wear a mask and wearing freedom fighter trucker shirts. Mark also spoke to the importance of teachers feeling comfortable in being themselves; he stated: "watch carefully the magic that occurs when you give a person just enough comfort to be themselves."

vision.

Mark approached problem solving and uniting his team to work together through the challenges of COVID-19 by having a vision. Mark stated "It (COVID-19) was an excellent way to test the strength of our community." Mark was aware that members of his school community

had lost trust in government, educators, and doctors. Early on in March 2020 Mark had some difficult conversations with staff and he told them, "the conversations we have as a group, how we work through that, and how we move forward will speak the most volume to our community. More than anything we have ever done in the past." Mark also stated that "COVID was an excellent way to reveal the strength of our community." He said this in reference to how his school community collaborated and worked together through those difficult times, during which "people realized we have to be together; we have to stick together." The term Mark's staff often used was "make it as normal as possible." Mark's long-term thinking and vision had the big picture in mind: "Make every day as normal as possible so that those kids in ten years they look back and say I remember COVID, and school wasn't great because we couldn't do this instead of it was horrible because every single thing we did in school changed." Mark felt that his vision combined with the continued focus on community, caring for kids, and making sure parents were a part of the conversation helped his school through the pandemic.

school culture.

Mark was also very aware of how his school culture both contributed and aided in their journey as a school community through the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated that, "It [COVID-19] was an excellent way to test the strength of the culture that myself and our community is working to build." Mark attributes his teachers opting to work at the school, as opposed to working from home, as well as Zoom classes and the afternoon open Zoom calls as the momentum that kept the school's culture and development going through the shutdown period. Mark stated that the "strong staff culture and community culture really carried myself as a school leader through those months."

Routine

Tom recognized early in the pandemic that students and teachers would require a different type of structure and routine. Staff members of Manitoba Maple School took a few days in March to collect their thoughts and get a plan put together. Ultimately, that time was appreciated by the entire school community. Tom stated, "it showed the parents that we cared enough to kind of take some time and establish a plan." Part of providing this routine was scheduling the Zoom calls for different grades as Tom was aware that some rural household Wifi might not be able to sustain multiple Zoom calls, plus mom and dad working, at the same time. Part of this new routine also included families picking up paper packages bimonthly. This allowed, as Tom stated, "parents to still feel connected to the building" and parents said things to Tom such as, "they [staff] have done a lot of work to get this here."

Tom also recognized that people are creatures of habit and that this carefully planned new routine would offer some stability to staff and students during this challenging time. A new twist on some traditions, such as providing Easter baskets to families, allowed a sense of normalcy as students had the opportunity to engage in seasonal activities. Upon the return of in-person learning in September 2020, Tom could also notice differences in students who had routines at home and those who did not. Some rural kids came back to school and had lost weight because they had been working on the farm and some town kids had [seemingly] just been playing video games for months. Tom stated, "So, we saw kids when they came back in the Fall after that May-June, there was, we saw gaps." These gaps lead to an increased number of WIAT[4] tests conducted at Manitoba Maple School.

[4] WIAT stands for Weschsler Individual Achievement Test which is a level B assessment

Challenges and Wellness

Flexibility came up as a theme for both teacher participants. They reported needing to be flexible on many things from instructional strategies utilized during COVID-19 to the stress and anxiety of dealing with the unknown in an unprecedented situation. This section presents the data related to challenges posed by the pandemic that required flexibility as well as the theme of wellness that emerged in response to those challenges.

All participants had the theme challenge, or a synonym such as struggle or stress, emerge as a theme during their interviews. Molly mentioned that the unprecedented and constantly evolving situation made things overwhelming, difficult, and increased her workload. Molly referred to instances through the timeframe of this study that felt very lonely and isolating. She stated, "we get into teaching as we're people-people, we like people, and we like to be around people, and we didn't get into teaching to sit in front of a computer screen and stare at black screens all day." Similarly, Mark struggled without having kids and community members in the school building in the same capacity as before. Mark voiced that he was not as "charged to get in there and make a difference." Mark reiterated Molly's belief that, "I didn't become a teacher to sit at a computer and engage with kids over a computer screen, I did this because I want to be in the classroom connecting with kids."

In September 2020, Mark said that Laurel Leaf Willow School lost 60 students. He felt that parents conflated their community, principal, and teacher with government decisions and "it was just one and we are against you all kind of thing." Ira also spoke to this timeframe being a challenging professional time, specifically in 2022 when there were big protests in Ottawa and around Alberta, including the blocking of a national border crossing. Ira stated that, "the larger political structure of this time, and the antagonism, and the kind of side attack on education has

been hard." Both Ira and Mark made comments about how polarizing COVID-19 was in their school communities. As an example, Mark stated, "COVID did a great job of revealing the struggles that we have in working together through differences."

Mark voiced that seeing his teachers struggle was very difficult and that he supported them through a lot of one-on-one conversations, visits, and by focusing on his staffs' wellness. Social committees mentioned above contributed positively towards staff wellness, collegial relationships, and the continued building of the school culture. Mark was very aware of the need to lighten the mood for his staff, and he also used humour to break the ice when meeting with parents as well. Similarly, Tom was very aware of his staffs' health when he stated, "goal one was kind of stay healthy and goal two was to make sure everything was running as it should." For Molly, teachers being paired up to support each other when one had to be home, was very beneficial. It provided a connection to another adult, to the outside world, and helped with the mental health challenges of isolation. She stated that, "it was less lonely, and teachers didn't feel forgotten about."

Summary

The guiding questions of this study are: *What is the nature of instructional leadership on practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?* This chapter presented the major themes and subthemes to answer these questions. As both questions have to do with the concept of instructional leadership, it is important to focus on the definition utilized throughout this study, proposed by Robinson (2010): "Instructional leadership refers to those sets of leadership practices that involve the planning, evaluation, coordination, and improvement of teaching and learning" (p. 2). Thus, instructional leadership encompasses

what a principal does to impact the quality of instruction that students receive in their school which will positively impacting student learning. There are a variety of behaviours, attributes, and actions that principals may take that are within this definition of instructional leadership.

Participants believed that effective instructional leadership is four-fold. First and foremost, leaders maintain and extend relationships between all members of the school community. As Tom said, “parents have seen their kids in a learning environment.” Working with parents to provide manageable and appropriate instruction for their children when schools were closed was so crucial for at-home learning to work. Student and collegial relationships were important, particularly to support mental health and wellbeing. Trust remained a cornerstone of relationships as teachers were required to try new things and be vulnerable; they needed that trust and support from their principals to do so. As Ira said, “I made a Facebook post within the first month listing all the things I had learned to do, and it was about 40 things.”

Some traditional instructional leadership practices shifted. For example, in-person classroom visits became popping on to a teachers Zoom class. If Zoom calls were more focused on socializing, leaders took note of paper packages that went home were done to ensure quality instructional practices. Communication and having focused conversations with teachers remained important throughout the pandemic and in the case of the four participants, communication levels were maintained while adhering to health restrictions.

All four participants acknowledged that the timeframe of this study, March 2020 to June 2022, was a challenging one for them. There was a lot of stress, anxiety, and dealing with an unprecedented change to society that seemingly occurred overnight. Molly mentioned that her own workload increased, and she perceived her principal’s workload to have increased as well. A focus on wellness and mental health was acknowledged and appreciated by all four participants.

During the chaos and the emergence of a stressful and unprecedented pandemic, Tom advised his staff at Manitoba Maple School to slow down and make good decisions. Tom also had his team take the time to plan and he acknowledged early on that all students would need a new routine and structure.

In Mark's school having a vision, maintaining focus on their school culture, and caring for kids were some keys to navigating his staff through the pandemic. Mark's vision to keep things as normal as possible and thinking about how students would reflect on their experiences ten years down the road, helped focus his team on working together and doing the best they could to try to maintain levels of student learning.

In summary, the nature of instructional leadership during COVID-19 focused on relationships, maintaining relational trust, modifying existing leadership practices as necessary, admitting there were challenges, focusing on wellness, having a vision, maintaining school culture and continuing to do what was best for kids under the circumstances.

Teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic included, for example: Tom was proud of how parent relationships improved throughout the pandemic and was illustrated by teachers putting out baskets of Easter activities for families with younger children, even younger than preschool age, to take home. Parents felt like the staff cared, students were given the opportunity to engage in some normal holiday activities, and it was fun. Mark also recognized the importance of relationships and voiced that it was very crucial to get parental feedback on instructional practice while school was shut down and also to include parents in the conversation of returning to school with health restrictions in place. Both principals seem to agree that relationships, especially with parents and the community, were most helpful for their schools throughout the pandemic.

Molly and Ira both valued the focus on their wellness and mental health as helpful instructional leadership practice. Both spoke to the challenges of the pandemic. Molly felt isolated at times and found the constant change to be difficult. Molly felt supported by her principal and added that her principal focused more on mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing as opposed to instructional support. She spoke about a buddy system for teachers who were at home sick or on isolation. Ira mentioned that she and her colleagues had less emotional reserve and energy to deal with things that they normally would have. Tom's support and prioritization of Ira's health and wellness was very important and helpful to her. She also mentioned several times the importance of the relational trust that she has with her principal and how supported that makes her feel as a professional.

In summary, teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic were the ongoing focus on relationships between all members of the school community but specifically with parents, maintaining relational trust, and the focus on wellness and mental health.

Chapter Five: Discussions and Conclusions

From March 2020 to June 2022[5], the education system encountered unforeseen challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these numerous challenges, teachers had an obligation to continue to meet their professional responsibility to provide effective instruction to their students; likewise, principals had an obligation to provide instructional leadership support for their teachers (Alberta Education, 2020a, 2020b). This study sought to uncover and understand the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction throughout March 2020 to June 2022 by portraying the unique contexts and situations experienced by participants. This chapter begins by connecting the themes and subthemes that emerged from my research back to the literature presented in chapter two. Next, connections to the LQS and recommendations for principals and leadership practice are presented. Limitations of the findings of this study are also offered.

The literature review in chapter two was split into three main sections: teaching practice, instructional leadership, and teaching, learning, and leading during COVID-19. Doing so was crucial to defining and exploring teaching practice; this chapter focuses on connecting the themes and subthemes of this study back to the literature contained within both the instructional leadership section and teaching, learning, and leading during COVID section. All findings and discussion attempt to inform an answer to the guiding questions of this study which are: *What is the impact of instructional leadership practices on teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?*

[5] This will constitute the experiential window that participants will be asked to reflect upon.

Instructional Leadership

This study utilized a definition of instructional leadership proposed by Robinson (2010): "Instructional leadership refers to those sets of leadership practices that involve the planning, evaluation, coordination, and improvement of teaching and learning" (p. 2). Thus, instructional leadership encompasses what a principal does to impact the quality of instruction that students receive in their school that will positively impact student learning. There are a variety of behaviours, attributes, and actions that principals may take that are within this definition of instructional leadership. Robinson (2010) distinguished between instructional leadership and effective instructional leadership, the second being more likely to improve student learning and achievement. Three interrelated characteristics comprised effective instructional leadership: (a) using deep leadership content knowledge (b) solving complex school-based problems, while (c) building relational trust with staff, parents, and students (Robinson, 2010). Her findings connect with the themes from this study as relationships was a theme for all participants and trust was a theme for one participant and a subtheme for another. Robinson (2010) also discussed how leadership, as a social process, makes relationships important because effective relationships with staff separates leadership from other sources of influence such as force, coercion, or manipulation. Relationships amongst all members of a school's community was seen to be valuable as data from the interviews focused on relationships with students, relationships with parents, and collegial relationships.

It is important to distinguish between trust and relational trust as it is relational trust that Robinson (2010) said is a characteristic of effective instructional leadership. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) defined trust as the willingness to be vulnerable to someone based on the confidence that they will be honest, open, reliable, benevolent and competent. Relational trust,

however, refers to the extent to which educators within a school perceive each other was fulfilling the expectations and obligations appropriate to their role (Robinson, 2010). In schools, educators do have a mutual dependence on each other and their consequent vulnerability to failure in someone else's performance (Robinson, 2010). It is evident that there is relational trust between Ira and Tom as Ira mentioned often how supported she felt by Tom through comments such as, "And then just knowing that he is willing to go to bat for you and he is always there to support you." When Mark was describing the need for his staff to work together through COVID and the message doing so would send to the community he was very aware that the actions his staff took could have resulted in a loss of trust. He stated, "Your school leader and people who you trust your kids with can't even figure it out, I mean – talk about a great way to lose trust in your school and in your education system." This statement demonstrates Mark's thoughtfulness in preserving relationships and trust on an ongoing basis, through good times and through times of crisis.

Robinson's (2010) finding the necessity of solving complex school-based problems also connects to the subtheme of reaction to COVID-19; when I asked Mark about the challenges he faced when we returned to in-person learning with health restrictions he said: "Ya know what, now you're making me relive the trauma here." Both Mark and Tom spoke about the logistics of returning to in-person learning with health restrictions in Fall 2020. In response to a question about this timeframe Mark stated, "Missing kids was so difficult, but I don't think it was more difficult than exactly what you are talking about." Mark and Tom took appropriate steps for their size of school to abide current health restrictions. Examples of the logistics they had to figure out included staggering recesses, cohorting students, separate entrances and exits, and making sure not too many students were in the bathroom at the same time.

Some actions that effective instructional leaders take include attending to teachers' and their impact on student learning, attending to instructional challenges, being present in classrooms, aligning professional learning to enhance student learning, holding high standards, and ensuring that the school's culture is conducive to learning for all (Hattie, 2015). These findings invoke imagery of a principal being present and engaged in all aspects of students' learning while also sharing curricular and pedagogical expertise with teachers. This image of effective instructional leadership is also in alignment with my findings. Three participants spoke about principals being present in classrooms which is under the instructional leadership theme that emerged from the data. Due to the health restrictions in the 2020/2021 school year, Tom said that, "I wasn't going into classrooms as much as I do now or did before." However, in that same timeframe Mark stated,

> I missed kids so much I would say I was in the classroom more in September and that was for selfish purposes. But the end result I was able to observe teachers more so there was an increase in visits and the by-product was that instructional leadership. The focus was just getting back to hanging out with kids.

In alignment with Hattie's (2015) actions that effective instructional leaders take is the concept of principals supporting teachers as learners. Teachers are expected to engage in career long learning, as per the *Teaching Quality Standard,* and the amount of learning teachers did during the COVID-19 was quite high (Alberta Education, 2020b). As Ira said, "I remember at one point I made a Facebook post within the first month listing all the things I had learned to do, and it was about 40 things." As principals work to build individual and collective efficacy amongst their staff, it is essential to understand there are different levels of competence that educators work through as they acquire and integrate new knowledge and skills. Adams et al.

(2019) presented four stages of competency that educators can progress through. The four stages are:

1. Unconscious incompetence. This is when an educator may not understand how to do something and maybe ignorant of their deficit. During this stage, educators may deny the benefit of learning a specific skill.
2. Conscious incompetence. This is when an educator may not know how to do something, but they acknowledge this deficit and the value of learning a new skill. During this stage, it is crucial that educators are supported in making mistakes while they are in this point of the learning process.
3. Unconscious competence is when an educator can perform a skill well but is unable to articulate what the essence of the skill is or how decisions were made regarding the use of the skill. There is often a lot of conscious involvement in executing the new skill at this stage.
4. Conscious competence is the fourth and final stage in skill acquisition. At this stage, an educator is considered to have a high level of efficacy. The educator has had a lot of experience using the skill and performs it efficiently. They make intentional decisions around the use of the skill and have a full understanding of the rationale and impact of the skill. The educator may also be so proficient that they can teach this skill to others.

Educators will enter the different levels of competency throughout their career as they endeavour to incorporate new skills and knowledge into their practice. School leaders need to create the conditions, provide opportunities, and facilitate professional learning that will support teachers to engage in self-reflection upon their areas of unexamined competence and support their growth in areas of unconscious competence (Adams et al., 2019). While educators progress through the

four stages of competence, it is essential for a leader to presume their competence. Presuming a teacher's competence is part of promoting innovation and fostering teacher commitment to continuous improvement and learning as outlined in the LQS (Alberta Education, 2020a). Teachers need to feel supported and trusted to take risks and implement new techniques in their practice (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

Leithwood et al. (2008) claimed that principals have an impact on teachers' emotions, motivations, commitments, beliefs, and in how supported they feel in their practice. Some factors that impact a teachers' emotions and practice include morale, job satisfaction and commitment, stress, and their own sense of efficacy (Leithwood et al., 2008). This is important as it has been demonstrated that teachers emotions have an impact on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2008). When teachers have a low sense of efficacy, they can feel discouraged and frustrated, which can have a negative impact on student performance (Ashton, 1984). The pandemic certainly had an impact on educators' sense of efficacy as well as their emotions; this is evident in the themes of challenge/struggle/stress, and flexibility. Ira summed this theme up well when she stated, "I think just in general it has been very challenging professional time. The burn out and the anxiety and the stress just in general, with me personally and with coworkers, has been a big struggle, right." Molly also voiced that she struggled throughout this timeframe and in a unique way out of these participants since she is a high school teacher. She stated,

> We had other mandates that kids had to be passed along to the next grade level and then going into the 2020/2021 school year was very hard because we were trying to balance this pandemic and all these reactions with school shutdowns, and we had kids being sent home.

She also mentioned that when teachers were out sick or isolating that, "other teachers who didn't get sick who had to pick up the slack." Molly and her colleagues were already in a challenging situation and then had to remain constantly flexible to support colleagues who were sick or isolating. Principals have the ability to have a positive or negative impact on many of these factors; as Leithwood et al. (2008) explained, leaders were quite influential on teachers' commitment, resilience, and effectiveness. This connects to the wellness theme that emerged from the study's data. As Tom said, "goal one was kind of stay healthy and goal two was to make sure everything was running as it should." Tom's goals were clear to Ira as she stated, "I also like that he is always looking out for everyone's welfare, that is foremost in his mind."

Vision was a sub theme under leadership for one participant and this is corroborated by Adams et al. (2019) who explained that the actions of principals which are most conducive to improving student achievement include: systematic monitoring of student progress, classroom visits, teacher observations, and generating a common vision amongst staff. When Mark was having some difficult conversations with staff around planning throughout this timeframe, he knew the importance of generating a common vision amongst his staff. He stated,

> We had some very difficult conversations and I said to the staff, the conversations we are going to have over the next few [and this was right at the start in March 2020], the conversations we have as a group, how we work through that, and how we move forward will speak the most volume to our community. More than anything we have ever done in the past.

Mark was aware of the importance of bringing his staff together with a focus on community and doing what is best for kids. He stated,

> I do think that some of the moves we made during COVID about still focusing on community and caring for kids, and making sure parents were a part of the conversation, I think those things aided in the fact that now we are through COVID and when people look back they can say I am pretty happy with how Laurel Leaf Willow School dealt with it.

Teaching, Learning, and Leading during COVID-19

Feelings of isolation and loneliness affected all members of the school community as everyone was affected by this pandemic and corresponding new health concerns and health restrictions (Kaden, 2020). One teacher participant, Molly, spoke a lot about feeling isolated and alone with the subtheme of lonesome emerging under the theme of challenge. Molly said, "So at home learning, especially from March 2020 to June 2020 it was again very isolating and very lonely because I was sitting in my classroom staring at a computer screen." Adams et al. (2020) found that Albertan principals reported concerns for the mental health of their school community and found high levels of anxiety in their schools. Principals should be mindful that teachers were experiencing the pandemic two ways: personally and professionally. Ira expressed this when she stated, "It's always hard to balance your professional life and your wellness." This connects to the themes of challenge/struggle/stress that were expressed by all participants. One challenge voiced by all participants was around missing kids during at-home learning. Mark said, "Coming to work I was not as excited, excited isn't the right word, but charged to get in there and make a difference."

A principal's ability to create a plan with a clear sense of direction that is also flexible enough to adapt for changes in the environment was found to be beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). There is a connection here to the themes of flexibility and

routine. Tom stated that "what struck me is that the kids needed structure…Our teachers also needed a structure and routine." The leader understands that while the intent of the plan may not change, how the plan is implemented or what it looks like it likely to change (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020). Principals need to set the direction during uncertain times because, "As a leader there is a choice to be overwhelmed by the context, or to try and shape the context to promote organizational success" (Gurr & Drysdale, 2020, p. 28). Right away when schools were shutdown, Tom communicated to parents that he and his staff needed time to plan and the parents in his community appreciated it. Tom stated,

> That was good. And it showed the parents that we cared enough to kind of take some time and establish a plan. So just the whole we talk about schools being quick and adaptive and able to pivot on a dime. Well yeah you can pivot, and it can be on a dime but you don't have to make it look like that.

While this literature and the data from participants is focused specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic, it is both a time of crisis and a time of substantive change. While not all educators may experience a second pandemic, it is likely that principals and teachers alike will encounter a crisis or a time of substantive change again in their careers. These situations do not have to occur on a global scale to be very real for a specific school, school division, or individual educator. The big picture conclusions and recommendations in the remainder of this chapter can apply to all times of crisis and substantive change.

Connections to Professional Leadership Standard

This section connects the findings of this study back to the *Leadership Quality Standard* (LQS) before making recommendations for school leaders. The LQS is a government mandated policy that applies to all principals in Alberta. It describes the professional expectations that

principals must meet in order to create conditions under which teachers can do their best work (Government of Alberta, 2021). The *LQS* comprises a variety of important skills, behaviours, and attributes of effective principals, described amongst nine competencies:

1. *Fostering Effective Relationships*
2. *Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning*
3. *Embodying Visionary Leadership*
4. *Leading a Learning Community*
5. *Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Metis and Inuit*
6. *Providing Instructional Leadership*
7. *Developing Leadership Capacity*
8. *Managing School Operations and Resources*
9. *Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context* (Alberta Education, 2020a).

Competency Six specifically relates to the guiding questions: *What is the nature of instructional leadership on practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?* Competency Six- *Providing Instructional Leadership*- is described as "a leader ensures that every student has access to quality teaching and optimum learning experiences" (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 6). In the *Education Act*, the first listed responsibility of a principal is "must provide instructional leadership in the school" (Government of Alberta, 2020c, p. 132). Thus, it is essential for principals in Alberta to develop a clear understanding of instructional leadership as they are responsible for providing it to their staff and by so doing

ensure that all students are provided with optimum opportunity to learn. This is especially important during times of crisis, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Instructional leadership did emerge as subtheme under the theme of leadership for both principal participants. When asked about his approach to instructional leadership Mark stated, “It’s so exciting to work behind the scenes with teachers and then to see that come to fruition in a classroom,” and “One of the greatest things I can do for instructional leadership, this might seem weird, but is to have a phenomenal relationship with students.” In response to the same topic Tom talked about wanting his staff to be vulnerable when he stated, “So, I want to see people trying different roles and I want to see people trying different things that may or may not work but just putting themselves at risk,” and

> I see it as more of a sharing thing than a telling thing. A lot more questioning, having teachers question their profession and question their motivations and question their reasoning for their pedagogical technique. Rather than me telling them this is how you do this.

Competency One – Fostering Effective Relationships – is described as “a leader builds positive working relationships with members of the school community and local community” (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 3). This connects directly to the theme of relationships that emerged from all participants. Under the theme of relationships data pertained to collegial relationships, relationships with students and their parents, and relationships with the community. Between ongoing and effective communication and parents coming in twice a month to pick up paper packages, “parents felt connected to the building,” as Tom stated. One positive lasting change from COVID-19 for Manitoba Maple School was improved relationships

between staff and parents and staff comfort with communicating with parents. In response to asking if teachers contact parents more now than they did prior to the pandemic Tom stated,

> Yeah, I do and they're using, a lot of them use Dojo for their mass emails more often. And we've got um a couple more newsletters that go home in the lower grades than did before. So that's good, it's just touch base in a variety of ways and that's something I always talk about, but this is where they had time to be like "ah ha". Now when I call, they're like on my side already.

One of the indicators under Competency One states: "demonstrating a commitment to health and well-being of all teachers, staff and students" (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 3). This indicator connects to another theme that emerged from the data: wellness. Wellness emerged as a theme from two participants, but the topic of wellbeing and health was mentioned during the interview by all four participants. As explained in the above section, Tom's focus on his staff's wellbeing was appreciated by Ira and was beneficial for their relationship because Ira felt supported by Tom.

Competency Three – Embodying Visionary Leadership – is described as " a leader collaborates with the school community to create and implement a shared vision for student success, engagement, learning and well-being" (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 3). Collaboration amongst school teams and with parents in order to provide education throughout both at-home learning and after the return to in-person learning with restrictions was mentioned by all four participants. The subthemes of school culture and vision from Mark's data connect well with this competency as well. Mark was very aware of the necessity of bringing people together to work towards a common goal so that they could look back positively on their efforts one day. This was demonstrated when he stated:

> We had some very difficult conversations and I said to the staff, the conversations we are going to have over the next few [and this was right at the start in March 2020], the conversations we have as a group, how we work through that, and how we move forward will speak the most volume to our community. More than anything we have ever done in the past.

Part of collaboration and working together for what's best for students requires communication which was another theme from two participants. The theme of routine that emerged from Tom's data also came from the desire to do what is best for the school community during uncertain times. Tom stated that, "It was important that we kept traditions and that we established routines early."

Overall, the data and findings from this study confirm many aspects of the professional competencies that comprise the LQS. The themes of challenge/struggle/stress emerged from data surrounding participants' experiences and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 was both a time of crisis and a time of substantive change. There are lessons to be learned here that can apply to other times of crisis whether they are on a global or a local scale. Three key learnings for leaders emerge from the last two sections that looked at connections between the themes and subthemes of this study between literature and the LQS. The first is the importance of fostering effective relationships between all members of the school community. Working with parents to provide manageable and appropriate instruction for their children when schools were closed was so crucial for at-home learning to work. In reference to having both students and parents join open Zoom calls Mark said, "I think that was really neat to see, that we offered that open piece for kids and parents to join in and it was really nice and able to keep that culture and development going." Student and collegial relationships were important, particularly to support

mental health and wellbeing. Trust remained a cornerstone of relationships as teachers were required to try new things and be vulnerable; they needed that trust and support from their principals to do so. As Ira said, "I made a Facebook post within the first month listing all the things I had learned to do, and it was about 40 things."

The second learning is the importance of focusing on the wellness of your staff. As Ira stated, "It's always hard to balance your professional life and your wellness," and this proved to be especially true during a time of crisis such as the pandemic. Tom made the health and wellness of his staff a clear priority and it was noticed and appreciated by Ira who is one of his teachers. Mark recognized that his staff were going through a hard time and through their social committee they were able to "continue to build that culture as staff and also to lighten the mood a little bit, it was heavy," as Mark said. Mark also shared a leadership strategy of his that he implemented at this time to support staff with their wellness. Mark stated,

> It was 1:1 where I would go connect with those teachers and one leadership strategy I have learned and I use often is at the end of those conversations I ask my teachers, how can I be a better principal for you and for your class? What can I do better to help you? When we say to people, hey let me know if you need help. Often, if things aren't going well, they aren't going to reach out and say I need help, can you do this for me? More than often, they are going to say I'll just do it myself. But to sit there and have those one-on-one conversations where I can dive into and say how can I be better? Give me the tangible things I can do to support you, and this is my character and I think quite a common male characteristic, let's solve it. Give me the checklist and I'm going to solve everything in your world, right? And it was a good lesson for me that no, there is no

checklist to solve with COVID, or for the struggles some of my teachers were going through.

While there may not have been a checklist or easy solution, Mark's approach with intentional and direct 1:1 conversations with his staff improved collegial relationships and demonstrated his caring and empathy for this staff as individuals.

The third learning related to the importance of bringing your staff together with a common vision. Indicator (g) under Competency One of the LQS states, "acting consistently in the best interest of students" (Alberta Education, 2020a, p. 3). Tom demonstrated this when he took time to collaboratively plan what at-home learning would like with this staff. The time and dedication that the staff put into planning was appreciated by parents. Mark was also cognizant of the importance of uniting his staff to work together in the best interest of students. Mark's vision to keep things as normal as possible and thinking about how students would reflect on their experiences ten years down the road, helped focus his team on working together and doing the best they could to try to maintain levels of student learning.

Limitations of the Findings

This study gathered data through semi structured interviews from participants in a small rural setting and focused on the timeframe and topic of leadership throughout COVID-19. The methodology and ethical considerations presented in chapter three were followed. This study is not intended to tell every principal how to conduct instructional leadership on a day-to-day basis. This study portrays the experiences and opinions of the four participants. The study did have a small sample size of participants and is specific to a rural context throughout a time of crisis. I did conduct an ethical and rigorous study, however there may be some errors due to the small sample size, the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rural context in which participants

work. The participants' memory or their perspectives and biases could be considered sources of error for the data that would prove difficult to confirm or deny as well.

Recommendations and Future Directions

One recommendation for practice and policy would be the amount of administrative time allocated to principals of small rural schools. As demonstrated throughout this paper relevant and current literature and the LQS support the data and findings from this study. Teachers' and principals' found a focus on relationships, maintaining relational trust, a focus on wellness and mental health, and having a common vision to be effective instructional leadership practices throughout a time of crisis. For principals to have the time to engage in these practices, they need to have adequate administrative time allocated to them. In rural settings, it is common for principals to teach. For example, Tom in the 2022/2023 school year teaches for 0.6 leaving him with 0.4 admin time to make up his 1.0 FTE. As Tom stated,

> So as an instructional leader, I find now it's tricky because I work as a teacher quite often. So, I can only get into classrooms at specific times on specific days so I don't see the good breadth of what I would normally like to of what teachers are up to.

In fact, while schools were shutdown from March to June 2020 Tom felt like he had more time to engage with the admin side of his roll. He stated,

> I remember principals would call and say "Oh man I am so busy right now" and I'm like "really?" Cause I had way more time to do principal stuff than I do otherwise. I can do morning check ins, I can do afternoons, I can make the phone calls to families "how are you guys making out?"

A subtheme that emerged from Molly's data was principal workload. She noticed that her principal's workload increased throughout the timeframe of this study. She stated, "my admin were pushing themselves very thin."

If receiving more administrative time is not an immediate option, engaging in distributed leadership is an option for a principal. Distributed leadership has been recognized as a contributor to organizational growth and success (Harris, 2012). Harris (2012) describes distributed leadership as the principal relinquishing some authority and power while developing the leadership capacity and capability of their teachers. Meaning, principals would intentionally delegate tasks and/or decision making to a teacher or group of teachers. This develops the leadership capacity of the teachers involved and reduces the workload of the principal.

In summary, a lot of the suggestions and take aways for principals as well as the findings for effective instructional leadership practices in this study are also recommended as best practice outside of times of crisis by both literature and the LQS. For principals to really engage in this meaningful work, and to provide principals with an increased ability to focus on balance and wellness for themselves and their staff members, they must be given adequate administrative time. There should be a policy regarding a minimum amount of administrative time that a principal receives regardless of whether they work in an urban or rural setting. An option for maximizing available administrative time for principals is engaging in distributed leadership.

Future Directions

A possible direction for future study is researching the recognized advantage or disadvantage of existing collaborative structures during the COVID-19 pandemic or a different time of crisis. Adams et al. (2020) had found that throughout COVID-19 principals relied on three practices to maintain a sense of meaning, purpose, and identity as they faced the challenges

of the pandemic: (a) committing to established structures that were effective, (b) emphasizing the creation and utilization of professional relationships, and (c) maintaining a focus on clear communication. It would be worthwhile to explore what established structures, collaborative or not, were viewed as effective or ineffective and how these practices are supportive or not throughout a time of crisis or both a principal and a teacher.

Conclusion

This study investigated the primary research questions of: *What is the nature of instructional leadership on practices during the COVID-19 pandemic?* and *What were teachers' and principals' perceptions of the most effective and/or helpful instructional leadership practices throughout the pandemic?* It was conducted through qualitative methodology using semi structured interviews of two principals and two teachers. The themes identified by participants as being the most effective leadership practices during the pandemic included: fostering effective relationships with the school community, maintaining relational trust, focusing on the wellness of staff, and uniting the staff to work together towards a common vision of what is best for students. These leadership practices are also supported by literature and the LQS. Whether it is another pandemic, a time of crisis, or simply supporting one staff member who is going through a tough personal time; focusing on these leadership practices will help a principal through the situation. As Leithwood et al. (2008) claimed, principals have an impact on teachers' emotions, motivations, commitments, beliefs, and in how supported they feel in their practice which in turn impacts student learning. Through fostering effective relationships with the school community, maintaining relational trust, focusing on the wellness of staff, and uniting the staff to work together towards a common vision of what is best for students; principals can engage in effective instructional leadership.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Participant Consent Form

Study Title: Perspective on Instructional Leadership Throughout a Pandemic

Contact Information
Principal Investigator: Sandi Hughes
Graduate Student at University of Lethbridge
Faculty of Education
sandi.symington@uleth.ca

Supervisor: Pam Adams
Associate Professor
adams@uleth.ca

Dear Participant:

You are being invited to take part in a research study[6]. Before you take part, a member of the study team is available to explain the project and you are free to ask any questions about anything you do not understand. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a principal and/or a teacher employed at the school in which I am conducting a case study. I will be asking the principal and all eligible teachers to participate. The principal and teachers involved must have been employed at the same school from March 2020 to June 2022.

What is the reason for doing the study?
The goal of this research study is to develop an understanding of instructional leadership practices throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction throughout March 2020 to June 2022. The information collected from this study will be presented in my thesis.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be taking part in one interview which will take place in-person or online. You and the principal investigator will choose together which medium works best for the interview. Online interviews will be conducted via Zoom. The purpose of the interview is to explore, in detail, principal and teacher perceptions of instructional leadership practices. The interview will require about 30-45 minutes of your time.

[6] Ethics ID: Pro00122395

If the interview takes place in-person the audio will be recorded. If the interview takes place online the video and audio will be recorded. You may turn your camera off during an online interview. Recording devices as well as the data collected will be encrypted. The recordings will then be transcribed by the principal investigator of the study, Sandi Hughes. The transcription of the interview will be provided to you for you to verify. You will have two weeks after receiving the transcription to contact Sandi to discuss any questions, comments, or concerns you may have.

What are the risks and discomforts?
There are no anticipated risks or discomforts related to this research. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. Your continued participation is as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. You may choose to not answer any question, or you may withdraw from the interview at any time for any reason. If you do this, all information from you will be destroyed.

What are the benefits to me?
There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this study; however, you will be contributing to a better understanding of instructional leadership practices throughout challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Do I have to take part in the study?
Being in this study is your choice. If you decide to be in the study, you can change your mind and stop being in the study up to two weeks after receiving the transcription of your interview. After that point we cannot remove you from the study because (explain the reasons). To withdraw from the study please contact Sandi Hughes at sandi.symington@uleth.ca

Even if you remain in the research study, you may choose to withdraw some or all of your responses by contacting Sandi Hughes within two weeks of receiving the transcription of your interview. We are unable to remove your answers after that time because the data from your interview will have been amalgamated with all other data.

Will I be paid to be in the research?
There is no reimbursement nor incentives for participating in this study.

Will my information be kept private?
Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity and confidentiality. At no time will your name or any identifying information be revealed. During this study we will do everything we can to make sure that all information you provide is kept private. No information relating to this study that includes your name will be released outside of the researcher's office or published by the researchers unless you give us your express permission. Sometimes, by law, we may have to release your information with your name so we cannot guarantee absolute privacy. However, we will make every legal effort to make sure that your information is kept private

What will happen to the information that I provide?
All the data collected in this study will be kept in a locked cabinet or on a password-protected computer, and only the researchers will have access to them. Collected information from interviews will be retained for five years from the completion of the study before being deleted.

The results from this study will be presented in my finished thesis. A copy of the finished thesis will be made available to all participants.

What if I have questions?

If you have any questions about the research now or later, please contact Sandi Hughes at sandi.symington@uleth.ca

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office at reoffice@ualberta.ca and quote Ethics ID Pro00122395. This office is independent of the study investigators.

How do I indicate my agreement to be in this study?

By signing below, you understand:

- That you have read the above information and have had anything that you do not understand explained to you to your satisfaction.
- That you will be taking part in a research study.
- That you may freely leave the research study at any time.
- That you do not waive your legal rights by being in the study
- That the legal and professional obligations of the investigators and involved institutions are not changed by your taking part in this study.
- That you agree to the data being stored as part of a data repository

SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT

_____

Name of Participant

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

_____ _____

Name of Person Obtaining Consent Contact Number

A copy of this information and consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Letter
Study Title: Perspective on Instructional Leadership Throughout a Pandemic

Contact Information
Principal Investigator: Sandi Hughes
Graduate Student at University of Lethbridge
Faculty of Education
sandi.symington@uleth.ca

Dear Participant,

My name is Sandi Hughes and I am looking to conduct a case study of an elementary school in order to develop a better understanding of instructional leadership practices throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the nature of instructional leadership practices that impacted teacher instruction throughout March 2020 to June 2022. The information collected from this study will be presented in my thesis. You are being asked to participate because you are a principal and/or teacher at the school in which I am doing the case study and you have been employed at this school throughout the March 2020 to June 2022 timeframe.

If you agree to participate, you will be taking part in one interview which will take place in-person or online. We will decide together whether to do an in-person or virtual interview. Virtual interviews will be conducted via Zoom. The purpose of the interview is to explore, in detail, principal and teacher perceptions of instructional leadership practices. The interview will require about 30-45 minutes of your time.

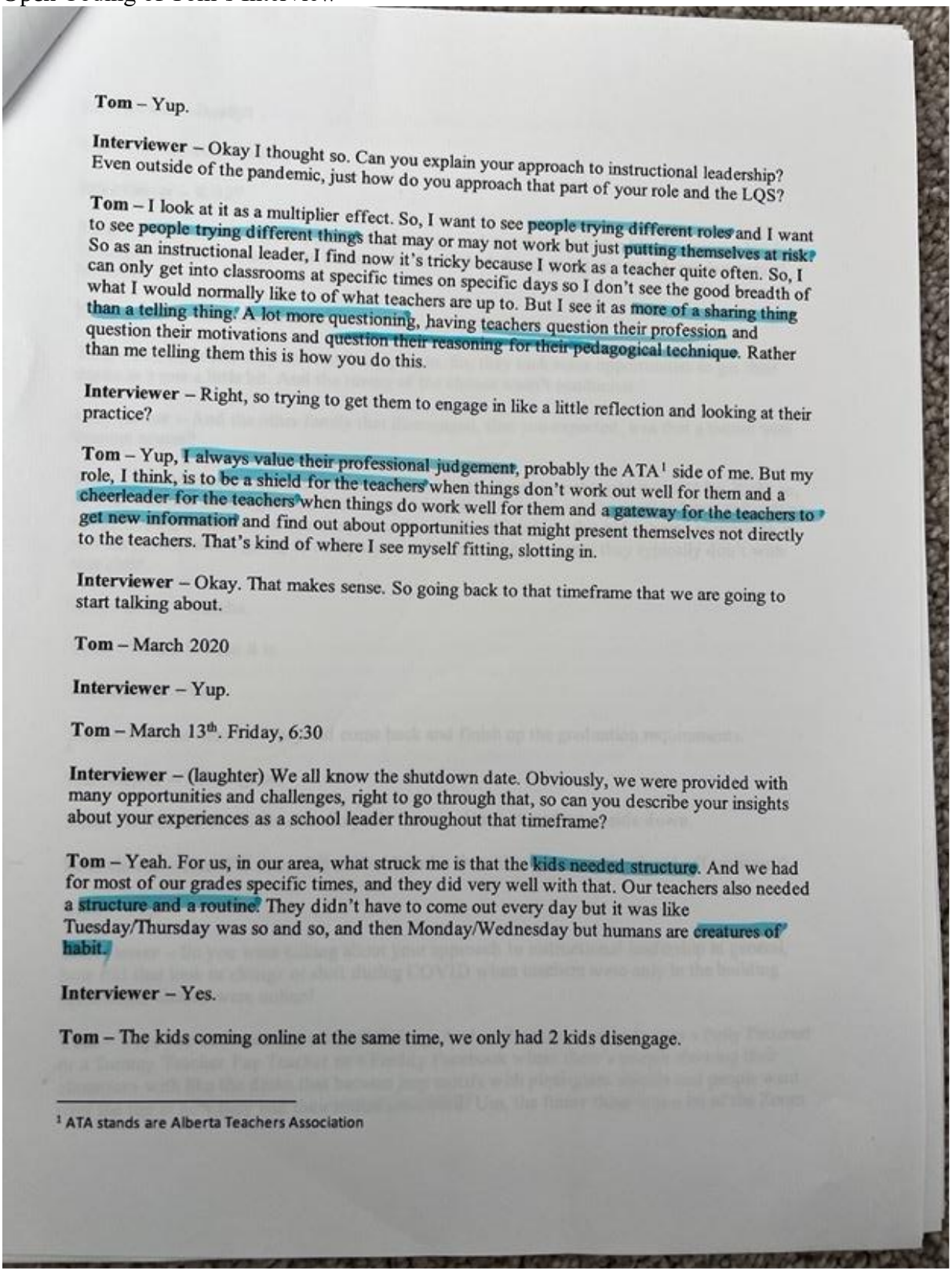
If the interview takes place in-person the audio will be recorded. If the interview takes place online the video and audio will be recorded. You may turn your camera off during an online interview. Recording devices as well as the data collected will be encrypted. I will transcribe the recordings myself. The transcription of the interview will be provided to you for you to verify. You will have two weeks after receiving the transcription to contact me to discuss any questions, comments, or concerns you may have.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me using the above contact information. Thank you very much,

Sandi Hughes.

Appendix C

Open Coding of Tom's Interview



Tom – Yup.

Interviewer – Okay I thought so. Can you explain your approach to instructional leadership? Even outside of the pandemic, just how do you approach that part of your role and the LQS?

Tom – I look at it as a multiplier effect. So, I want to see people trying different roles and I want to see people trying different things that may or may not work but just putting themselves at risk. So as an instructional leader, I find now it's tricky because I work as a teacher quite often. So, I can only get into classrooms at specific times on specific days so I don't see the good breadth of what I would normally like to of what teachers are up to. But I see it as more of a sharing thing than a telling thing. A lot more questioning, having teachers question their profession and question their motivations and question their reasoning for their pedagogical technique. Rather than me telling them this is how you do this.

Interviewer – Right, so trying to get them to engage in like a little reflection and looking at their practice?

Tom – Yup, I always value their professional judgement, probably the ATA[1] side of me. But my role, I think, is to be a shield for the teachers when things don't work out well for them and a cheerleader for the teachers when things do work well for them and a gateway for the teachers to get new information and find out about opportunities that might present themselves not directly to the teachers. That's kind of where I see myself fitting, slotting in.

Interviewer – Okay. That makes sense. So going back to that timeframe that we are going to start talking about.

Tom – March 2020

Interviewer – Yup.

Tom – March 13th. Friday, 6:30

Interviewer – (laughter) We all know the shutdown date. Obviously, we were provided with many opportunities and challenges, right to go through that, so can you describe your insights about your experiences as a school leader throughout that timeframe?

Tom – Yeah. For us, in our area, what struck me is that the kids needed structure. And we had for most of our grades specific times, and they did very well with that. Our teachers also needed a structure and a routine. They didn't have to come out every day but it was like Tuesday/Thursday was so and so, and then Monday/Wednesday but humans are creatures of habit.

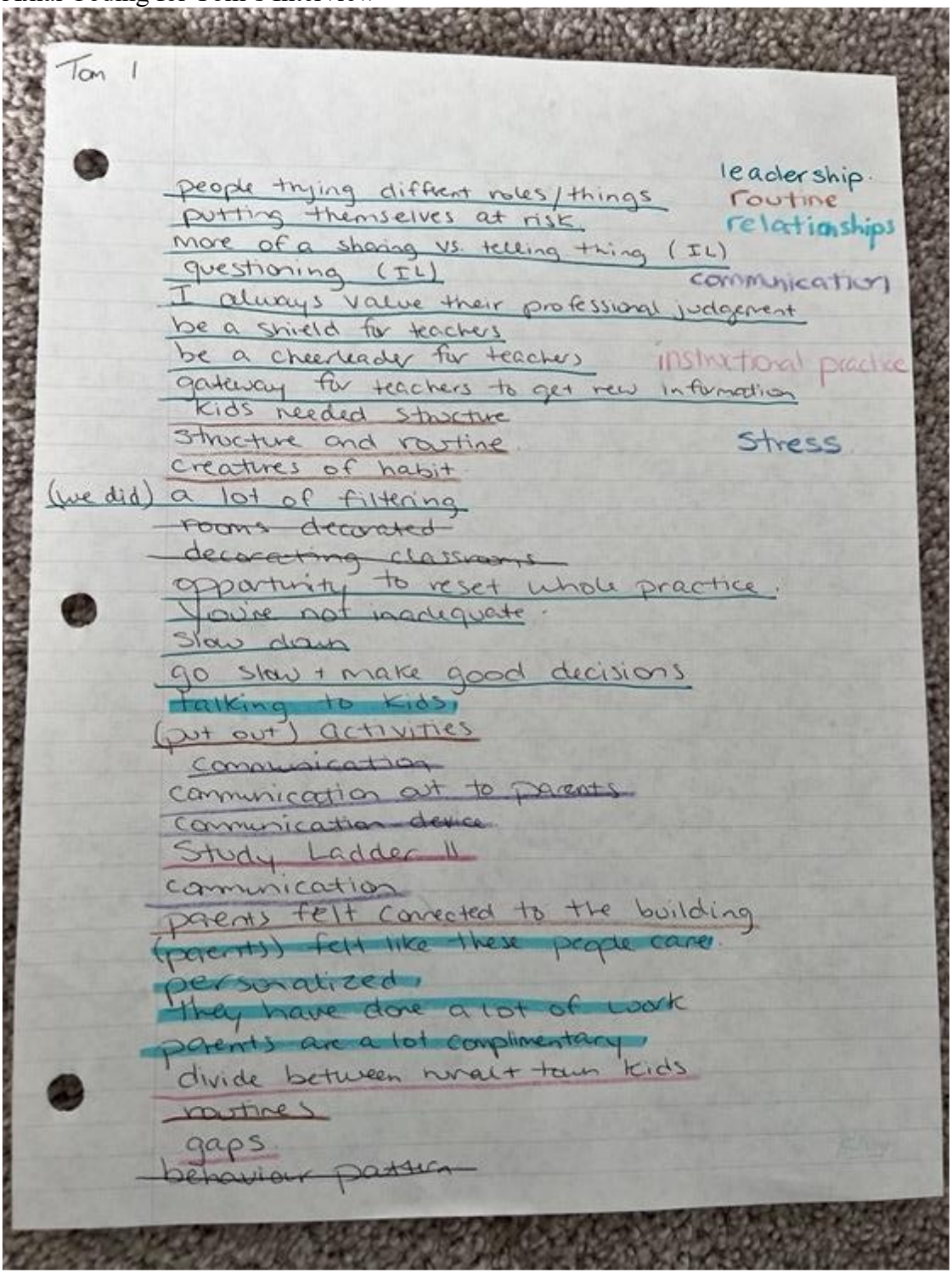
Interviewer – Yes.

Tom – The kids coming online at the same time, we only had 2 kids disengage.

[1] ATA stands are Alberta Teachers Association

Appendix D

Axial Coding for Tom's Interview



Tam 2.

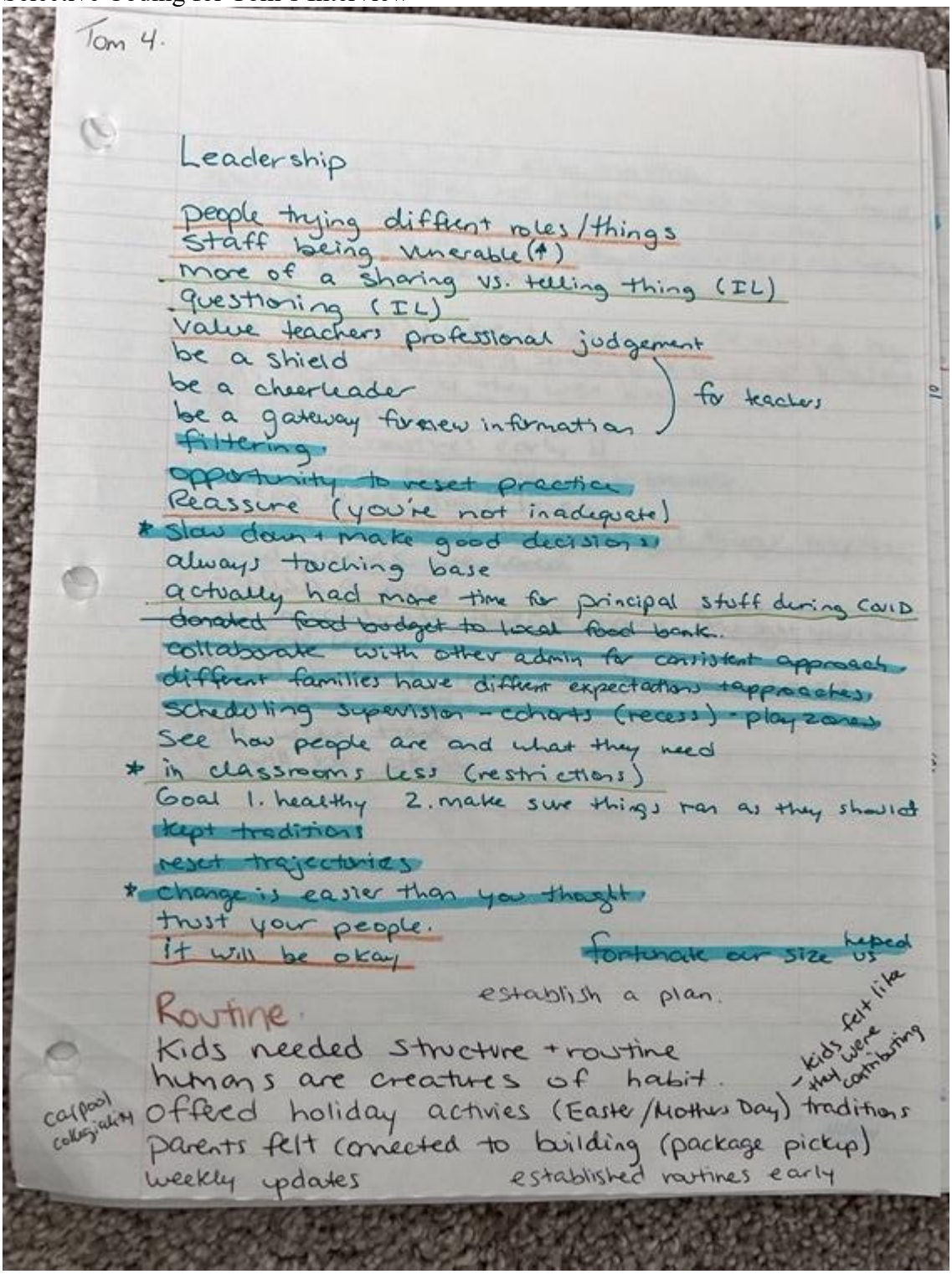
Weekly updates
carpool - collegiality
talk on intercom
roll out into hallway
connect
stay healthy
always touching base.
I actually had more time to checkout what teachers are up to
Other admin - so busy
Tam - had more time to do principal stuff
donate food budget to local food bank.
"can you look in the background for signs of abuse"
felt a lot of stress
kids would have a little social time.
WIAT testing
helped identify few more kids that need assistants
modify (programming)
collaborative (with other admin)
routine (things to look consistent
fairly constant
different families have different expectations/approaches
fatigue !!
~~focus off teachers~~
scheduling supervision was trickier
cohort for recess
play zones for cohorts
fortunate: our size helped us a lot.
communication
touching base.
seeing how people are doing + what they need.
supportive (messages from community)
parents have seen their kids in a learning environment
improve relationships
going into classrooms less

Jan 3

goal one was kind of stay healthy
goal two was make sure everything was running as it should
kids were quite nervous (being near each other)
biggest thing was not being in classrooms as much
teaching kids not to share is backwards
WIATS
they (students) weren't burning off energy !!!
(Easter + Mother's Day) having something kids could take home
kids still felt like they were contributing
kept traditions
established routines early !!
people knew they could count on us.
you can reset trajectories
take time to collect thoughts + get things together
showed parents we cared
establish a plan
reset / recalibrate / tweak / change easier than you thought you could
unprecedented
it's not beyond your abilities to change
trust your people
take your time
it will be okay

Appendix E

Selective Coding for Tom's Interview



Jan 5

Relationships

talking to kids
Letting kids socialize
carpool (collegiality)
(parents) noticed we worked hard and felt like we cared
parents are a lot more complimentary
talk on intercom/in hallway (staff)
improve relationships
people knew they could cant on us
Showed parents we cared.

Communication.

Communication with staff
Communication with parents
Communication from government (look for signs of child abuse)
Supportive messages from community
Parents have seen their children in learning environment

Instructional Practice

~~Study Ladder~~
gaps
~~divide between rural kids + town kids~~
kids were nervous (to be near each other)
teaching kids not to share is backwards
WIATS
kids weren't burning off energy
helped identify kids that needed modified programming or assistants

Stress.

Stay healthy
felt a lot of stress
fatigue.

unprecedented.

kids were nervous (to be near each other)

Team 6.

Leadership: Trust
teachers being vunerable to try different roles/things
value teachers professional judgement
Reassure (you're not inadequate) + it will be okay
trust your people.

Leadership: Instructional Leadership
more of a Shcring vs telling thing
questioning (to cause reflection)
actually had more time for it during COVID.
in classrooms less (restrictions)

Leadership: In response to COVID
filtering
opportunity to reset practice.
collaborate with nearby admin
different families have different expectations + approaches
scheduling - cohorts - playzones
kept traditions
(you can) reset trajectories
change is easier than you thought
fortunate that our size helped us
slow down + make good decisions

WIFTS - identifying gaps

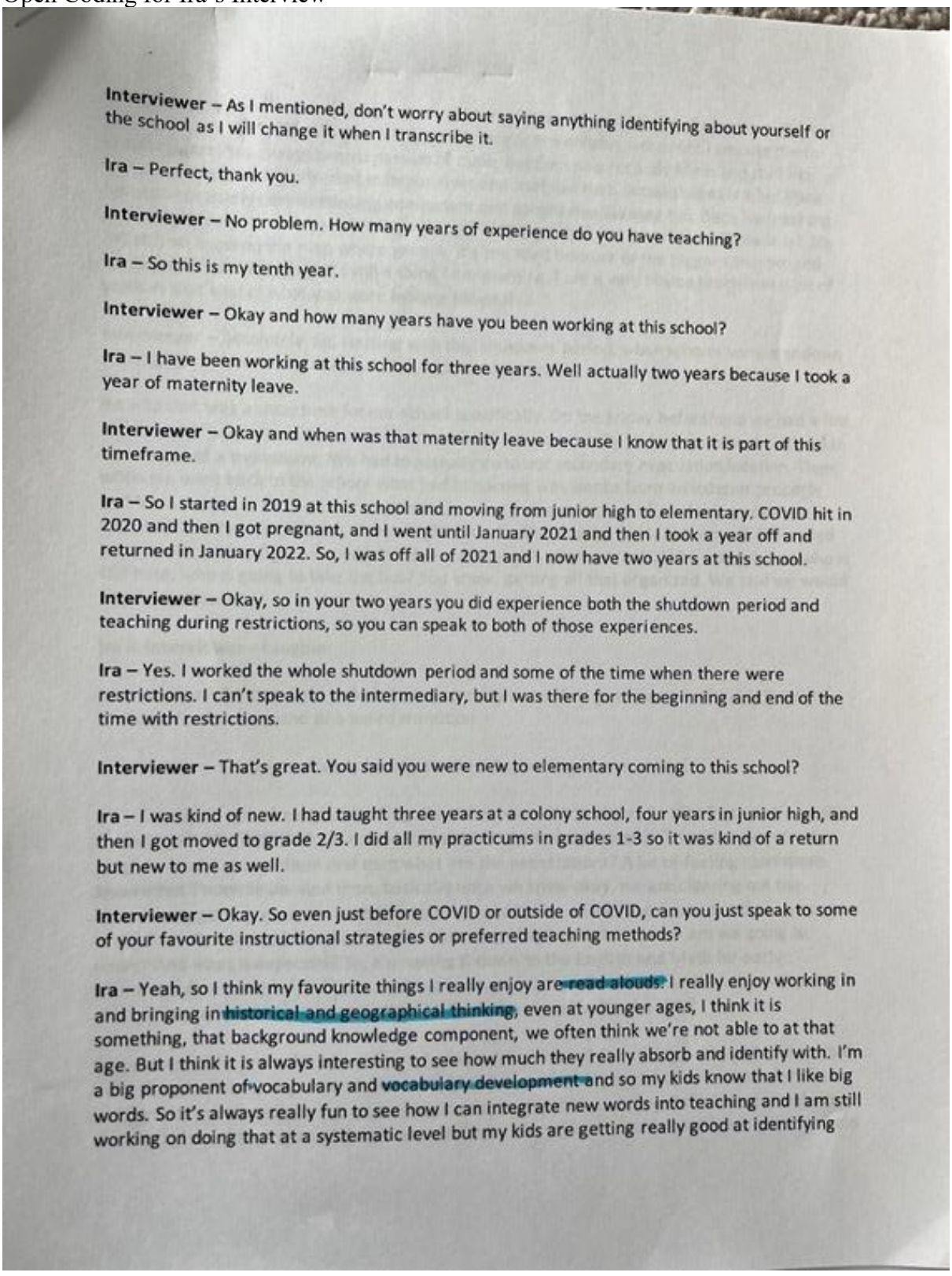
trust clustered into instructional leadership

1. Leadership
   - → Leadership: trust
   - → Leadership: Instructional Leadership
   - → Leadership: In response to COVID
2. Routine.
3. Relationships
4. Communication.

~~5. Instructional Practice.~~
6. Stress.

Appendix F

Open Coding for Ira's Interview



Interviewer – As I mentioned, don't worry about saying anything identifying about yourself or the school as I will change it when I transcribe it.

Ira – Perfect, thank you.

Interviewer – No problem. How many years of experience do you have teaching?

Ira – So this is my tenth year.

Interviewer – Okay and how many years have you been working at this school?

Ira – I have been working at this school for three years. Well actually two years because I took a year of maternity leave.

Interviewer – Okay and when was that maternity leave because I know that it is part of this timeframe.

Ira – So I started in 2019 at this school and moving from junior high to elementary. COVID hit in 2020 and then I got pregnant, and I went until January 2021 and then I took a year off and returned in January 2022. So, I was off all of 2021 and I now have two years at this school.

Interviewer – Okay, so in your two years you did experience both the shutdown period and teaching during restrictions, so you can speak to both of those experiences.

Ira – Yes. I worked the whole shutdown period and some of the time when there were restrictions. I can't speak to the intermediary, but I was there for the beginning and end of the time with restrictions.

Interviewer – That's great. You said you were new to elementary coming to this school?

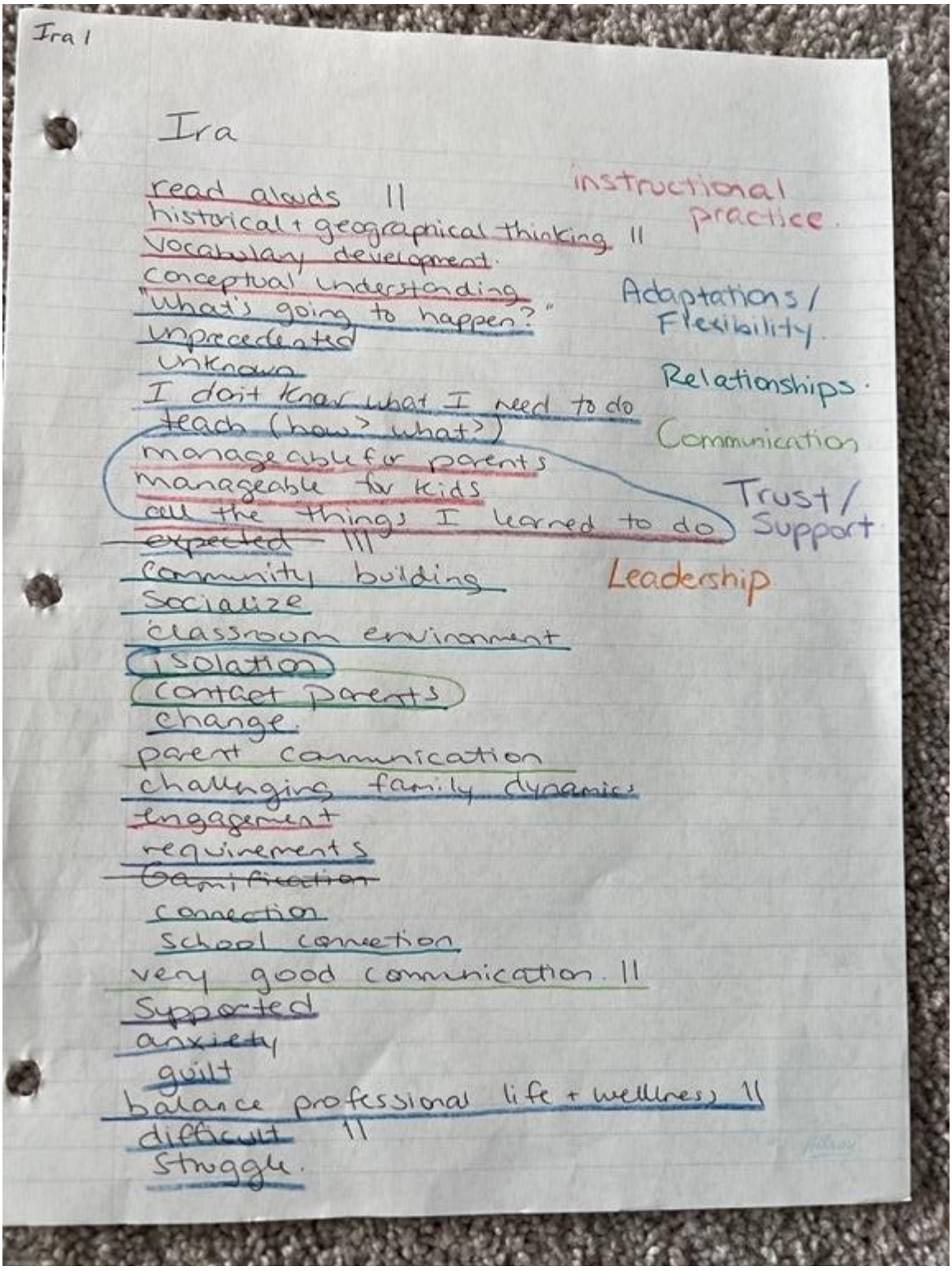
Ira – I was kind of new. I had taught three years at a colony school, four years in junior high, and then I got moved to grade 2/3. I did all my practicums in grades 1-3 so it was kind of a return but new to me as well.

Interviewer – Okay. So even just before COVID or outside of COVID, can you just speak to some of your favourite instructional strategies or preferred teaching methods?

Ira – Yeah, so I think my favourite things I really enjoy are **read alouds**. I really enjoy working in and bringing in **historical and geographical thinking**, even at younger ages, I think it is something, that background knowledge component, we often think we're not able to at that age. But I think it is always interesting to see how much they really absorb and identify with. I'm a big proponent of vocabulary and **vocabulary development** and so my kids know that I like big words. So it's always really fun to see how I can integrate new words into teaching and I am still working on doing that at a systematic level but my kids are getting really good at identifying

Appendix G

Axial coding for Ira's Interview



Ira 2

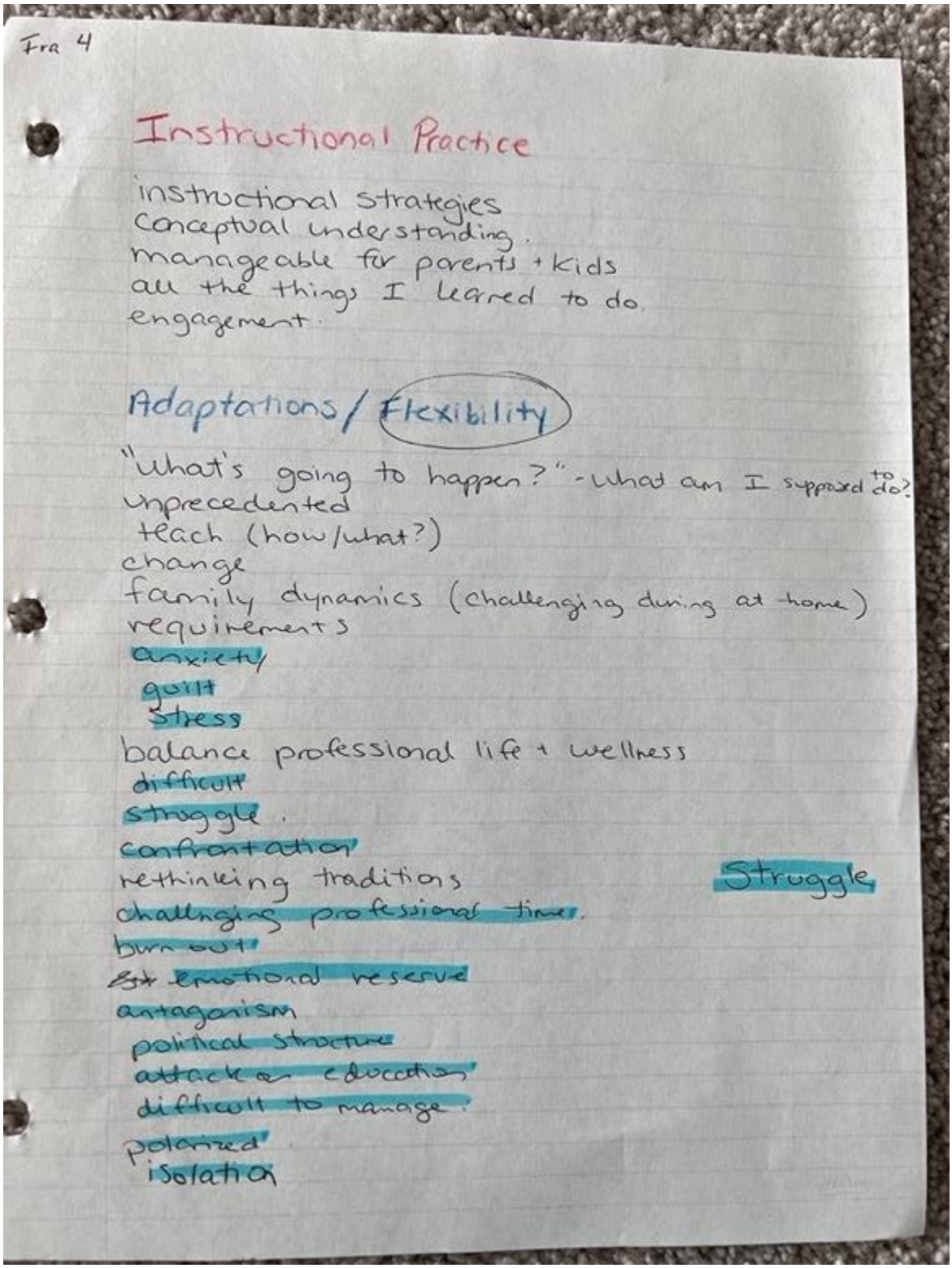
Whole class learning
Small groups
(admin) is supportive. ###
he leads by example.
Straightforward in explaining why things are.
(he is) good communicator |||
" " approachable.
" " looking out for everyones welfare.
" " willing to go for bat for you
" effective
" very relaxed.
" confidence in us
" available.
I trust you (admin trusts her)
he trusts my professional judgement
collegial/meet in middle
relationship ||
confrontation ||
parent relationships |||
parent communication
? class's emotional + social wellness.
weekly update - communication tool.
social aspect.
rethinking some traditional things.
Very challenging professional time.
burnout
anxiety stress
struggle
emotional reserve
very difficult
big struggle.
antagonism
political structure
attack on education

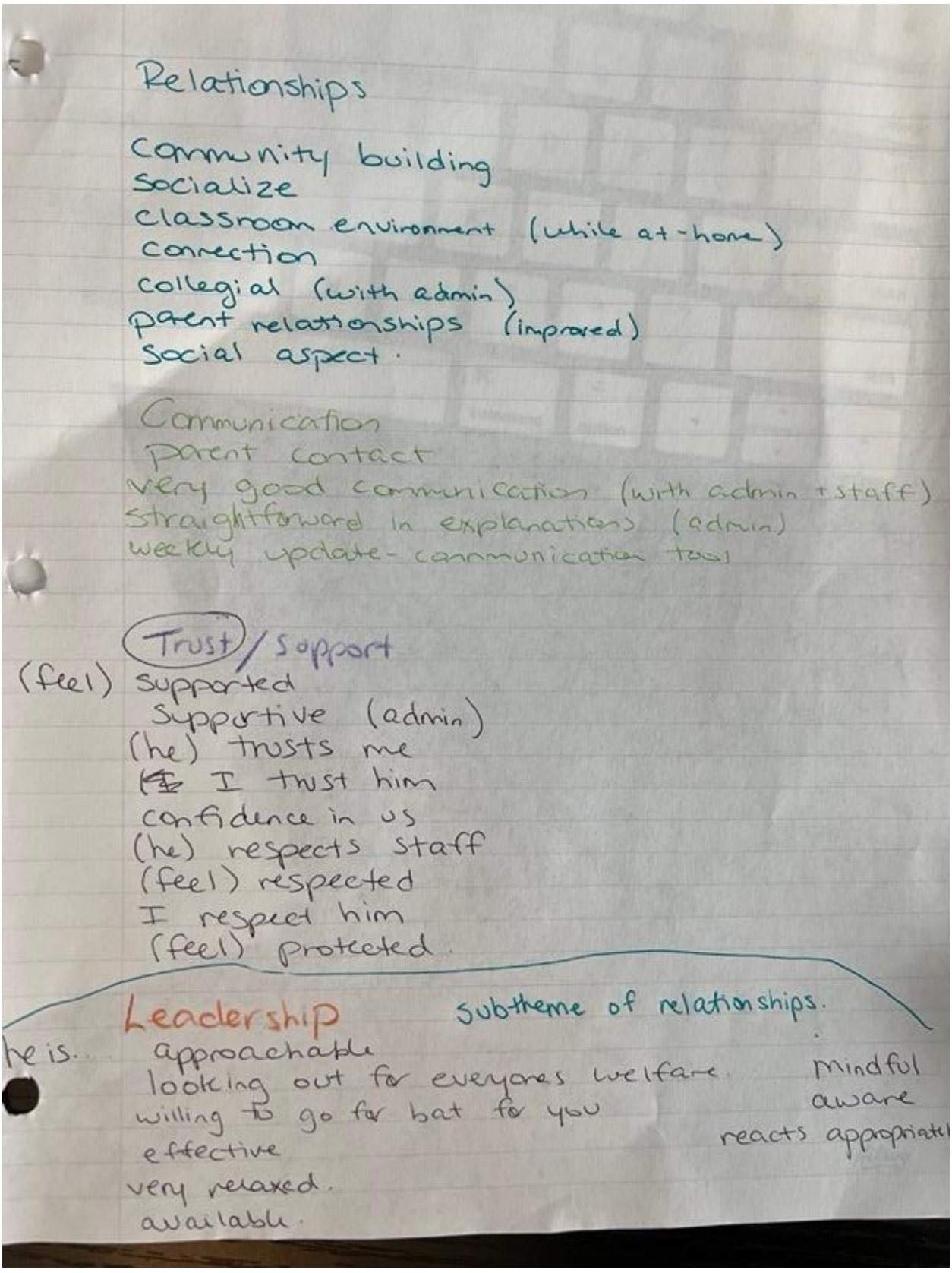
Ira 3

difficult to manage.
balance personal life.
He is mindful 11
He is aware.
(He) respects staff
(He) reacts appropriately.
feel supported
feel respected
I respect him
polarized
feel protected
feel supported.

Appendix H

Selective Coding for Ira's Interview





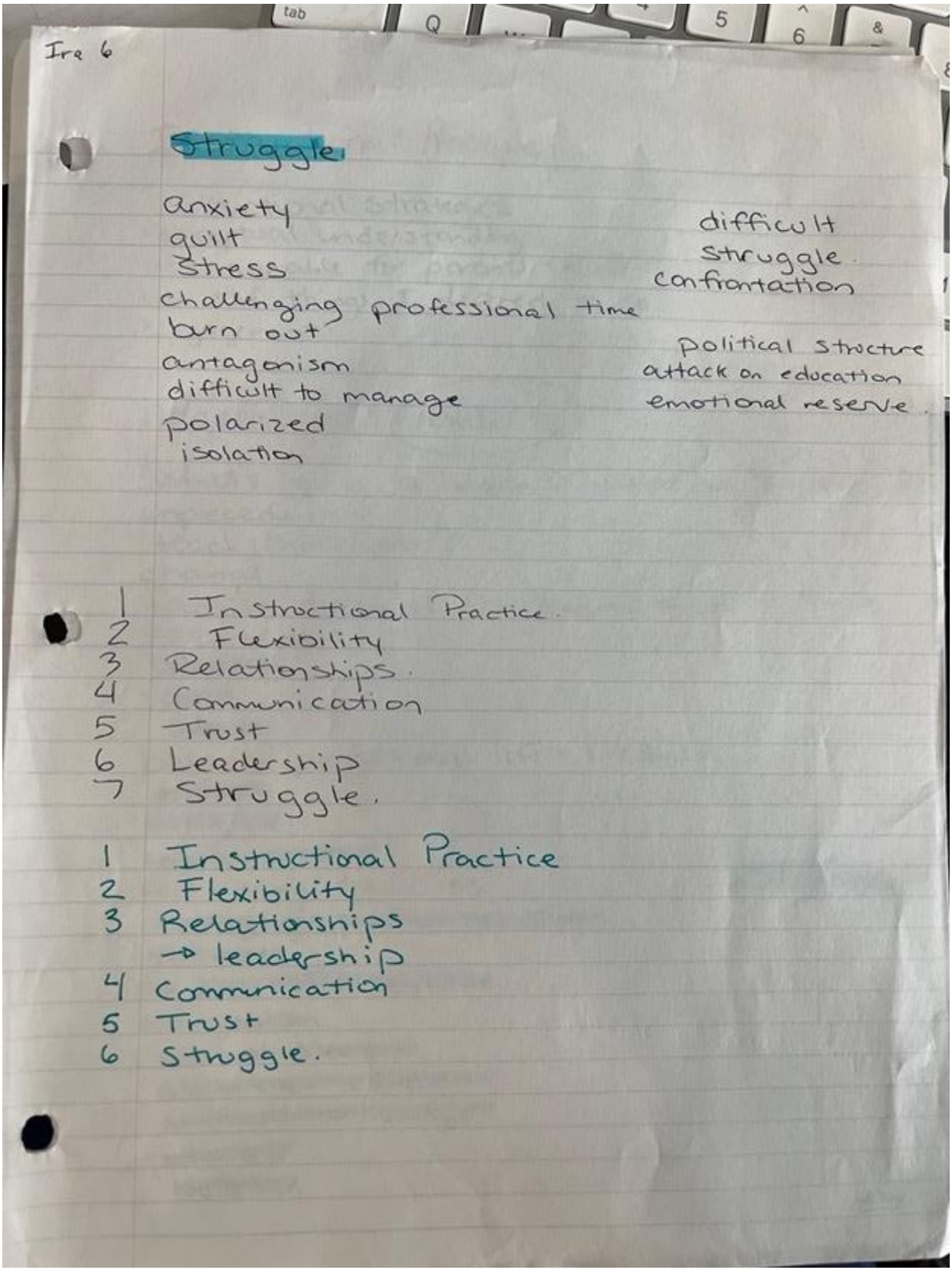
Relationships

Community building
Socialize
Classroom environment (while at-home)
Connection
Collegial (with admin)
Parent relationships (improved)
Social aspect.

Communication
Parent contact
Very good communication (with admin + staff)
Straightforward in explanations (admin)
Weekly update - communication tool

Trust / Support
(feel) supported
Supportive (admin)
(he) trusts me
I trust him
confidence in us
(he) respects staff
(feel) respected
I respect him
(feel) protected.

Leadership — subtheme of relationships.
he is...
approachable
looking out for everyones welfare
willing to go for bat for you
effective
very relaxed.
available.
mindful
aware
reacts appropriat


Ira 6

Struggle.

anxiety
guilt
stress
challenging professional time
burn out
antagonism
difficult to manage
polarized
isolation

difficult
struggle.
confrontation

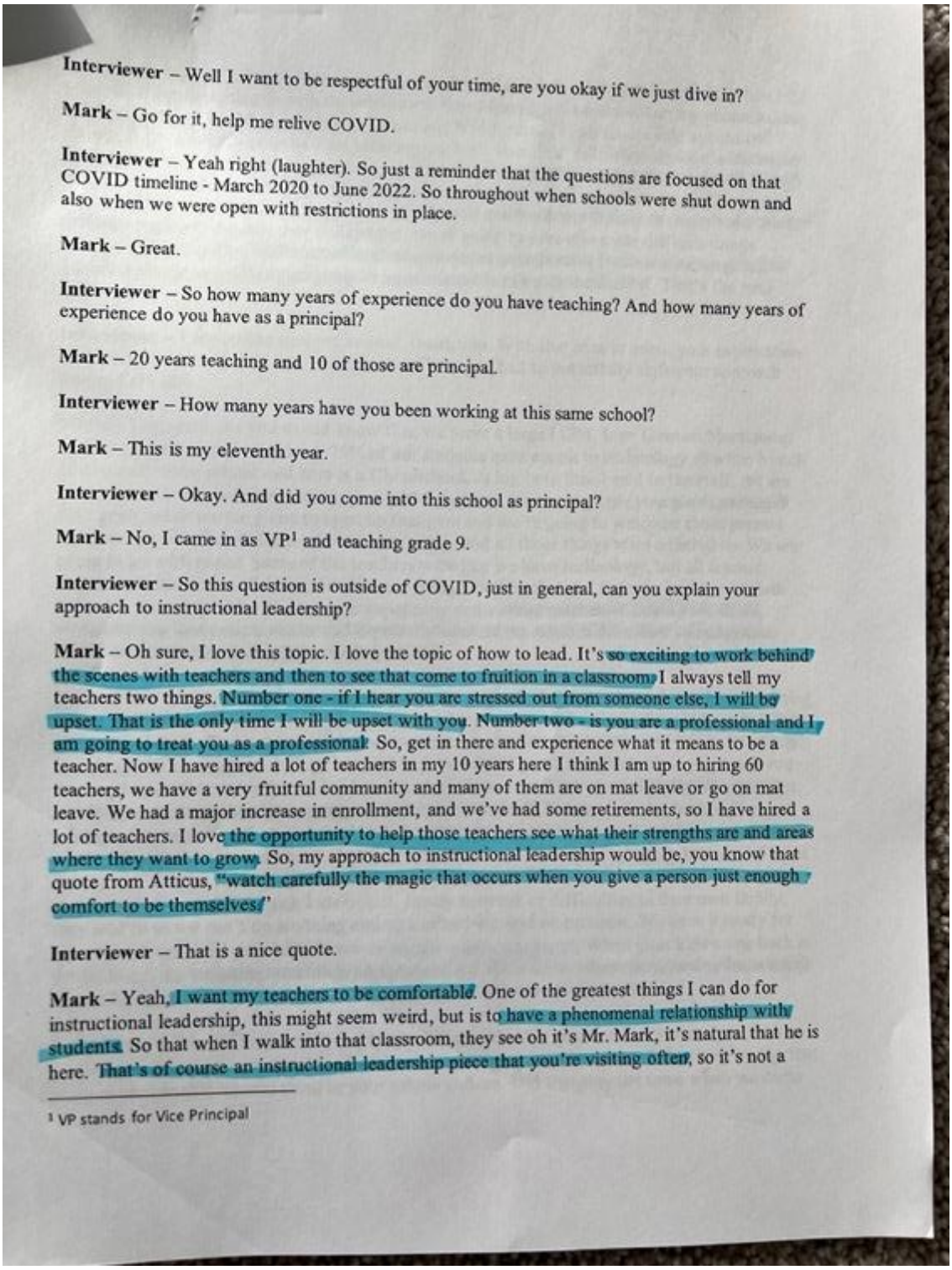
political structure
attack on education
emotional reserve.

1 Instructional Practice.
2 Flexibility
3 Relationships.
4 Communication
5 Trust
6 Leadership
7 Struggle.

1 Instructional Practice
2 Flexibility
3 Relationships
→ leadership
4 Communication
5 Trust
6 Struggle.

Appendix I

Open Coding for Mark's Interview



Interviewer – Well I want to be respectful of your time, are you okay if we just dive in?

Mark – Go for it, help me relive COVID.

Interviewer – Yeah right (laughter). So just a reminder that the questions are focused on that COVID timeline - March 2020 to June 2022. So throughout when schools were shut down and also when we were open with restrictions in place.

Mark – Great.

Interviewer – So how many years of experience do you have teaching? And how many years of experience do you have as a principal?

Mark – 20 years teaching and 10 of those are principal.

Interviewer – How many years have you been working at this same school?

Mark – This is my eleventh year.

Interviewer – Okay. And did you come into this school as principal?

Mark – No, I came in as VP[1] and teaching grade 9.

Interviewer – So this question is outside of COVID, just in general, can you explain your approach to instructional leadership?

Mark – Oh sure, I love this topic. I love the topic of how to lead. It's so exciting to work behind the scenes with teachers and then to see that come to fruition in a classroom. I always tell my teachers two things. Number one - if I hear you are stressed out from someone else, I will be upset. That is the only time I will be upset with you. Number two - is you are a professional and I am going to treat you as a professional. So, get in there and experience what it means to be a teacher. Now I have hired a lot of teachers in my 10 years here I think I am up to hiring 60 teachers, we have a very fruitful community and many of them are on mat leave or go on mat leave. We had a major increase in enrollment, and we've had some retirements, so I have hired a lot of teachers. I love the opportunity to help those teachers see what their strengths are and areas where they want to grow. So, my approach to instructional leadership would be, you know that quote from Atticus, "watch carefully the magic that occurs when you give a person just enough comfort to be themselves."

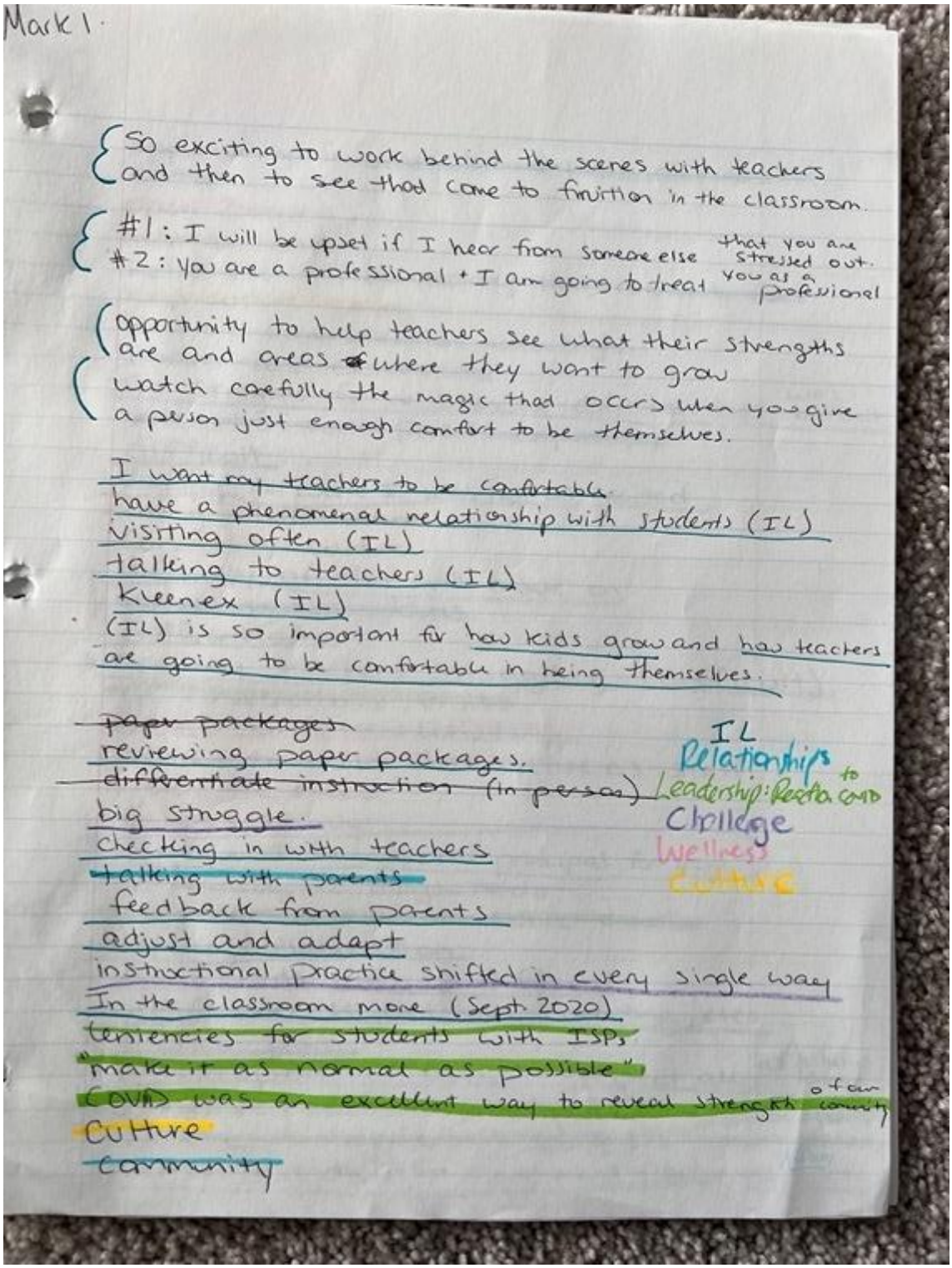
Interviewer – That is a nice quote.

Mark – Yeah, I want my teachers to be comfortable. One of the greatest things I can do for instructional leadership, this might seem weird, but is to have a phenomenal relationship with students. So that when I walk into that classroom, they see oh it's Mr. Mark, it's natural that he is here. That's of course an instructional leadership piece that you're visiting often, so it's not a

[1] VP stands for Vice Principal

Appendix J

Axial Coding for Mark's Interview



Mark 2.

opportunity for staff to connect with other adults.
outlet
open Zoom
mental health
relational - maintaining that community feel
keep culture going
level of communication was high
I am an extrovert.
The struggle for me when we didn't have kids was difficult
interaction with parents (important)
difficult
Coming to work I was not as excited
Strong staff culture
Community culture.
difficulty of this will move on
Connecting with kids.
differentiate
* See my teachers struggling (difficult)
1:1 conversations, visits
social committee: WhatsApp
continue to build that culture as staff.
lighten the mood
it was heavy
how can I be a better principal for you?
~~Give me tangible things to do~~
~~there's no checklist to solve covid~~
teacher collaboration
missing kids was so difficult
logistics: recess, exit times, cohorting, etc.
logistical pain
different point of views - respect all as school leader
~~we had very difficult conversations~~
~~How we work together will speak the most volume to our community~~
parents lost trust in government + ~~education~~, etc.

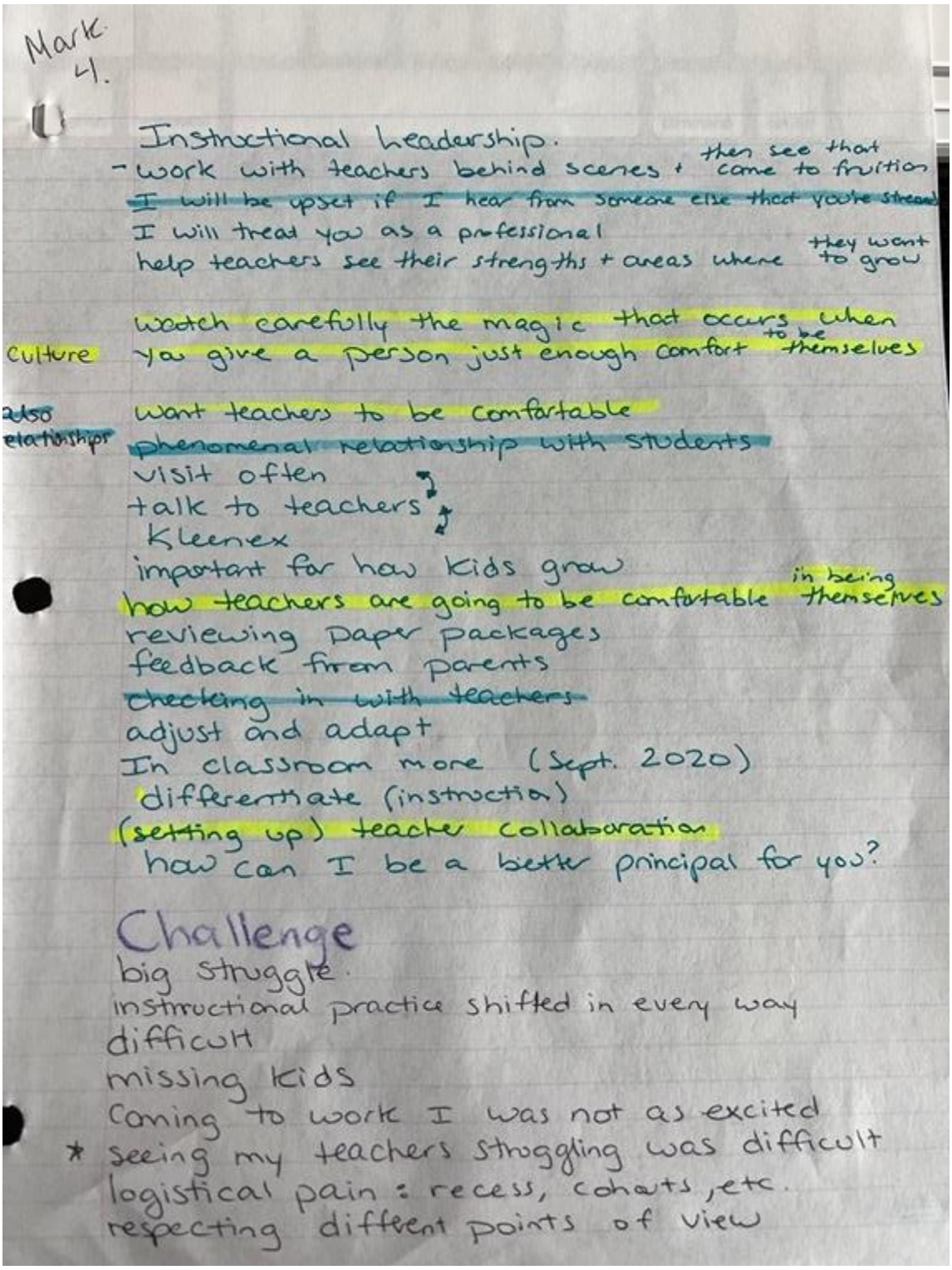
Mark
3.

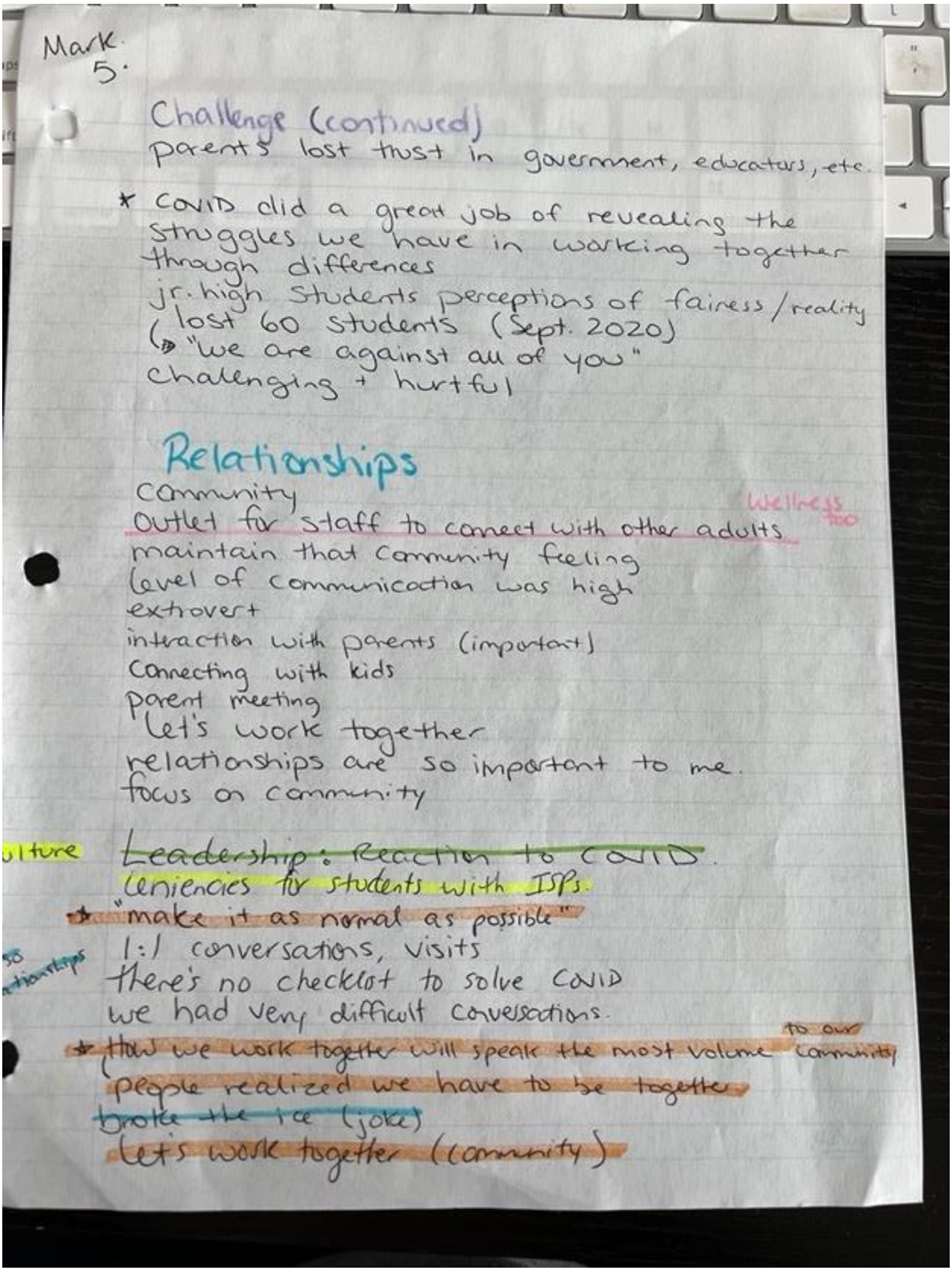
COVID did a great job of revealing the struggles we have in working together through differences
people realized we have to be together

parent meeting
broke the ice (joke)
trying to make the day as normal as possible for kids
let's work together
community
developed stronger community with anti-COVID people through collaboration
jr. high students: reality / judgement / fairness
biggest struggle.
lost 60 students in Sept. 2020
struggle.
"we are against all of you"
challenging + hurtful
relationships are so important to me.
focus on community
caring for kids
make sure parents are a part of the conversation

Appendix K

Selective Coding for Mark's Interview




Mark 5.

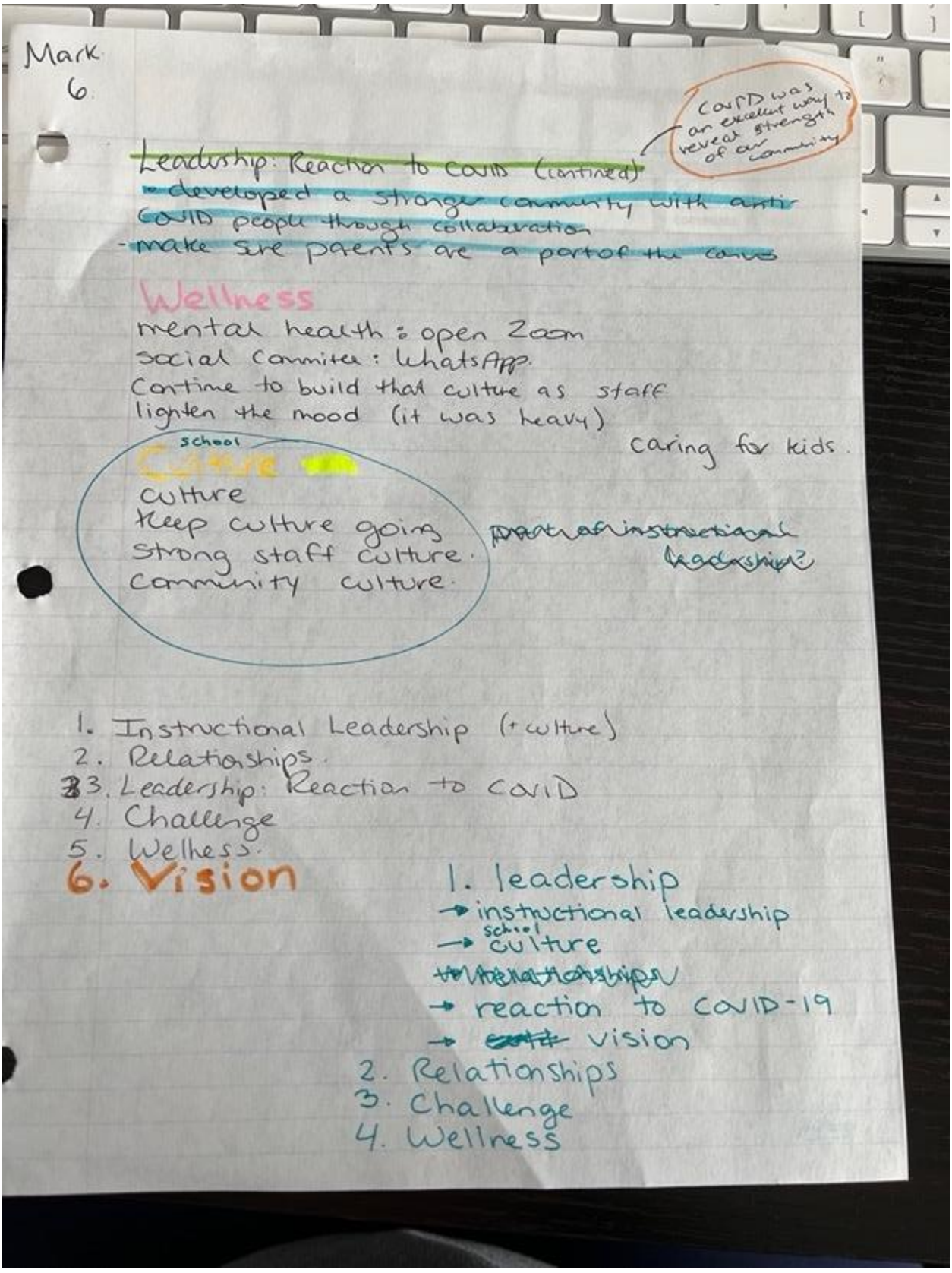
Challenge (continued)
parents lost trust in government, educators, etc.

* COVID did a great job of revealing the struggles we have in working together through differences
jr. high students perceptions of fairness / reality
(lost 60 students (Sept. 2020)
(» "we are against all of you"
challenging + hurtful

Relationships

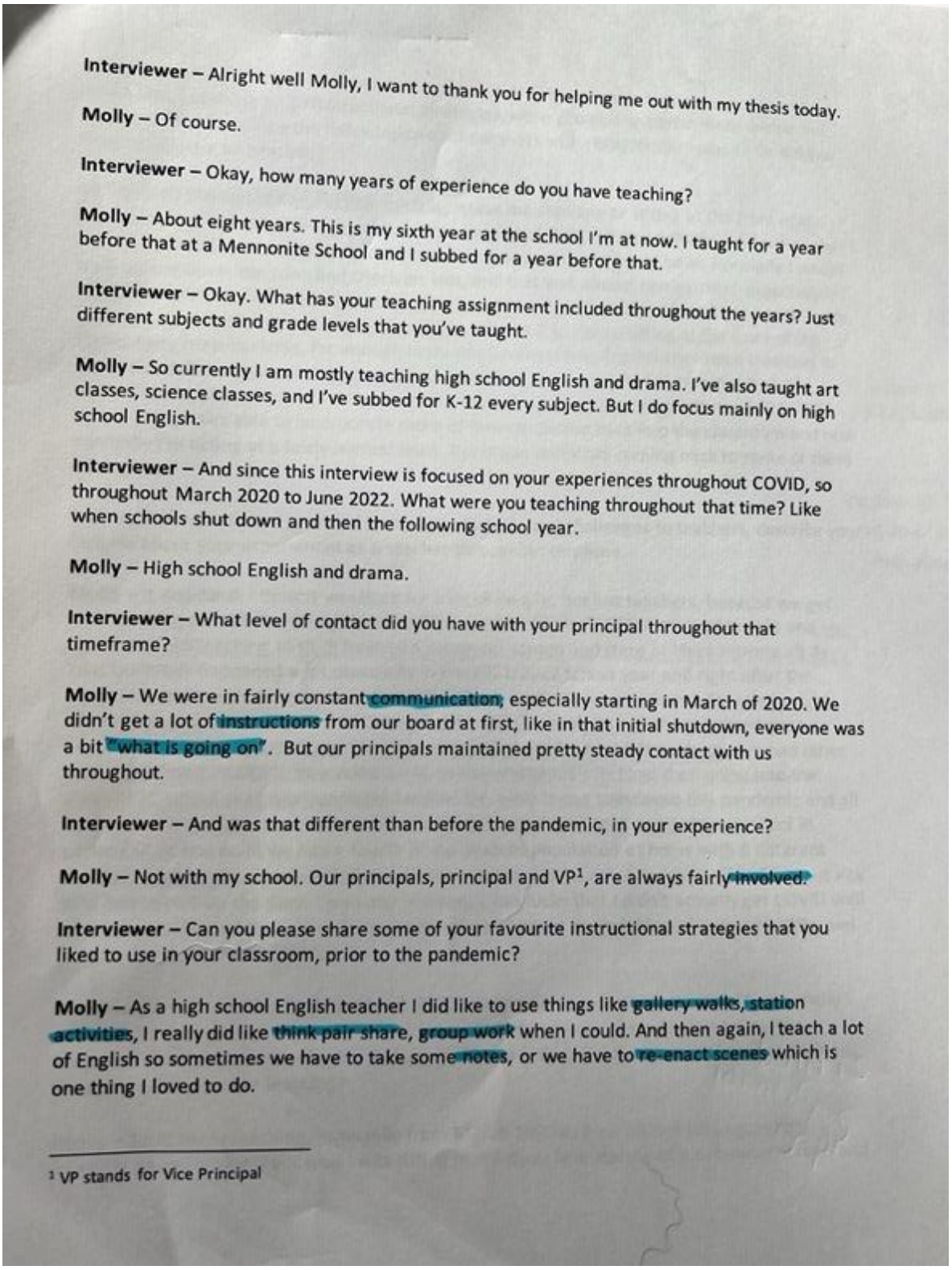
community
wellness too
outlet for staff to connect with other adults
maintain that community feeling
level of communication was high
extrovert
interaction with parents (important)
connecting with kids
parent meeting
let's work together
relationships are so important to me.
focus on community

Leadership: Reaction to COVID.
leniencies for students with ISPs.
* "make it as normal as possible"
1:1 conversations, visits
there's no checklist to solve COVID
we had very difficult conversations.
* how we work together will speak the most volume to our community
people realized we have to be together
broke the ice (joke)
let's work together (community)


Mark
6.
COVID was an excellent way to reveal strength of our community
Leadership: Reaction to COVID (continued)
- developed a stronger community with anti COVID people through collaboration
- make sure parents are a part of the conversation
Wellness
mental health: open Zoom
social connect: WhatsApp
Continue to build that culture as staff
lighten the mood (it was heavy)
caring for kids.
school
culture
culture
keep culture going
strong staff culture.
community culture.
1. Instructional Leadership (+ culture)
2. Relationships.
3. Leadership: Reaction to COVID
4. Challenge
5. Wellness.
6. Vision
1. leadership
→ instructional leadership
→ school culture
→ reaction to COVID-19
→ vision
2. Relationships
3. Challenge
4. Wellness

Appendix L

Open Coding for Molly's Interview



Interviewer – Alright well Molly, I want to thank you for helping me out with my thesis today.

Molly – Of course.

Interviewer – Okay, how many years of experience do you have teaching?

Molly – About eight years. This is my sixth year at the school I'm at now. I taught for a year before that at a Mennonite School and I subbed for a year before that.

Interviewer – Okay. What has your teaching assignment included throughout the years? Just different subjects and grade levels that you've taught.

Molly – So currently I am mostly teaching high school English and drama. I've also taught art classes, science classes, and I've subbed for K-12 every subject. But I do focus mainly on high school English.

Interviewer – And since this interview is focused on your experiences throughout COVID, so throughout March 2020 to June 2022. What were you teaching throughout that time? Like when schools shut down and then the following school year.

Molly – High school English and drama.

Interviewer – What level of contact did you have with your principal throughout that timeframe?

Molly – We were in fairly constant communication, especially starting in March of 2020. We didn't get a lot of instructions from our board at first, like in that initial shutdown, everyone was a bit "what is going on". But our principals maintained pretty steady contact with us throughout.

Interviewer – And was that different than before the pandemic, in your experience?

Molly – Not with my school. Our principals, principal and VP[1], are always fairly involved.

Interviewer – Can you please share some of your favourite instructional strategies that you liked to use in your classroom, prior to the pandemic?

Molly – As a high school English teacher I did like to use things like gallery walks, station activities, I really did like think pair share, group work when I could. And then again, I teach a lot of English so sometimes we have to take some notes, or we have to re-enact scenes which is one thing I loved to do.

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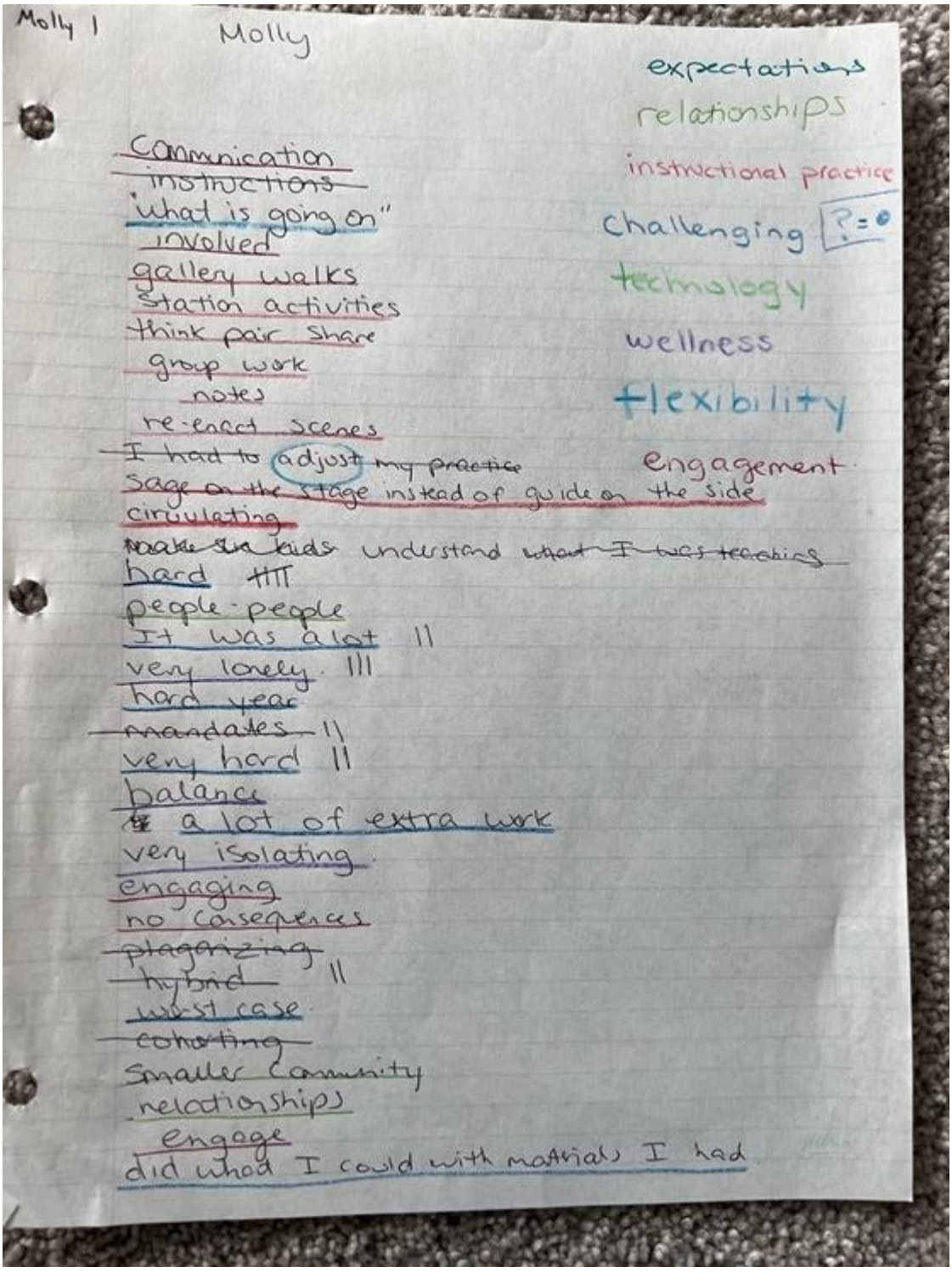
[1] VP stands for Vice Principal

Appendix M

Axial Coding for Molly's Interview



Molly 2

engage.
Chromebook |||
technology ||||
books
apps
- ELL
internet |||
barrier
expectations
behavioral expectations
not take good care of teachers
~~kind of a failure~~
let our staff down
~~contact~~
connection to outside world
isolated
positive mental headspace.
wasn't easy
unlucky
collegial relationship
checking in
willing to help
supportive
mental + emotional well being
physical well being
turn and talk.
do what you can
no one anticipated.
- they had to be on constantly
- always on

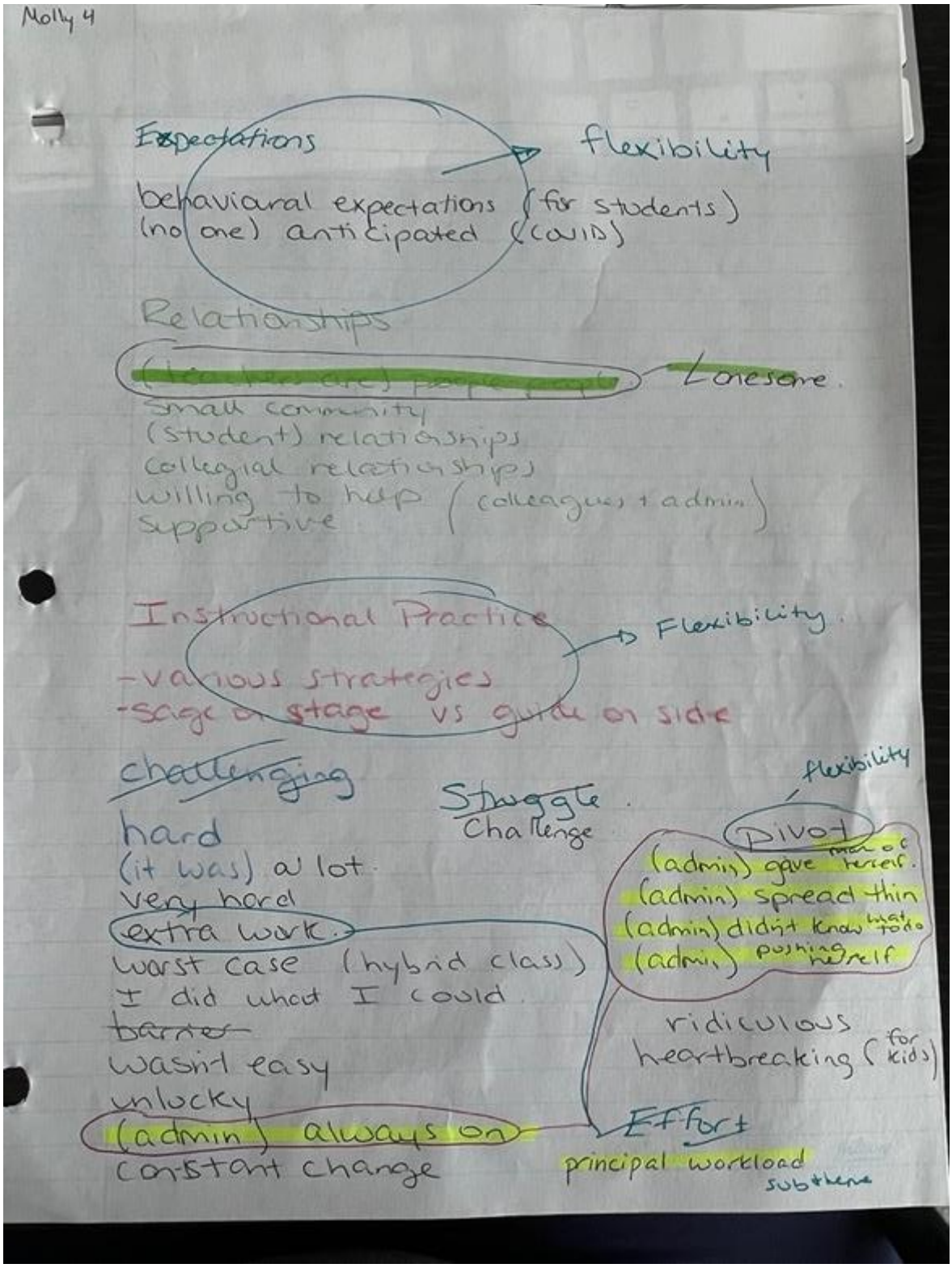
protocols had to be changed
pivot |||
ready to change
- give more of herself.

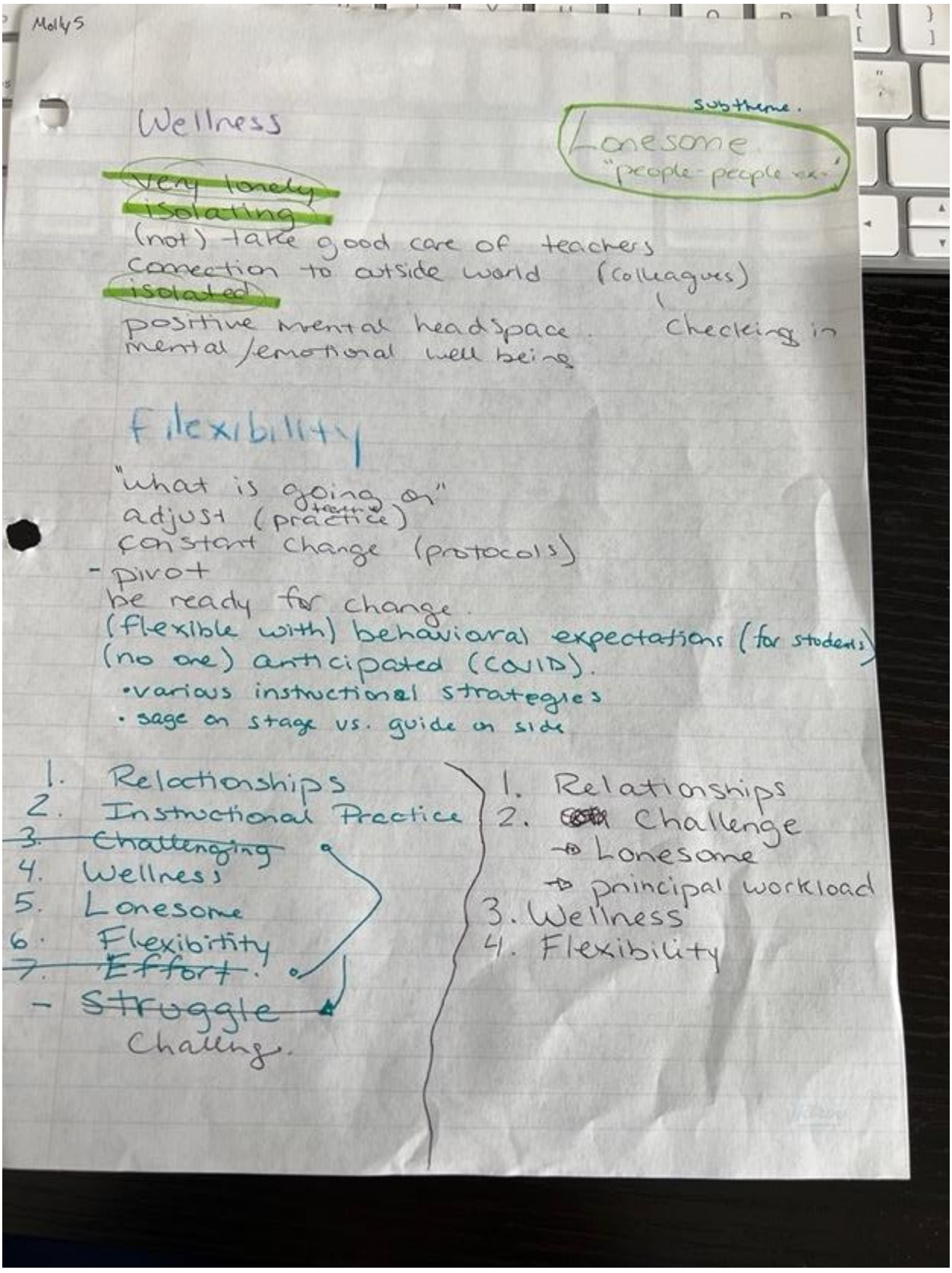
Molly 3

- Spreading herself pretty thin
- none of us know how to deal with
- pushing themselves very thin
- heartbreaking for my kiddos
- ridiculous.

Appendix N

Selective Coding of Molly's Interview




Molly's
Wellness
Subtheme.
Lonesome
"people-people ex-"
very lonely
isolating
(not) take good care of teachers
connection to outside world (colleagues)
isolated
positive mental headspace. checking in
mental/emotional well being
flexibility
"what is going on"
adjust (practice)
constant change (protocols)
- pivot
be ready for change.
(flexible with) behavioral expectations (for students)
(no one) anticipated (COVID).
•various instructional strategies
• sage on stage vs. guide on side
1. Relationships
2. Instructional Practice
3. Challenging
4. Wellness
5. Lonesome
6. Flexibility
7. Effort.
- Struggle
Challng.
1. Relationships
2. Challenge
→ Lonesome
→ principal workload
3. Wellness
4. Flexibility