

## MOTHER SCHOOL LEADERS NEGOTIATE ‘BLURRED LINES’ BETWEEN WORK AND HOME DURING COVID-19

*The COVID-19 pandemic that began in late 2019 but grew into a national crisis during the first three months of 2020 provides a unique context for researching how educational leaders respond to precarity. For leaders who are also mothers, a group that scholars commonly call mother/leaders (Grzelakowski, 2005), the intersections of personal and professional identities create specific constraints relative to their positioning. This study explores the experiences of ten K-12 school mother/leaders (e.g. principals, assistant principals, and curriculum leaders).*



### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in late 2019 but grew into a national crisis during the first three months of 2020 provides a unique context for researching how educational leaders respond to precarity. For leaders who are also mothers, a group that scholars commonly call mother/leaders (Grzelakowski, 2005), the intersections of personal and professional identities create specific constraints relative to their positioning. This study explores the experiences of ten K-12 school mother/leaders (e.g. principals, assistant principals, and curriculum leaders) during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In the wake of the seismic shift in our day-to-day embodied realities wrought by COVID-19, mother/leaders face a range of challenges, including increased workloads and “blurred boundaries” between work and home. As the photograph above represents (Figure 1)—with its overlapping leadership readings and children’s workbooks—for many women, home spaces have dissolved into workspaces and vice versa. Although a long history of research on working mothers indicates the diverse conflicts and pressures they navigate (e.g. Castaneda & Isgro, 2013; Collins, 2019; Hochschild, 2012), and female school lead-

ers negotiate particular issues unique to their roles (Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015), pandemic conditions have profoundly amplified and altered these navigations. Moreover, conditions have also shifted mother/leaders' sense of leadership authority, embodied realities, workspaces, roles, daily tasks, and time boundaries in ways that require adjustments at work as well. Such shifts invite new theorizing and visions of school leadership and the structural supports that might enable actualizing such visions. As they re-define essential and nonessential tasks during crises, mother/leaders experience anew the routine inequities that prevail in times of normalcy. Pandemic conditions produce and require new ways to mother and lead. As mothering and schooling practices are re-imagined, so too, is leadership.

In the sections that follow, we situate our study in scholarship on mother/leaders and the contextual forces and cultural norms that shape motherhood. We detail our methodology, findings, and conclude with significance. Like Lumby (2015) found in her study of principals, we encountered agential leaders deploying varied strategies in their leadership roles and refusing a stance of victimization. Although all were wrestling with an array of pressures, their narratives suggest they were taking charge of their environments as best they could in these conditions.

### **Mothers in School Leadership**

Scholarship is replete with evidence about cultural norms shaping motherhood and the lived experiences of working mothers (Collins, 2019). Despite high numbers of working women and numerous gains in workplaces, processes within homes have remained mostly static. As sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2012) notes in her classic research on *The Second Shift*, "The influx of women into the [formal] economy has not been accompanied by the cultural understanding of marriage and work that would make this transition smooth" (p. 12). The conditions shaping the second shift include cultural norms and ideologies to which mothers themselves often adhere, whether intentionally or unconsciously, contributing to their own pressures.

Additionally, research on pre-COVID public school environments points to the turbulent, uncertain, and risky nature of leading in an era of rapid change (Burke et al., 2012; Grimmett et al., 2008; Hameiri, et al., 2014; Reed & Blaine, 2015). In their study of leadership responses to uncertainty and risk in public schools, Hameiri et al. (2014) found that these forces "are relevant and significant characteristics of public-school environment [sic]" (p. 48). Leaders in these challenging school contexts, then, have an increased need for resilient leadership (Reed & Blaine, 2015), transformational skills, soft power bases (Hameiri et al., 2014), and high levels of technical and adaptive expertise (Burke et al., 2012; Grimmett et al., 2008). Resilient leadership involves the ability to encounter adversity and not only survive, but thrive (Reed & Blaine, 2015). According to

Hamieri et al. (2014), transformational leaders inspire others by promoting a shared vision for change, embracing rather than avoiding risk. Using soft power bases, such as persuasion, collaboration, and charisma instead of coercion and punishment, transformational leaders empower followers in times of uncertainty (Hameiri et al., 2014). “Core aspects of transformational leadership such as intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration are highly significant when organizations experience crisis” (Hameiri et al., 2014, p. 53). The required leadership skills needed in profoundly risky situations, such as the pandemic, are correspondingly more intense.

For mother/leaders in education, scholarship has found three significant factors that influence how mothers experience the turbulence of school leadership and negotiate the dual roles of mothering and leadership. 1) The staunch patriarchal norms of educational institutions create obstacles for mothers in leadership careers. 2) As women negotiate gender ideologies within these systems, they experience both agency and constraint in relation to work-home balance. 3) Some mother/leader border crossers (Clark, 2000; Jordan, 2012) successfully navigate their challenges by integrating their identities and establishing clear boundaries regarding both roles. We outline each of these themes below.

### **Patriarchal Norms**

Although the number of women school leaders has grown substantially in recent decades, entrenched perceptions of leadership as a predominantly male and masculine realm continue to limit opportunities for women within educational leadership in varied contexts (Kruger et al., 2005; Lumby, 2015). Despite this dominant masculine ideology, studies of gender in educational leadership indicate that women use transformational leadership practices more often than men (Choge, 2015; Hallinger et al., 2016; Kruger et al., 2005; Lumby, 2015; Lumby & Azaola, 2014). Additionally, a recent study of resilience in educational leadership concludes, “...women are more resilient leaders and possess higher levels of [Leader Resilience Profile] skills than men (Reed & Blaine, 2015, p. 467). These skills include optimism, support, values, adaptability, perseverance, and courageous decision making (Reed & Blaine, 2015). Lumby and Azaola (2014) articulate the conundrum gender stereotypes create for mothers in school leadership. “Women taking up a school principal role may [...] face persistent and prescriptive stereotypes which mean, whether competent or not, nurturing or not, they will be transgressing one prescription or another, as woman or leader” (p. 33).

### **Agency and Constraint**

Another nuance of the mother/school leader scholarship indicates

mother/leaders experience both agency and constraint in relation to work-life balance as they negotiate gender ideologies—institutional as well as personal. Research is clear that school leaders and academic mothers, like other working mothers, retain primary responsibility for child-rearing and domestic work (Baker, 2016; Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Brown & Wynn, 2004; Clark, 2017; Jordan, 2012; Litmanovitz, 2010; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015; Lumby & Azaola, 2014). In addition, school leaders encounter unique professional demands. Mirroring the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), which requires ‘good mothers’ to cater to needs of the child no matter the cost, Baker (2016) uses the term intensive leadership to describe the role of the school principal. Intensive leadership “advises leaders to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money leading their schools” (p. 140). Unrealistic demands of both home and professional work create dilemmas for mother/leaders as they experience feelings of guilt and inadequacy while seeking the elusive balance between sometimes competing roles (Baker, 2016; Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Choge, 2015; Jordan, 2012; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015; Lumby & Azaola, 2014).

Bradbury and Gunter (2006) found at times, mother/leaders in English primary schools accept the socio-cultural constraints and imbalance that accompany a demanding career as well as their complicity and guilt for allowing the imbalance to usurp family commitments. At other times, mother/leaders demonstrate agency, leveraging their gendered positions to challenge dominant social narratives of mother/leaders (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006). The ongoing, cyclical nature of mother/leaders’ negotiations and identity constructions indicate the challenges they encounter in transgressing dominant cultural ideals—and their own encultured gender ideologies—related to mothering and leadership. The social context in which women navigate these complexities, such as mothering during “precarious times” (Dolman et al., 2018), may be salient for understanding the contours of these navigations.

### **Border-Crossers**

A third theme in scholarship indicates that some successfully navigate the challenges of mothering and leading by integrating their identities and establishing acceptable boundaries. For example, in their studies of female principals in Kenya, Lumby and Azaola (2014) and Choge (2015) found that despite an oppressive male hegemony in school leadership, female principals integrated their mothering and leadership identities. Similarly, Bradbury and Gunter (2006) found headteachers in English primary schools “merge” (p. 496) their mother and leader identities, in some cases, allowing them to establish themselves professionally as both leaders and mothers to win the confidence of stakeholders. Regardless of the ongoing negotiations, mother/leaders in this study felt confident in their dual roles

and found the interactions of these roles beneficial to them as mothers and headteachers. As Bradbury and Gunter (2006) note,

The identities of mother and headteacher are not combined or integrated but coexist in a flexible state, with one sometimes growing and encroaching on the territory of the other, at other times vice versa, and at yet other times overlapping, underpinning, or supporting each other, always balanced on their profile as women (pp. 498-499).

Some mother/leaders, including several participants in our current study, articulate such fluidity and interaction among roles rather than using “balance” to describe their navigations. Similarly, Jordan (2012) describes mother leaders as border crossers who experience significant permeability between the domains of motherhood and school leadership, language we adopt here. She found “complementary factors as well as competing factors when one is a headteacher and a mother, revealing the interplay between agency and structure as women negotiate both roles” (p.17).

Available research suggests the most successful mother/leaders had a firm sense of personal agency, strong boundaries, and beliefs that integrating work and home life provided more satisfaction than separating them (Baker, 2016; Jordan, 2012). These studies demonstrate the interplay between career and family life that influence and complicate identity construction for women in both roles.

Furthermore, some research on gender and leader resilience indicates that women possess higher leadership resilience than men. The resilient leader “demonstrates the ability to recover, learn from, and developmentally mature when confronted by chronic or crisis adversity” (Reed & Blaine, 2015, p. 460). Proficiency in thinking skills, capacity-building skills, and action skills set the resilient leader apart from the reactionary leader (Reed & Blaine, 2015). However, in times of extreme precarity, uncertainty, and risk, leaders must employ “a slightly different set of professional tools to better enable efficient coping” which could include swift reactions to an ever-changing landscape (Hameiri et al., 2014).

## **Methodology**

In the best of times, mother/leaders navigate demanding expectations, their own gender ideologies, and embodied experiences. With the pressure to develop new systems of instruction to support children, teachers, and parents—and be good caregivers for their own children—feelings of guilt and inadequacy are common among mother/leaders even in non-pandemic times (Baker, 2016; Jordan, 2012; O’Reilly, 2016). In the intensely uncertain and risky COVID-19 conditions, such feelings and navigations might be amplified. As Kitchener (2020) suggests of the COVID-19 context, “It’s an impossible situation for caregivers who...now work from home. There is not enough time to do everything” (p. 5).

As part of a larger, ongoing autoethnographic investigation (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013) of mother/leadership (Crosslin, in process), we conducted a qualitative study using photo-elicitation and semi-structured interviews with ten mother/leaders. The interviews were conducted during late summer and early fall (2020) to understand how women navigate their roles during these times of peril. We sought to understand:

- 1) Mother/leaders' experiences;
- 2) How women were navigating their border crossings—what one participant calls “blurred lines” during the pandemic; and
- 3) What lessons for leadership these navigations reveal.

In our autoethnographic design, the researcher first serves as the “site and subject of these [embodied and] discursive struggles” to provide a unique way of exploring the self within a given cultural context (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 38). The researchers' analysis then becomes a springboard to research “with” rather than “on” (Lather & Smithies, 1997) other leaders to advance broader insights into women's leadership strategies and theorize leadership itself—the focus of the current essay on mothering and leading in a pandemic.

## Procedures

The first author's experiences as a mother/leader propelled this study. After collaborating on study design, piloting questions, and obtaining IRB approval, both authors reached out to their networks for contacts who fit study criteria: being a full time leader in a K-12 school and being a mother/care-giver of children. Women from several states in the south-central United States responded, with others in the queue; we focus on ten participants to highlight some commonalities we found in their experiences.

## Methods

We used two primary methods. First, we conducted dialogic, semi-structured interviews of between one and two hours with each participant, asking open-ended questions related to their unique challenges, self-care, and strategies. We conducted these primarily through video conferencing applications, recording with permission. Second, we used photo elicitation, a method in which we invited participants to take photographs to represent their lives (see Figures 2 and 4). We also incorporated our own (Figures 1, 3, and 5). When situated alongside interview data, photo-elicitation adds a unique dimension to the process of crystallizing knowledge (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) and understanding and representing experience (Harper, 2002), augmenting and evoking memories, emotions, stories, or reactions that can facilitate understanding and enhance validity.

As Richardson & St. Pierre (2005) explain, the metaphor of a crystal conveys multidimensional perspectives. While not everyone elected to take photographs, some offered powerful glimpses of their mother/leader roles. A third, supplemental method was observing women during interviewing. Although observations were brief and fixed in comparison to traditional fieldwork that occur in varied spaces over time, we found some of these organic opportunities to observe a working woman in her home/school environment enhanced our insights into her navigations.

## **Analysis**

Following new directions in embodied qualitative methods (e.g. Ellingson, 2017), we relied on aural, sensory, verbal, and written data processing. Although conventional methods rely on transcribing as a necessary translation method for analysis, methodologists have noted that this process extracts and flattens a dynamic exchange to words on the page (Kvale, 1990). Using an inductive analytic stance, we thus listened to, watched, and read data multiple times, wrote jottings and memos, sorted and re-sorted data units into emerging themes, and processed collaboratively. We also created visuals that reflected emerging metaphors in the data, such as waves filled with sharks and circles of swirling colors to capture the collapse of boundaries in home/work life. We returned to the themes with deductive analysis to answer the research questions.

## **Participants**

Ten mother/leaders participated, representing diverse school contexts in the mid-Southwestern United States. Like the first author, all are full time workers, with many years of experience in schools. Three identified as women of color (e.g. BIPOC, Black, Indigenous or People of color); two did not identify; and five were White. The mothers each cared for between one and four children, ranging in age from toddlers to young adulthood, and one was 8.5 months pregnant at the time of interviewing (Table 1). Kinship support inside and outside the home varied; one relied selectively on an ex-husband or extended networks, while others had spouses working from home, providing financial or some domestic support. Several have health conditions; several had children with special needs.

**Table 1***Study Participants*

Pseudonym	Years in education	School setting	Size of school	Ages of dependents
Angie	20+	High school	2500+	Teens
Debbie	10+	Elementary	700+	6 Years
Diana	10+	Elementary	350+	8 & 11 Years
Gabby	15+	Elementary	700+	8 & 12 Years
Grace	10+	Elementary	800	6 & 9 Years
Julie	20+	High school	1500+	Teen & college
Kathy	15+	Elementary	300	7 Years to teens
Rachel	10+	Early childhood	700+	6 months & 1 year
Sarah	15+	Elementary	700+	4 Years
Amy	12+	Elementary	500+	4 Years to teens

## Findings

The analysis surfaced varied themes, three of which we focus on here: (1) triage leadership and mothering; (2) reframing, adjusting, and letting go; (3) leadership as care work. Each of these themes speak directly to the second research question, “How did mother/leaders navigate their border crossing?” An overview of each theme and related analysis follows.

### 1) Triage Leadership

The term triage leadership conveys a sense of leading within uncertainty and constantly shifting priorities and giving the onlway as waves of demands ebb and flow. Nearly two decades ago, policy researchers used “triage” (Bascia, 2003) to describe narrow and incomplete public education reform systems that lack a big picture understanding of the challenges of complex and changing education contexts (Bascia, 2003; Grimmitt et al., 2008). The intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic evokes similar sentiments as unsettled conditions intrude on participants’ authority as leaders at home and work, surfacing the question: what does “leading” look like in constantly shifting global, national, and school terrain? Sarah’s photograph (Figure 2) of her toddler son’s precarious stacking project, constructed while she was on a videoconference, captures visually the essence of triage leadership. One participant remarked, “I don’t know how to do this job.” Similarly, Amy said, “it’s a hot mess...I really put out fires, honestly.” As the pandemic began unfolding in spring 2020, it generated ambiguities about finishing the school year. However, as spring morphed into summer and pandemic conditions persisted, “planning” for fall school

openings unleashed new challenges. Familiar routines gave way to constant changes that prevented planning. As predictability undulates, responsiveness and reprioritizing in the moment are forms of leadership.

## **Figure 2**

### *Participant's Symbolic Photograph of Precarity*



Constant change suffused the data. For example, Debbie recalls receiving an email in March 2020 inviting her and some teachers to a district instructional planning meeting.

That was the first meeting that I heard for the first time, our district had no plan. We, like, we were part of the plan. And this is a district that is so prepared, always ahead of the game, and when I was hearing these leaders ask these questions to teachers, I was like, ‘oh...oh, we really don’t know what we’re doing.’

Another principal (mid-July 2020) explained the uncertainty surrounding the plan for school starting in August.

I’m betting we’re going remote [...] but at what point do we say, “we just need to jump in and open these schools and see what happens?” [...] Are we going to wait until there’s a vaccine? Are we going to wait until all people have the vaccine? Is this a year plan? Is this a two-year plan? Are we going to wear masks and be at home for the rest of our lives? The bigger implications are kind of what freak me out.

The constant wondering ranged from existential questions about the meaning of the pandemic for children’s learning to quests for criteria that would signal concrete action items for schools.

These common questions demanded a form of leadership as triage: prioritizing, acting, shifting, making decisions quickly, and reversing course in moments when new priorities emerged. These decisions were sometimes health related. For Rachel, having students return to the build-

ing created the responsibility of evaluating symptoms, sending students home, contact tracing, and documenting COVID. She described escorting a young girl to the clinic who said she was not feeling well:

I've trained for this. I'm ready...I have my face shield on, my gown, I take her to our quarantine room...I'm fully suited up, looking like a goober. And she comes out and she's crying. And, I was like, "Honey, what's the matter?" She's like, "I really just miss my mom." I'm like, "Oh, my!" Take it all off. [...] It was totally just a kid saying she doesn't feel good because she missed her mom. [...] That's where I feel inadequate. I don't know. Like, these kids are so little. They say they don't feel good. You take them at their word.

Some were wary as they scrutinized the landscape for signs of the virus, working to tease out the 'normal' from the 'dangerous.' Suiting up and then casting off the protective gear was triage leadership—prioritizing to meet the demand of the moment. Similarly, Kathy felt the weight of the pressures on her older teachers as they grappled with decisions about their jobs and health, paraphrasing their concerns: "You know, I'm over 60 years old and I'm still teaching because I love what I do, but if I get COVID I could die." One participant expressed fear of the virus for herself, which was directly related to underlying family health conditions and their race, given that U.S. people of color have been disproportionately affected by the virus.

In addition to grappling with health risks of the virus as non-health practitioners, participants enacted triage leadership to meet students' and teachers' immediate physical and emotional needs and to minimize the negative impact of the pandemic on student learning. They deployed food, supplies, and technology, while managing novel school operations—remote instruction, social distancing, masks, sanitizing busses, and contact tracing—all while taking necessary action without the benefit of planning ahead for long-term needs. Despite intense triage, half of participants voiced concerns that the pandemic will have long-term negative effects, anticipating a post-COVID world that would bear the reverberations of the conditions of 2020 for their roles and the children they serve.

### **Figure 3**

*Author's Children 'Doing School' at Home*



### **Triage Mothering**

Mother/leaders enacted some triage leadership at home as well. With the spring 2020 lockdown of schools, businesses, and entertainment, mothers found themselves with limited options for childcare. This issue was most pressing for mothers with younger children. Meanwhile, school leaders scrambled to reinvent teaching and learning. Most women with young children developed strategies—allowing more screen time, buying toys, or using the pool as a babysitter—to occupy children so they could work and parent simultaneously. While most expressed that the urgencies of triage leadership made these decisions necessary, they thought their constrained choices were not beneficial to their children. All but the two mothers responsible for older children/dependents described working with their children—sometimes in unconventional settings—on schoolwork, as Figure 3 represents.

Debbie had to shift priorities as well. Faced with her son's subpar learning environment, provided by apathetic, inattentive campus support staff during fall remote instruction, she describes how after three painful days she felt she had no other choice but to stop working from school and bring her son back home because "...the paras truly let our kids down, which is not OK." Although the decision increased her stress, she thought it was better for him. Rachel implemented survival strategies as well. Skeptical of daycare safety, because, "it was kind of scary at first," Rachel kept her newborn and young sons home during the spring and hired an in-home babysitter for busy workdays. This created challenges when her babysitter regularly cancelled or her male principal called a last minute meeting. She laughs about the triage mothering experience of hiring her six-year old neighbor to watch her two young boys while she attend-

ed an important video conference: “I come out of the office after my hour meeting, and there are goldfish everywhere. I mean, [the babysitter] is a first grader.”

Other responses evoked emotion as participants described mothering circumstances at odds with their values and preferences. Amy said, “everything is just a checklist,” and “I just feel like I’m not in the moment...that’s really, really hard.” Diana, too, found herself constantly distracted when engaged in activities with her children. Sarah lamented that her four-year-old son would miss the birth of his baby sister. “It does crush me that [my son] can’t be there...I want that for him, and he will never get it back because we won’t have another [child].” Another recalls shameful acts of maternal violence—yelling, smashing toys, and chasing her daughters with a flyswatter—which, in reflection, she attributes to the pressures of mothering and leading in spaces in which the boundaries had completely dissolved.

Gabby presented sobering evidence of triage mothering as her own as well as her daughter’s underlying health conditions prompted her family to take drastic preventative action. Within minutes of receiving the news that she was denied an accommodation to work remotely, she had no time to process; she simply submitted to the mounting wave. Falling back on kinship support, she packed her daughter’s things and sent her to live with family several hours away. Gabby’s potential exposure to the virus at school has necessitated limited in-person contact with her daughter. Currently, she is visiting only after receiving a negative COVID-19 test result, a few times per month. Crying, she expressed:

It’s been extremely difficult as a parent, also as a working parent, to come to the school and, um, be around other kids, and not get to be around my own. [...] That’s really hard. When do I get my baby back?”

Several participants negotiated feelings of regret or guilt around these difficult choices, fueling a sense of inadequacy in structural and national conditions outside of their control. Sarah explains that she would cry to her principal when she felt guilty about being impatient with her three-year-old son. “I had a lot of guilt...I just felt so guilty about the fact that maybe I sent him to his room when he was throwing a fit in the middle of my Zoom.” Mother/leaders can face serious decisions, in some cases, decisions that feel like life and death. As Gabby explained, she had her “back against the wall.” Despite amplified pressures, these mother/leaders exercised agency by taking action.

Their narratives demonstrated all components of “Leader Resilience Action Skills—perseverance, adaptability, courageous decision making, personal responsibility” (Reed & Blaine, 2016, p. 461) even as the waves continued to swell. As Diana noted, “I’m here, here, then here, then here....” During some interviews, researchers noted the frenetic en-

ergy in the pace and volume of participant voices in sharing experiences. Debbie's voice raised an octave as she described hierarchizing and re-hierarchizing her mothering and leading roles in one long, breathless comment.

The only real break I get is lunch, and I give him his plate and let him watch a little cartoon while I come back to answer emails or get on a Zoom, which stinks because now I feel like I'm struggling because I can't have my child have a crappy education, but I'm not going to have this new position that I have fought to get, die either. So, I am literally juggling super high every day and it's exhausting!

## **2) Reframing, Adjusting, and Letting Go**

How women balanced intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and intensive leading (Baker, 2016) involved constant reframing, adjusting, and letting go, whether of previous norms and expectations about "good enough" mothering (Winnicott, 1973), optimistic and pragmatic framing, or through sheer exhausted necessity. In contrast to scholarship on mother/leaders' pre-pandemic navigation in which they established boundaries between work and home to help manage, the majority described—and some demonstrated—constant permeability in boundaries. Concerned with caring for their children during the pandemic, most mother/leaders found themselves frequently unable to negotiate leading or mothering the way they preferred. Half the participants described adjusting parenting expectations to help manage work and home concurrently. Only three described establishing clear boundaries between the work day/week and evenings/weekends.

Some strategies were relatively benign: electronics, less at-home studying, endless peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, later dinners, and more independent play. Amy, for example, allowed her youngest child to stay up later to increase family time. Others were more challenging. For most mother/leaders, the loss of time with children was a constant difficulty. One commented, "The time constraints have been hard because it's just, it's come home, read with them, help with homework, cook dinner." As Kathy noted,

[the work demands have] sucked hours and hours and hours out of my time with my kiddos...that's the hardest...Yeah dude, I miss out on picking them up...I was in hopes that this year would be a little more settled, and I would be able to leave prior to, you know, 5, 6, 7 o'clock more often. But I don't.

While motherwork remained a priority for participants, their inability to meet the demands of intensive mothering caused them to let go of certain usual mothering practices.

One key observation was the pace and fluidity in which sever-

al women carried out their roles, sometimes border crossing effortlessly multiple times in minutes. One researcher's children interrupted an interview multiple times, while, in turn, the interviewee's baby was crying. In another interview, the researcher tracked ten different almost seamless movements as the principal interviewed first walked with her video screen around her office, then variously brushed her hair on screen, checked her watch for texts about a laptop delivery to children in a quarantined house, left the room to retrieve her children from a friend, responded cheerfully several times to their needs as they joined us on screen, checked her phone for messages, and took a quick break, each time returning to the flow of the conversation as if no "interruption" had occurred. This embodied movement seemed to reflect a form of "habitus" in Bourdieu's (1986) terms. Her actions conveyed a set of deeply embodied dispositions and skills (Bourdieu, 1986) that seemed so engrained that she barely paused in her navigations between her mother/leader practices and interviewing, giving generously of her time to us in this intense period.

Pandemic conditions seemed to leave little time for sustained reflection about their circumstances. They just kept going, doing, and letting go. One participant commented, "It has really, it has really changed me.... I just want to do, I just want to work and do everything I can to the best of my ability. But I don't have a lot to give in regards to...this district." Julie said it has "been very much a 'from the hip' kind of environment," while Diana said, "it's been a blur." Figure 4 shows how one participant's laundry found a semi-permanent home in the mudroom, while another participant, referencing her messy desk, remarked, "I just don't come up here on the weekends, because I just don't care. I just don't care." Angie discussed silly policies that schools needed to ignore in crisis circumstances, such as the dress code. She asked, "Who cares about their belly buttons showing if they are in their chairs in math class?"

**Figure 4**

*Participant's Weekend Laundry*



During a remote principal meeting, one participant rolled her eyes off-screen as colleagues at more affluent schools complained about parents faking COVID symptoms to take vacations. Several principals suggested these students shouldn't be allowed to take their Chromebooks and access remote assignments, which other principals found punitive. They emphasized the necessity of prioritizing: "So what if students are on vacation? If a few kids desire to do school while they are at the beach in these extreme circumstances, why should we prevent them?" Gabby expressed, "Fear has been a big part of the conversation, as well as letting go of the things you can't control. Like, we can't control this pandemic."

### **3) Leadership as Care Work**

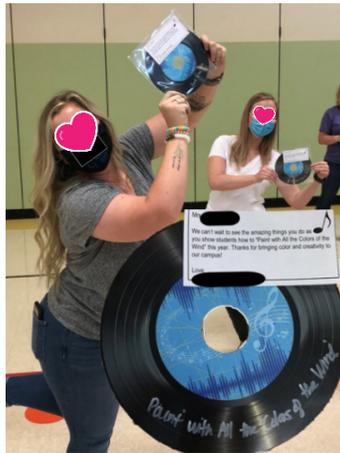
One response to this lack of control was amplifying care work (Lanoix, 2013), which emerged as fully embodied and emotional labor in the narratives. Women described prioritizing the care of others and engaging in impression management (Goffman, 1959) at work and at home. We read this care work as a form of leadership amid triage circumstances in helping others when normal routines seemed out of control. Despite their own heavy workloads, many expressed empathy for the teachers and children they served, trying to serve as resources and take on duties where they could. Kathy said, "I think my job is always stressful all the time, but my biggest stress has been my worry about teachers...I've never been a teacher during a global pandemic." She consulted teachers in making some decisions, emphasizing, "at the end of the day, my job as the principal is to support the teachers. I mean, someone has got to take care of them."

Care work took varied forms. The added time demands on teaching and leading remotely prompted one principal to question the need for staff meetings. She said, "I think that the stress level of the teachers was as bad as mine was. And so, I am going to take 30 minutes for a staff meeting? I felt guilty doing that to them." As teachers navigated new technology and their fears, they often felt overwhelmed and ill-equipped, leading to tearful, emotional responses. During these times, principals described varied efforts to support teachers. All principals described offering a listening ear to teachers. Rachel, for example, one of several leaders with a male supervisor, regularly empathized with teacher-mothers when the male principal called last-minute meetings that left them scrambling for childcare or, regarding work/home conflicts, flippantly told them to "just figure it out" as he had done when his kids were young.

...and then, I just asked him, "Well, so how did you do that?" He was like, "Actually, my wife did it, and she was late to school." And I was like, wait, so you really didn't do that? [...] I told him, "You have to stop saying that."

## Figure 5

### *Care Work: Teacher Theme Songs*



One leader shifted her preferred leadership style to meet teachers' needs. Sarah, proud of her typical collaborative leadership style, became more bureaucratic when she recognized her operations team wanted her to "just tell us what to do." Despite her own hectic schedule, she created dismissal plans, safety protocols, and lunch schedules to relieve pressure on teachers. Julie said, "I've always been a leader that strives to be positive and to find the bright side, but I find myself doing that, even more so." She regularly sent out positive messages and reminded them, "It's going to be okay. One way or another we are going to get through this." As seen in Figure 5, the first author worked with her administrative team to select individualized "theme songs" for 72 teachers to lift their spirits. Debbie, a teacher leader who transitioned out of the classroom during the pandemic, stifled her excitement to implement new plans, recognizing, "We are not there; we are in a pandemic" Gabby recalled the difficulty of asking staff to cover classes when they couldn't find substitute teachers.

Teachers were scared... there were even some tears from teachers that day that I... asked to step into these classrooms. [...] I just said, "Hey, you can do this. You know, you can do it"... kind of built that teacher up.

Several leaders wanted to show more care than circumstances permitted. Grace said,

As a leader... we struggle [in] really showing our appreciation [for our teachers]. But when I can't even sit in a room with you, or I can't give you all that you deserve, it's heartbreaking...I don't know that with COVID if it was necessarily tasks that were hard.

I think it was the people connection...because you can't connect on Zoom correctly.

Most leaders described the desire to undertake teacher and student carework, efforts to do so, and the weighty recognition. These actions only offered partial comfort.

### ***Impression Management***

Care work at times meant impression management. Goffman's (1959) classic concept captures people's labor in social interactions to shape others' impressions of them. For leaders whose sense of control and certainty were undermined by the pandemic, they often sought to be a stable force for their schools. Some described putting on a "brave face" or "game face" to prioritize teachers' feelings over their own or opening their office doors to be a steady source of support. In these cases, impression management was thus a form of care work. Amy, for example, felt 'comforted' that her empathic leadership style provided teachers needed support even though, "in my head I feel like I'm frazzled." Most leaders described upset or confused parents, crying, angry, struggling, or anxious teachers, and complex school dynamics. Several had teachers resign during the crisis, yet personnel constraints meant leaders "could not tell their side of the story."

At home, several described trying to create stability for their children. Kathy remarked that "the things I say have great power...I want my children to know that they are safe and taken care of...and any problem, no matter what, we can talk about it." Gabby describes her mothering:

I allow [my kids] to see my strengths as well as my struggles. I don't hide a lot from them because I want them to understand the joys of life, but I also want them to understand how to navigate rocky waters. And so, I am a very authentic person with them...I talk about everything with my kids, and I allow them to ask me questions, tough questions. There is really not anything that is off limits with them. [...] I refuse to give everybody else my best and give them the last of me.

### ***Negotiating Self-Care***

Notably, when asking leaders about their self-care, a number responded, "I need to exercise, but I don't," or, "I used to exercise but I am usually too exhausted; I just want to sit on the couch." One had no answer for the question. Grace summed it up powerfully when she said, "I'm terrible at self-care. And I always have been, and I think that that is the gift of being a mom and a principal." Accepting poor self-care as part of principal and mother job descriptions, the first author recalls the hectic pace of the

first day of in-person learning in September, 2020. With nothing to eat or drink the entire day except a few Slim Jims and a cup of coffee at 10 am, she was convinced that what turned out to be her COVID-19 infection was nothing more than dehydration. Debbie observed, “I can’t work out,” and “cook dinner, clean house, be a great wife, great mother, great teacher... I can do three or four, but I can’t do it all.”

Women described some efforts toward self-nourishment as a way of coping with stressors. Several mentioned spending time with family, erecting as firm-as-possible boundaries between the working week and the weekends. One texted a trusted friend daily, and another had regular manicures. Debbie recognized the value of self-care:

I have my own grounding techniques that make me feel stable... I do things that bring me joy. I know that sounds so silly, but it works for me. [...] And it makes you a better person; it makes you a better mom; it makes you a better teacher if you can have that self-care and that balance and say, “Nope, it’s my turn.”

Whether through a breathing technique, stretching, a Brené Brown book or podcast, or simply repeating a mantra, Debbie enlisted varied tools to cope with anxiety. Two shared that their faith and regular prayer strengthened them to face risk and uncertainty. Gabby, a firm believer in self-care and boundaries, remarked, “I love taking care of me. I love pampering myself. [...] So that part of it, you know, I miss that side of it. [...] I’ve just, I’ve grounded myself in prayer...and that has been able to sustain me.”

Some managed with medication or alcohol. Rachel, who gave birth early in the pandemic, proactively began anti-anxiety medicine based on a previous Post-Partum Depression Diagnosis. Instead of weaning off the medicine as she did with her oldest child, she increased her dosage during the pandemic and has maintained this as a helpful intervention during COVID. One participant took her blood pressure medicine more regularly than in pre-pandemic times. Two joked that alcohol consumption increased since the pandemic, and another, who was diagnosed in her late 40s with Attention Deficit Disorder, increased the dose of her medicine during the pandemic.

Notably, of the ten women we interviewed about their sources of support and self-care, only four mentioned regular exercise. One diligently arose most days to run and lift weights; one walked; one was dressed in workout clothes during our conversation, poised to dash to the gym the second we finished. Another managed to practice yoga a few days per week. Primarily, even as women recognized its importance, their own self-care was displaced to care for others.

## **Discussion and Implications**

The COVID-19 pandemic is a remarkable context for exploring

how mother/leaders negotiate their roles during unprecedented times. The interviews highlight the gendered practices constitutive of mother/leaders' navigations and the triage leadership practices and care work they have performed at home and in schools. In response to our inquiry questions focused on women's experiences, their navigations of border crossings, and the leadership lessons their experiences reveal, several findings and lessons emerged. At this writing, leaders are still adapting, responding, changing course as conditions unfold, with more lessons yet to come. We focus on three cumulative findings and lessons emerging from these leaders' experiences that can inform leadership practices and framing of mother/leaders' care work.

First, mother/leaders primarily expressed intense stress as well as narrated resilience in navigating their home and work lives. As individuals, they described exercising adaptability, flexibility, and perseverance (Reed & Blaine, 2015) as well as "inspirational motivation" and "individualized considerations" that are essential transformative leadership skills (Hameiri et al, 2014, p. 53). Notably, mother/leaders primarily framed their navigations and schools' responses in individualistic terms. There is little structural attention to the gendered dimensions of care work in women's narratives or examples of structural support that help foster women's resilience, self-care, and agential leadership practices. Their embodied, material isolation due to COVID-19 combined with minimal, if any, institutional awareness or support for their gendered experiences as mother/leaders, could accelerate the precarity of the pandemic for mothers. One leader, in fact, recognized that her own male leader's insistence that teachers manage their children—as his family (wife) had—obscured the gendered differences in their lives. His messaging reflects a false gendered neutrality in the effects of COVID conditions on leaders. This might be a common phenomenon in other schools and contexts. Similarly, the denial of Gabby's request to work from home to protect both her and her child meant additional machinations for an already stressed leader. Institutional framing of Gabby's situation as her responsibility to address raises important questions about the availability of policies to support mother/leaders' gendered needs. How widespread or visible are policies and flexible work arrangements to support women's needs? What other structural supports were available?

While feminist labor scholarship has long critiqued the mismatch between patriarchal norms (Kruger et al., 2005; Lumby, 2015), structural support, and women's needs as educational workers (e.g. Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012), the pandemic has amplified the necessity of institutional policies and practices that take gendered positioning into account to advance the well-being of women leaders. Although some described support from family, friends and co-workers, participant interviews showed no evidence of substantive structural support in their work lives, so ensuring a modicum of self-care meant relying on family or carving out space

on their own. As mothering scholar Andrea O'Reilly (2020) insists the pandemic has unleashed a crisis for mothers that is primarily invisible; we must "render audible what has been silenced—the labour of mother-work under COVID-19—in order to inform, support, and empower mothers through and after this pandemic" (p. 8).

The second finding is that mother/leaders reframed their navigations of blurred boundaries as agential triage leadership in conditions that pushed and pulled them to respond to pressing, immediate, and multi-dimensional needs in the best ways they could. Participants' leadership experiences were anchors in "uncontrollable" circumstances, and they engaged in impression management as care work to support children/teachers when they could not lead/mother in conventional ways. While literature indicates that women can and do reform and integrate their understanding of themselves as mothers and leaders (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Jordan, 2012; Loder, 2005; Lumby, 2015; Lumby & Azaola, 2014), there has been insufficient time for the women in this study to reflect deeply on the meanings of these times for their identities. Yet, even so, they recognize changes. As Grace commented, COVID has "blurred my home lines, it has blown them out...I feel like I'm cheating on my husband with work." Instead of engaging in conceptual vision work, leaders spent their time triaging immediate needs, including attending to at-risk children, setting up home spaces (couches, tables, desks) for work, learning unfamiliar technologies, providing support to stressed teachers, frantic cleaning of buses to follow health protocols, and cumbersome contact tracing.

Our data analysis reflects women's agential movement and adaptability within waves of shifting demands consistent with the literature as necessary interventions when navigating risky, turbulent, and changing educational contexts (Burke et al., 2012; Hameiri et al., 2014; Hallinger et al., 2016). While the majority cried during the interviews (five of the women with younger children), and some described the circumstances as "really hard," the interviews all reflected mother/leaders' agential grappling with the conditions. Several were clear that good leadership mattered tremendously, and they loved their jobs, even in circumstances in which the stakes were so high. Looking ahead, as perilous COVID conditions persist, mother/leaders must "learn their way forward" (Burke et al., 2012, p. 117). Educational leadership preparation, professional development, and structures that emphasize the importance of tapping resilience (Reed & Blaine, 2015) and adaptability (Burke et al., 2012; Hameiri et al., 2014; Reed & Blaine, 2015)—skills identified in the literature as more often practiced by women than men—offers promise for creating more equitable spaces for women in educational leadership.

The third finding, echoing finding two, is that virus conditions have necessitated new forms of leadership. Leaders' narratives foreshadow potential transformations in educational practices wrought by the pandemic likely to shape the future of education that leaders have yet to process or

concretize. Just as the pandemic has forced or invited people worldwide to re-envision their daily lives—for often heartbreaking reasons—it similarly has required leaders to respond quickly and enact new practices. These forced changes unleash possibilities for reconceptualizing leadership and American public education. Some leaders have dispensed with “normal” practices (scheduled meetings, Type-A expectations, strict home rules) because they do not meet the needs of the moment. As Kathy said, “Everything we do is in response to COVID” right now.

Yet some “usual” practices continue (daily school announcements, hiring, academic planning, professional development, teacher/leader orientation, and parent/community outreach) while novel duties surface and morph (leading online, virtual collaboration, digital platforms, and constrained physical environments), often with children under foot at home. Thus, what leaders consider dispensable and necessary are shifting. As one noted, “I don’t think things will ever be the same.” Catapulted into new delivery methods, some schools may continue to implement them, while some believe remote learning will have serious long-lasting consequences for children. One shared, “I am very scared of the path we’re on...I would rather be wearing a mask every day with children in this building than... the remote idea...what scares me the most is what kind of kids are we going to get back?” In contrast, another noted the virus’ ongoing threats, with hundreds of quarantined children, family losses, and challenges in hiring substitutes who don’t want to “work in a petri dish.”

The reverberations of the pandemic have underscored the educational inequities for differently-positioned students that weigh heavily on leaders. Several were kept “up at night” worrying about children under their care. Amy said, “most of my stress comes from...not having control over decisions and not having control over our students that are in very hopeless situations... Some kids are not having their basic needs met.” Most found their own families affected by the challenges of remote learning; two mother/leaders of children with special learning needs simply could not get their children’s needs met through school resources, a distressing circumstance that highlights already challenging school inequities. This was a sobering and weighty aspect of pandemic circumstances that triage leadership could not address. As mother/leaders respond to the reverberations of COVID-19, they strategized to address student and parent needs. However, pandemic conditions underscore the enormous structural inequities that continue to shape children’s learning and the mother/leaders guiding their schools. One lesson remains clear: unless drastic corrective action at institutional and structural levels ensues, school leadership will continue to unjustly burden mothers.

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