

Leading Through Crisis:

How Elementary Principals In Title I Schools Navigate
and Grow as Crisis Leaders

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Presentation Agenda

- Overview of the Study
- Data Analysis
- Key Findings
- Cross Case Analysis
- Implications and Recommendations
- Forward Thinking
- Conclusion and Discussion



Crisis Leadership in K-12 Education: What We Know



Principal role expanded from manager to crisis leader (Hallinger, 1992; Leithwood et al., 2012; Grissom & Condon, 2021).

Crises in schools are more frequent, complex, and emotionally demanding (Cotta, 2021; Grasser, 2022; NCEs, 2023).

Burnout and turnover are rising; principal exits are costly for districts (Blad, 2023; Lückler et al., 2022; Darling-Hammond, 2022).

Preparation seldom includes explicit crisis leadership coursework (Grissom & Condon, 2021; Wooten & James, 2008, 2021).

Crisis Decision Theory is rarely applied in K–12 leadership (Sweeney, 2008; Frankland & Biddle, 2023; Garris, 2020).

Key Gaps in the Literature

- **Few studies on crisis leadership in Title I elementary schools** (Daughtry, 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Hunter et al., 2025; Virella, 2025).
- **Limited attention to principals' *post-crisis reflection* and learning** (Peterson, 2023; Nasheeda et al., 2018; Conway, 2024).
- **CDT work lacks emphasis on reflection/feedback loops in school contexts** (Sweeney, 2008; Frankland & Biddle, 2023).
- **No model explaining how Title I elementary principals grow as crisis leaders over time.**



Statement of the Problem

- **Growing Demand**

School leaders are increasingly expected to navigate complex crises.

- **Preparation Gap**

Preparation for crisis leadership remains limited.

- **Research Gap**

Little research examines how elementary principals learn from and make meaning of crisis experiences over time.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how elementary principals in Title I schools in Eastern North Carolina identify, navigate, and develop as crisis leaders, focusing on decision-making during crisis events and the ways in which reflective practice fosters leadership growth over time.

Research Question 1:

How do Title 1 elementary school principals describe their lived experiences with crisis decision making in their schools?

Research Question 2:

How do principals' stories of lived experiences describe their own sense of reflexivity and the role of feedback after leading school communities through crisis situations?

Grounding the Study:

Crisis Decision Theory

Assesses severity, identifies options, evaluates responses in crises.



Missing: structured attention to *post-crisis* reflection and learning.



Reflective Crisis Response Model

Extends CDT with a feedback loop for reflection and leadership growth in Title I elementary schools.

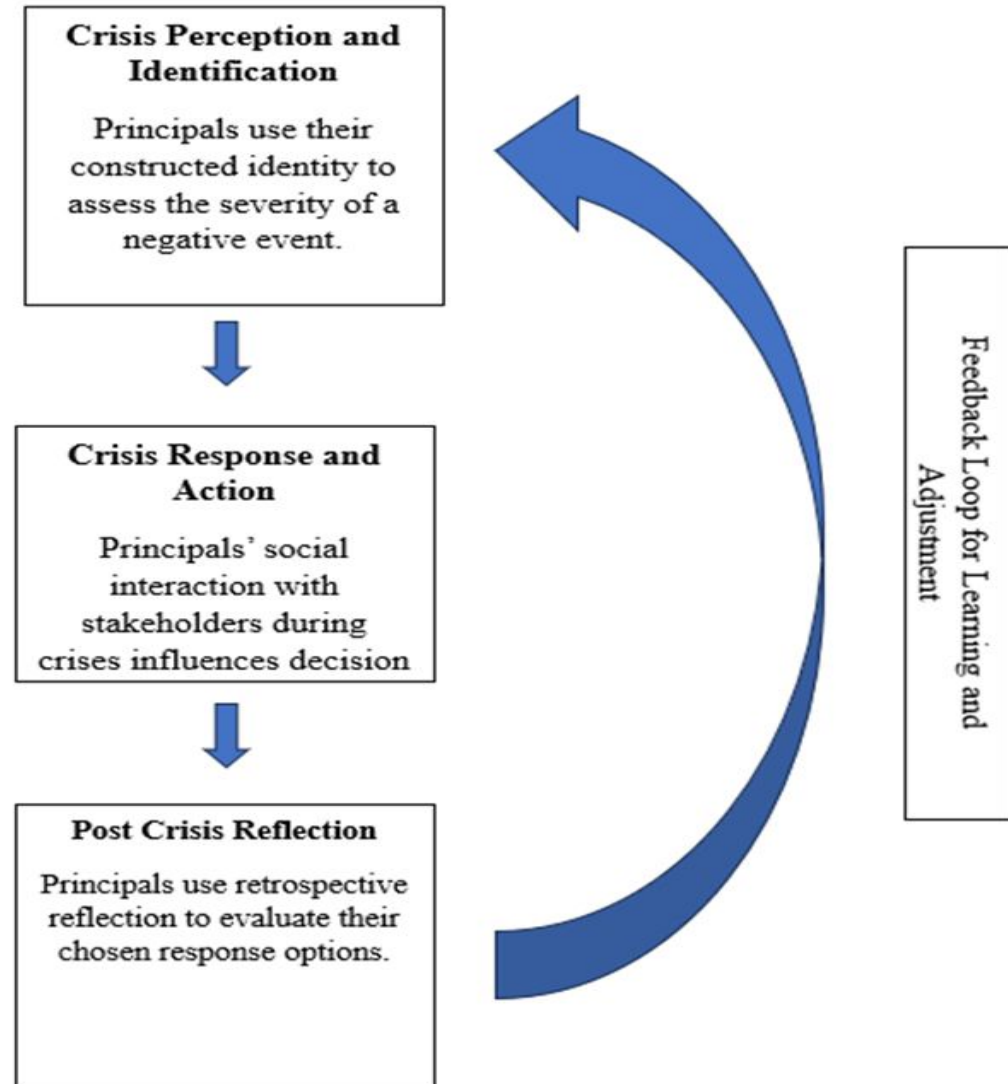
Reflective Crisis Response Model

Builds on the 3 stages of CDT to include the Feedback Loop for Learning and Adjustment.

This loop, or fourth stage, provides space to explore the prevalence of post-crisis reflection and its potential impact on future crisis identification and decision making.

Establishes a cyclical design and space to examine how principals may grow and adapt and where district may provide more support.

Reflective Crisis Response Model



Methodology

Sampling

Purposeful sampling of Title I elementary principals
Eastern North Carolina
Criterion sampling of those who experienced a self-identified school crisis

Recruitment Procedures

Digital recruitment flyer email
QR-linked screening questionnaire
Informed consent

Narrative Inquiry

Explores lived experiences through participant stories *in their own words*
Meaning is co-constructed
Restorying attends to time, context, and relationship

Data Collection

Pilot interviews
Semi-structured interviews
First-person accounts
Focus on decision-making and post-crisis reflection
Audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim

Credibility & Reflexivity

Member checking of transcripts
Peer debriefing
Reflexive journaling
Analytic memoing to monitor assumptions and bias

Participants

N = 5

40% male

60% female

20% Indigenous American

20% White, Hispanic Origin

60% White, Not of Hispanic Origin

20% 1-3 years experience

40% 4-6 years experience

20% 7-9 years experience

20% 10+ years experience

60% < 500 students

40% 501-1000 students

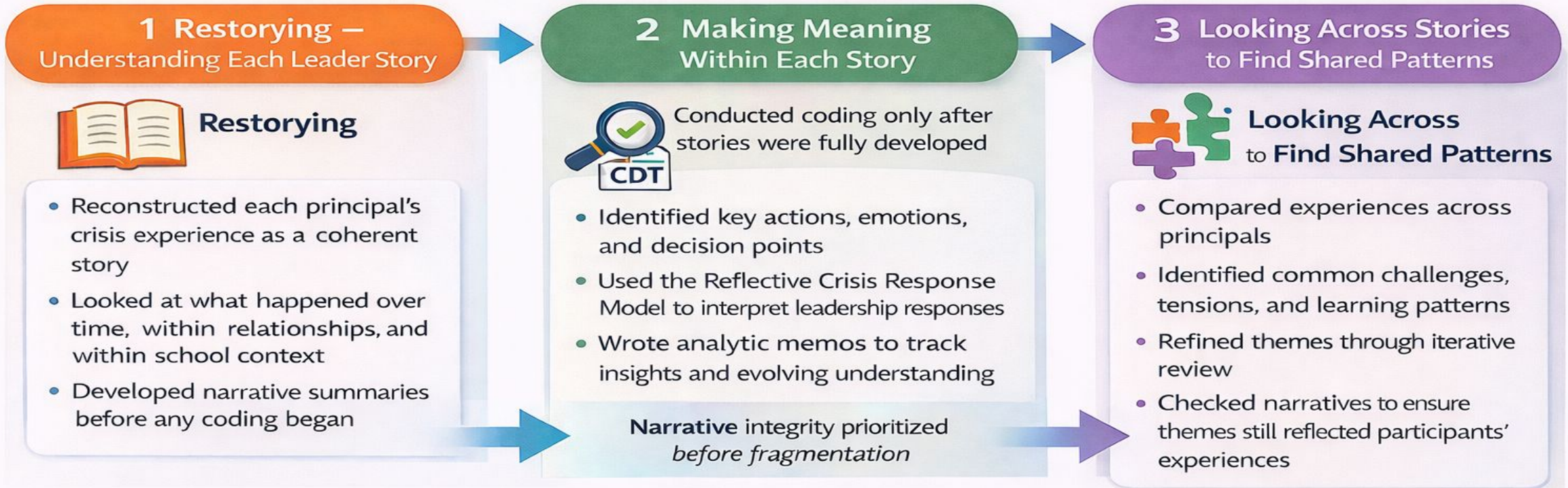
Demographic characteristics of participating principals

Pseudonym	Race/ethnicity	Gender	Age range	Years as principal	Enrollment	Title I percentage
Gary	White, not of Hispanic origin	Male	41-50	4-6 years	501-1000	>95%
Jack	White, not of Hispanic origin	Male	31-40	4-6 years	<500	75-85%
Kylie	White, Hispanic origin	Female	41-50	10+ years	501-1000	75-85%
Lara	White, not of Hispanic origin	Female	41-50	1-3 years	<500	75-85%
Melanie	Indigenous American	Female	60+	7-9 years	<500	>95%

Note. Demographic and school characteristics were self-reported in ranges to maintain participant anonymity.

How Participant Stories Became Findings

(Narrative Inquiry Data Analysis Process)



Built-In Trustworthiness Throughout the Process

- ✓ Member checking with participants
- Reflexive journaling and analytic memoing
- Multiple data sources to strengthen interpretation
- Ongoing attention to researcher assumptions

Result

Themes were developed across stories while keeping each principal's experience intact.

Findings



Principals entered the role underprepared for the realities of crisis leadership

Principals' responses to crisis were marked by rapid decision-making under uncertainty.

Principals described post-crisis reflection as valuable but difficult to achieve amid the fast-paced realities of school leadership.

Finding 1: Entering the role underprepared for the realities of crisis leadership

“At that time...I don't know that there was a tremendous amount of crisis training. I don't even know that that was even a term.” - Melanie

“The only reason I knew our reunification site was because my principal talked about it years ago when I was an AP. It literally came up in conversation.” – Kylie

“It (crisis response training) was nothing that was required. I sought it out.” – Lara

“So it was minimal (crisis leadership training). I think we took, like, a school safety course...honestly, I don't remember much about it.” – Jack

A lot of my training dealt with hiring and firing or working with the district, and that's important. But now when you are faced with a natural disaster, or active shooter, or highly volatile situations. We don't have enough prep for that. These things take a back seat to curriculum, but they play a huge part in how you run a school. You've got to have some practice, or at least some background knowledge.” - Melanie



Finding 2: Rapid Decision-Making Under Uncertainty



“In any crisis situation you’re going to have a lot coming at you very, very quickly. And in a crisis, you don’t have the luxury, most of the time, of time to make decisions.” –Jack

“I knew right then I had a call to make, because the situation was only going to escalate if we didn’t act quickly.” –Lara

“You realize pretty quickly that the buck stops with you. People are looking to you to figure out what’s next, even when you don’t have all the answers.” –Melanie

“I mean, what do you do when you have a kid that makes a threat that they want to kill somebody and it’s 3 o’clock, and you are loading buses and you have to act with a sense of urgency.” –Gary

Finding 3: Reflection is Valuable, but Difficult to Achieve

- “I don’t think reflection happens right away. In the middle of it, you’re just trying to survive and help other people survive. Reflection comes later, when you finally have a moment to breathe.” –Melanie
- “I think that’s the point though. I don’t think I’ve ever even had time to reflect.” – Jack
- “I’ve probably reflected about it more talking to you today than I have since then. We just have to move on to the next thing.” –Lara
- “Self-reflection often times comes so much later than when you could really use it.” –Melanie
- “I do wish we had the time to talk about different scenarios, things that come up, things that happen, because that’s the best way to learn, like, learn from each other.” -Kylie



Cross Case Analysis

Entered Underprepared

- Limited Crisis Training
- Learning Through Experience
- Systematic Preparation Gaps
- Evolving Crisis Landscape

Decisions Under Uncertainty

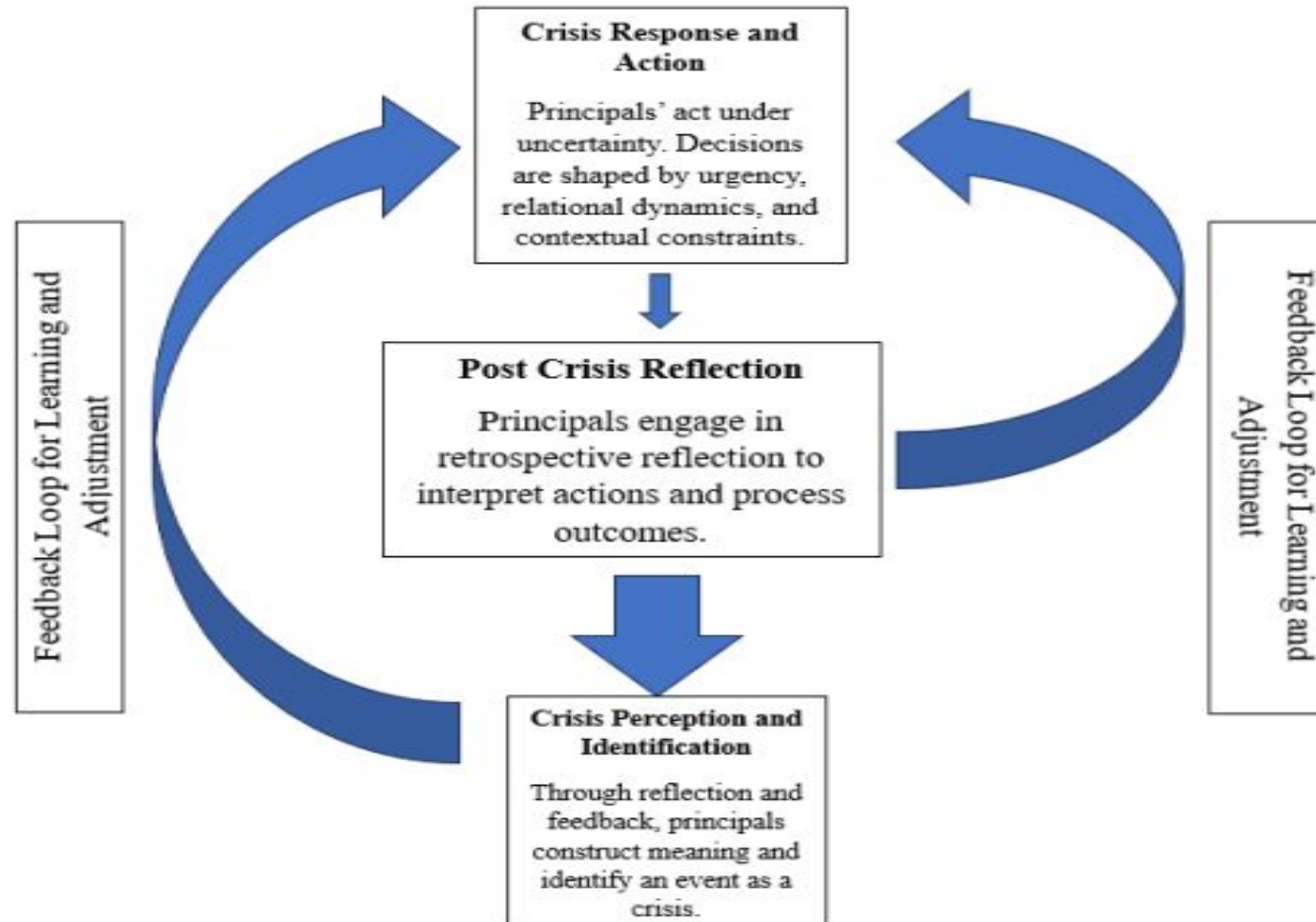
- Urgent, Time-pressured Decisions
- Incomplete Information
- Primary Decision-makers
- Prioritized Safety

Reflection: Valued but Difficult

- Delayed Reflection
- Post-crisis Learning
- Time-constrained Reflection
- Desire for Shared-Learning

Revisiting the Reflective Crisis Response Model

Revised Reflective Crisis Response Model



Recommendations for Practice

Districts

- Embed structured reflection in principal support systems
- Create peer learning networks for shared crisis learning
- Provide ongoing emotional and psychological support for principals



Administrator Preparation Programs

- Strengthen crisis decision-making in prep programs
- Provide simulations, role plays, scenario practice
- Explore program revisions



Shift training from managing crisis events to leading through people through crisis events.

Recommendations for Theory

- **Position reflection as a central mechanism of leadership learning**
- **Reconceptualize crisis identification as retrospective and socially constructed**
- **Frame crisis leadership as developmental and context-dependent**
- **Elevate emotional and relational dimensions within crisis leadership theory**

Recommendations for Policy



At the state level...

Allocate targeted funding
for crisis leadership
development and resources
in high-poverty schools



At the university level...

Require crisis leadership
coursework in
administrator preparation
and licensure programs



At the district level...

Mandate structured
post-crisis debriefing
protocols

Recommendations for Future Research

- **Expand studies across regions and school contexts**
(urban, suburban, secondary settings)
- **Conduct longitudinal research on leadership development through crisis**
- **Examine how organizational culture shapes post-crisis learning**
- **Investigate the impact of structured reflection on leadership outcomes**

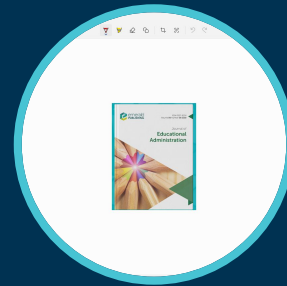
Next Steps



UCEA
Conference Paper
May 2026



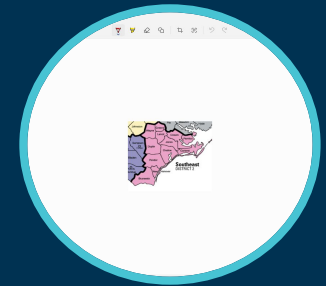
AERA
Conference Paper
July 2026



Journal of Educational
Administration
Journal Manuscript
In Progress



EdNC perspectives
Crisis Leadership
2 Accepted



NCDPI Southeast
Regional PD
Principal Support
Networks
Coming Soon

Conclusions and Discussion

