

## Flying a Plane, While Also Building the Plane in the Air: A COVID-19 Composite Narrative for Educational Re/newal

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### ABSTRACT

*Using narrative inquiry to understand the stories from 15 PreK-12 and higher education administrators, this article interweaves narrative inquiry, composite characters, and arts-based research. As such, this article presents the composite narratives of the pandemic and its impact on PreK-20 educational leaders as a non-fictional story of two old friends catching up in a speculative future beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. These non-fictional accounts are built upon the pastiche of data shared with the research team to craft a coherent narrative creatively. This composite narrative is presented in the article as a whole story to serve as a blueprint for innovative qualitative methodological explorations that speak both to scholars and practitioners. The experiences of Supe and Dean are two composite characters representing the broad experiences of the administrators from our study. More specifically, Supe(rintendent), represents the collective experiences of our PreK-12 administrators, and Dean (of Students) represents the broad experiences of our higher education administrators. Using the composite narratives of our 8 PreK-12 leaders and our 7 higher education leaders allows us to craft a compelling comparative understanding between educational levels and their national response to the COVID-19 pandemic. By engaging in the creative, we not only document the means by which educators have experienced the pandemic, but it also allows us to imagine the outcomes of what could be based on the understandings crafted during these times.*

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19, narrative inquiry, composite narrative, arts-based research, educational leadership

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It's a tale as old as time. Two old friends randomly run into one another after too many years to count. Supe(erintendent) and Dean (of Students), two high school friends who have not spoken in years, finally have the opportunity to visit family in their hometown after the trauma induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, run into one another in their local coffee shop. This unexpected gathering, crafted as a composite narrative (Cook, 2013), tells the story of the convergences and divergences between the way that PreK-12 and post-secondary educational leaders navigated this time of crisis.

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The use of storytelling as a methodology aimed to capture the lived experiences of PreK-20 educational leaders during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study was based on the primary research question: What are the experiences and stories of PreK-20 leaders during this time? The use of a composite narrative was intentional to reach a broader audience, both within and outside the Academy<sup>2</sup>, to present the research findings of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational administrators.

Using the words of 15 different leaders from across the United States (US), from both PreK-12 and higher education leadership teams, stitched together, these composite characters, Superintendent and Dean (of Students), allow for us to blur genres (Geertz, 1980) between empirical non-fiction research and creative storytelling (Willis, 2019). That is, “narratives are useful in research precisely because storytellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it as it was” (Riessman, 2005, p. 6). In addition, this composite narrative is presented in the article as a whole story to serve as a blueprint for innovative qualitative methodological explorations that speak both to scholars and practitioners “which acknowledges the complexities of individual motivations and outlooks, whilst drawing out more generalized learning and understanding” (Willis, 2019, p. 476). Lastly, this article is timely as we process what it means to be survivors in what seems to have only been witnessed in science-fiction tropes before our experiences living through the global COVID-19 pandemic (DeMartino, 2021; DeMartino & Weiser, 2022; Weiser & DeMartino, 2022).

### **Setting the Story: The Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US took the country by surprise. Due to the politicization of the pandemic, two major and contradicting sources of information arose. The President of the United States repeatedly denied the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to unreliable claims being spread across the country regarding the virus and the preparation for this crisis (DeMartino & Weiser, 2021). Like, in February 2020, the former President claimed the coronavirus would weaken “when we get into April, in the warmer weather—that has a very negative effect on that, and that type of a virus” and the outbreak would be temporary because “It’s going to disappear. One day, it’s like a miracle—it will disappear” (Paz, 2020, para. 3). On the other hand, Dr. Anthony Fauci cautioned the public that “as the next week or two or three go by, we’re going to see a lot more community-related cases” (Paz, 2020, para. 6). To date because we lived through the pandemic and transitioned our lives to fit pandemic precautions in the post-vaccine era, the COVID-19 virus still impacts the health of the worldwide population. Pivoting to the impact of the pandemic on PreK-12 and institutions of higher education, schools, colleges, and universities were challenged and changed by the COVID-19 crisis.

### **PreK-12 Schools**

Although we experienced other pandemics in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, like the 1918 pandemic (H1N1 virus), the 1957-1958 pandemic (H2N2 virus), the 1968 pandemic (H3N2 virus), and the 2009 H1N1 pandemic (H1N1pdm09 virus) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019), the COVID-19 pandemic universally impacted every facet of our lives, including the education of our youth (DeMartino & Weiser, 2021). At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, PreK-12 schools frantically tried to adapt to delivering a high-quality education under extreme crisis. PreK-12 schools navigated uncharted territory while attempting to feed, educate, counsel,

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<sup>2</sup> Here we think of the Academy as the community of scholars who typically read journal articles. Narrative approaches are more aligned with the popular press understandings of scholarship.

and support their students and families while attempting to situate themselves and their own families during the pandemic (DeMartino & Weiser, 2021; 2022).

During this time, the CDC (2021) acknowledged the fact that the COVID-19 vaccine was the highest level of protection, but because most children under 12 were not yet eligible for the vaccine at the time of release, they provided guidance emphasizing the implementation of layered prevention strategies to protect students and families. In short, these layered prevention strategies included “universal indoor masking by all students (age 2 and older), staff, teachers, and visitors to K-12 schools, regardless of vaccination status,” at least 3 feet of physical distance between students within classrooms, screening testing, proper ventilation, frequent handwashing, “staying home when sick and getting tested, contact tracing in combination with quarantine and isolation, and cleaning and disinfection” (CDC, 2021, para. 4). Given the CDC recommendations, the politicization of the pandemic infected PreK-12 schools, as well. For example, in Arizona, Republican Governor Doug Ducey was given 30 days by the U.S. Department of Treasury to “remedy” his unlawful “requirements of federal COVID-19 relief aid when he used it to create two grant programs to disincentivize school mask mandates” (Blad, 2021b, para. 2). In fact, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo stated in his October 2021 letter, “We are concerned that two recently created Arizona grant programs undermine efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19” (Blad, 2021b, para. 3). On the other hand, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom of California was the first to announce a statewide mandate for PreK-12 students to be vaccinated against COVID-19 (Blad, 2021a). However, the proposed state policy was not without loopholes. For example, families could more easily opt their children out of the COVID-19 vaccine requirement than other required vaccines for more routine illnesses, like measles, as a condition of school attendance (Blad, 2021a). However, at this time, it was still a groundbreaking announcement for PreK-12 schools.

### **Institutions of Higher Education**

Similar to PreK-12 schools, institutions of higher education were in disarray at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many colleges and universities were quickly able to transfer classes to an online format but less were able to easily manage the day-to-day operations, like communication, team support, and equitable solutions (DeMartino & Weiser, 2021). These limitations prompted institutions of higher education to re-evaluate their emergency plans or lack thereof (Weiser & DeMartino, 2022).

Then, when the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) gave full approval to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, several colleges mandated that students and employees be vaccinated against COVID-19 (Adedoyin, 2021). Therefore, as colleges and universities returned to work for the fall semester of 2021, administrators were tasked with deciding whether to require or just strongly encourage students and employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19. At that time, the *Chronicle for Higher Education* identified a mere 1,060 campuses requiring vaccines of at least some students and employees (Thomason & O’Leary, 2021). In contrast, some campuses had little to no precautions to protect their students and employees. For instance, the University System of Georgia dictated that instructors in their 26 public colleges were not allowed to require masks or change their course modality from in-person to a virtual or hybrid format (Pettit, 2021). To reinforce this policy, the University System provided a template to provosts for “disciplining faculty members who move a class online without prior approval, or who miss a lecture without either prior approval or a documentable illness” (Pettit, 2021, para. 3). In fact, this disciplinary guidance “ranged from a verbal warning to suspension or a reduction in duties and pay,” based upon the conduct (Pettit, 2021, para. 3). In addition to the unique challenges experienced in the PreK-12 and higher

education educational spaces, the shift to emergency remote learning created similar challenges across the PreK-20 landscape.

### **Ensuring Equity During the Shift to Emergency Remote Learning Across the Pre-K-20 Landscape**

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant inequities in education, emphasizing the need for an imperative focus on equity to ensure the needs of students, families, and educators were met (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Qadir, 2020). For example, the shift to emergency remote learning exacerbated existing inequities, particularly for under-resourced and marginalized communities, who faced limited access to devices, internet connectivity, and supportive resources (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Turner, 2020). As a result, educational leaders responded with a “do no harm” approach to teaching, prioritizing safety and well-being for their greater school communities (Qadir, 2020). These actions, or the principle of “Maslow before Bloom,” advocated for the prioritization of the greater educational community’s basic needs, like safety, mental health, and physical well-being, before emphasizing academic learning (Qadir, 2020).

Equitable remote learning plans required educators to center the needs of special student populations, including students with disabilities and English language learners, who faced numerous challenges during the pandemic. With the absence of in-person support networks, such as academic, physical, and mental support systems, students with disabilities require additional resources to maintain educational progress (Tinubu Ali & Herrera, 2020). In response, schools implemented strategies such as providing printed materials, remote access to essential supports, and engaging with community organizations to supplement remote learning (Reich et al., 2020). Furthermore, schools partnered with internet providers and distributed laptops, tablets, and hotspots to address access disparities (Reich et al., 2020). However, these interventions highlighted broader systemic issues, such as families being forced to choose between essential needs and data plans or households sharing a single device for multiple learners (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020).

Given the rampant disparities across both PreK-12 schools and institutions of higher education at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must learn from the past to collectively do better. As such, through the use of creative storytelling as methodology, this article appeals to both the general public and educators as it speaks to multiple lifeworlds sparking conversations beyond the school, college, and university walls.

### **Creative Storytelling as a Legitimized Method of Inquiry**

As Geertz (1980) points out, drawing upon the work of John Locke, “the point at which the reflections of humanists on the practices of social scientists seems most urgent is with respect to the deployment in social analysis of models drawn from humanist domains” (p. 169). Using a humanities-infused manner to reframe empirical data serves not only to challenge what we know about what could be regarding empirical scholarship but also to package non-fictional empirical data in a format that is perhaps more familiar than a standard scientific article. Moreover, strong qualitative work maintains verisimilitude, much like any good fiction. This artistic re/presentation of the experiences of 15 educational leaders in the US under duress during the COVID-19 pandemic allows us to engage in *what could be* (Roy, 2020) that is present in so many fictional genres, including forward-facing social science research.

Therefore, this article uses the data we collected in the summer and winter of 2020 to reconstruct a non-fictional narrative between two old friends, setting our social fiction up to have

the composite narratives speak to one another. All direct quotes within the vignettes are pulled from the narratives of the various participants to create these composite narratives of Superintendent representing our PreK-12 leaders and Dean (of Students) representing our post-secondary leaders.

Using the composite narratives of our 8 PreK-12 leaders and our 7 higher education leaders from across the US allows us to craft a compelling comparative understanding between educational levels and their national response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Presenting this research as a narrative allows us to re/imagine the future past today by providing a possible pathway forward into what lies ahead for the future of education.

Rather than embracing a “new normal” rhetoric, we challenge educational leaders to consider the difficult but critical question of *who* has benefitted from pre-pandemic public education. Because it is the moral duty of educational leaders to re/ imagine education through the systematic re/ design of both PreK-12 and higher education based upon critical inclusivity and wellness of their entire diverse student populations, in what ways can the future of education re/ construct educational opportunities for all, with a warming spotlight on marginalized students and families. Therefore, by engaging in the creative, we not only document the means by which educators have experienced the pandemic but it also allows us to re/ imagine the outcomes of *what could be* (Roy, 2020) based on the understandings crafted during these times. In other words, we present these data in a creative and re/ imagined re/ design to inspire a wider audience of educational leaders to abandon the “new normal” rhetoric and re/ claim the promise of education for the betterment of society as a whole.

### **Narrative Research as Methodology**

In April 2020, we began an empirical undertaking to craft a deeper understanding of the experiences of educational leaders during this time. Although we began our study with a simple question: What were the experiences and stories of PreK-20 leaders during this time? The answers were not as simple as we anticipated. Using convenience sampling, we recruited practicing PreK-20 educational leaders by crowdsourcing using primarily our social media networks. The project began using semi-structured interviews with fifteen individuals from the US, 8 PreK-12 leaders, and 7 higher education leaders (see Table 1). In a second round of data collection, we asked participants to share images that typified their days with us.

As you can see from the table not all participants elected to share images with us. We did not set any parameters regarding how many or what types of images were to be shared with us. Because our aim was to add further depth to the narratives the participants were sharing with us, all of the images were related to the impact of COVID-19 on the participants’ greater school community. We listened to their stories and revisited them with their images. Using a *mélange* of arts-informed methods to answer our question, we analyzed both words and images in this project. For this project, we use narrative inquiry as a means to understand the stories of the teller. These images and stories serve to present and preserve moments in time upon which we used to spark conversation about the image and the personal experience.

**Table 1**  
*PreK-20 Educational Leaders*

Pseudonym	PreK-12 or Higher Education Administration	Years at Organization	Location in the United States	Institution Type	Photos
Alima	Higher Education Administration	<10 years	South	Private, regional comprehensive university	Yes
Annamae	Higher Education Administration	<3 years	South	Public regional comprehensive university	Yes
Bowie	PreK-12	More than 10 years	Southwest	Mid-sized urban school district	Yes
Cassia	PreK-12	<3 years	Southwest	Mid-sized urban school district	Yes
David	Higher Education Administration	<5 years	Midwest	Flagship (transitioned to a new university half-way through project to mid-Atlantic private university)	Yes
Frank	PreK-12	<5 years	Midwest	Small school district in urban and rural areas	Yes
Idele	Higher Education Administration	<5 years	Northeast	Urban, private comprehensive university	No
Kelly	PreK-12	<10 years	Midwest	Small school district in urban and rural areas	No
Laura	PreK-12	<2 years	Midwest	Small school district in urban and rural areas	Yes
Lisa	Higher Education Administration	<5 years	Mid-Atlantic	Private Small Liberal Arts College (SLAC)	Yes
Phyllis	PreK-12	<10 years	Southwest	Mid-sized school district in an urban area	Yes
Richard	PreK-12	<10 years	Southwest	Small school district in urban and rural areas	Yes
Sam	Higher Education Administration	<2 years	Northeast	Private SLAC	Yes
Suzie	Higher Education Administration	More than 10 years	Southeast	Private for-profit	Yes
Zach	PreK-12	More than 10 years	Midwest	Large school district in urban area	Yes

Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) to understand narratives as stories, this essay treats narrative inquiry as a formation of arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Leavy, 2015). As such, this article presents the composite narratives (Cook, 2013; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Johnston, 2024; Willis, 2019) of the pandemic and its impact on PreK-20 educational leaders as a non-fictional story of two old friends catching up in a speculative future beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Although a composite narrative typically calls for the narrative to be embedded throughout the article, this article presents the full composite narrative at the end. This design intends to provide a complete blueprint of a composite narrative to use as a model for

other scholars and practitioners interested in both designing their qualitative study and presenting their findings in a more innovative way, using narrative inquiry and composite characters.

### **Narrative Inquiry and Composite Characters**

Narrative inquiry is both a “methodology and a way of understanding experience narratively” that enables scholars to understand that knowledge as “personal, practical, shaped by, and expressed in practice” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 9). These non-fictional accounts are built upon the pastiche of data shared with the research team to creatively “craft a coherent narrative” (Cook & Dixson, 2013, p. 9). Moreover, engaging in counternarratives within this narrative allows us to create a fictionalized comparative exchange between these two composite characters—illustrating the discrete experiences in these stories.

The creation of composite characters “draws a composite picture of the phenomenon emerging” (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 2). Cook and Bryan (2021) argue that composite characters allow for three primary areas of strength. First, it allows for an empirical space to recount the narratives and experiences of those in political precarity. Second, composite narratives allow us to re/present a “rich robust context in which to understand those stories and lived experiences while maintaining the complexity of meaning” (Cook & Bryan, 2021, p. 253). This allows us to turn away from the individualized experience to that of groups. For this article, the group is 15 PreK-20 educational leaders. Finally, this method of representation makes empirical research more accessible beyond the walls of academia.

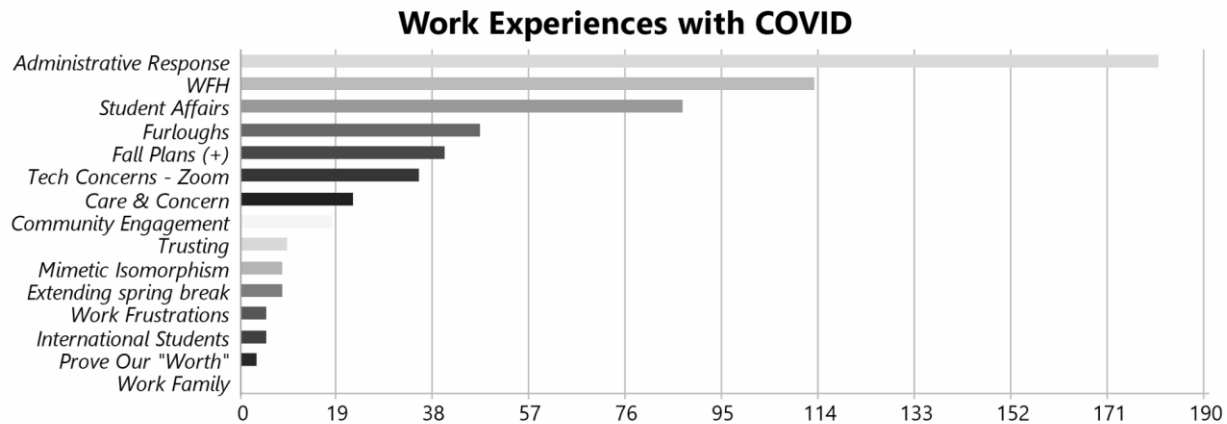
For the development of these composite narratives, we followed the guidelines provided by Willis (2019), who outlined four practices designed to “ensure a clear link between the original interview transcripts and the final narratives” (p. 475). Similar to Willis’s (2019) work, the only difference is that we present data from several individuals as one singular narrative. Like other composite narratives, these narratives are joined together by a resonant thread. That is, the thread interwoven through this composite narrative is the varying and robust positionalities of the PreK-12 or post-secondary educational leaders who offered their experiences and stories during the height of a global pandemic.

As Johnston (2024) shares, the use of composite narratives allows scholars to evoke “readers’ felt sense so that their research has impact” (p. 8) that may go beyond traditional formations of representation of research findings. As humans, we have always learned from and with stories, using a compelling story to share research findings. Our purpose is that this representation will help others understand the resonant experiences of the participants within this project. With these aims and strengths in mind, we crafted a representation that speaks to the shared experiences of individuals who often spoke out against decisions made above their heads to protect their communities.

The larger data set upon which this essay is built is a national assemblage of interview and photo elicitation that attempted to capture at the moment the experiences of PreK-12 and post-secondary educational leaders during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We worked with a group of educational leaders from various portions of the US across different educational contexts (PreK-12 and post-secondary institutions), in private, public, parochial, for-profit, flagship state schools, and small liberal arts colleges (SLAC) to craft as broad an understanding as possible of the phenomena under study. Using an inductive approach, a variety of coding schemas were used, such as process, emotion, descriptive, and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2015) coupled with intercoder reliability checks used to understand the lived experiences, nuances and understanding of these data while promoting reflexivity and dialogue among the researchers. A graph demonstrating the coding schema used for this segment of the project, which focused exclusively

on their work experience, is found below in Table 2. The numbers at the bottom indicate how many times that code, or one of its various subcodes, appeared across the full spectrum of data. Please note that issues pertaining to work at home are indicated in the table as WFH.

**Table 2**  
*Work Experiences Coding Schema*



Our re/ presentation here blurs the lines between fiction (the setting) and non-fiction (the quotes, italicized within the narrative for the reader) to present a cohesive narrative of two friends connecting after some time apart. In this paper, when dialogue is presented in italics, these are direct quotes. On the other hand, when quotes are not italicized, they are reimagined by the authors to blend actual quotes for the sake of narrative. These non-italicized quotes do not present data but instead help to move the story along. This artistic re/ presentation follows the conventions of arts-based educational research (Leavy, 2017) while engaging in descriptive comparative research (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014).

Further, this work diverges from traditional comparative education that compares educational systems across national contexts. Instead, it speaks to two educational systems (PreK-12 and HE) in one national context (US) to understand and compare levels of education and their local response considering the national and international pandemic. As such, this article will use not only the narratives of the individuals but also some of the images that they shared with us.

### **Taking a Break to Grab Some Brew**

A tiny bell signals the opening of a door. A young woman puts her mask on, momentarily getting it tangled in her curly hair. It's a windy day on a midsummer's eve. She smiles at the young barista with purple hair – hair that would have been very out of place when she used to frequent this shop in high school, but it reminds her of how times have changed. She orders her special drink, a flat white with oat milk and a touch of honey. When the barista asks for her name, she replies, "Dean (of Students)."

While she waits for her flat white, her phone vibrates. She glances down at her locked phone screen and sees an updated meeting notice from her shared professional and personal work calendar. "What now?" she murmurs. After reading the message in the updated meeting notice, she releases a huge sigh of relief. "Phew, my first meeting was canceled. Now, I have a little extra time to myself this morning," she thought.



At this, she hears a deep voice behind her say, "Dean? Is that you? It's Supe (rintendent), Supe from high school. Class of...., well, we don't need to date ourselves," as a man roughly the same age as Dean chuckles and smiles behind his mask. Dean promptly turns around, and Supe can see her smile in her eyes despite her mouth being obscured from her mask, which hosts a nationally recognized university sports team mascot.

Standing before her is a man in his mid-forties with graying hair and emerging baldness. He is also wearing a mask and smiling underneath his mask. At this moment, Dean is transported to her sophomore year of high school, walking home from school with the round-faced, freckled, and reddish brown-headed boy from the end of her block. Dean remarks, "It is so good to see you Supe! How have you been? It's been some twenty years since we last spoke. I think it was shortly after graduation. – I see on social media that you are in education, too! Are you still in Arizona? How exciting! Are you taking your coffee to go, or would you like to join me in catching up?"

### **Having a (Properly Distanced, Outdoor) Chat**

Because the small café had a large outside area, Dean and Supe decided to continue their conversation on the patio at a distant, outdoor table in the corner of the patio. Swoosh! The wind was still billowing on this day. After settling their wind-blown hair, they engaged in some small talk between two old friends, expressing how nice it felt to engage in casual conversation after the tumultuous recent years they've endured.

Supe stated, *"Honestly, I'm personally doing well. As I have shared with others, it's kind of like that positive energy and enthusiasm for a new [academic] year."*

In response, Dean replies, *"Yeah, it [was] a tough year, both physically and mentally. It's both emotional and psychological...you are investing your time, energy, and spirit to develop your students while supporting them on their journeys. Plus, you are doing all of this administrative work. Then, there's the need to find a way to care for yourself."*

"I am not only doing my job as a K-12 administrator, but additionally, 'we have two elementary age kids in our home' and 'my wife is also a teacher.' Every morning, I thought of all the students in my district while my kids ate breakfast because a 'quarter of our students in our building alone get free breakfast and lunch' so 'my question is - did those kids eat breakfast and lunch every day? I think the answer is no. Even with food distribution, I don't think that happened,'" Supe responds.

"Wow, that's not something I've dealt with in my role at Large State University (LSU). In fact, 'I've only seen a couple of students ... over the last six months since all of this started, and those have been just a couple who happened to still be in town. Most of our students 'went back home' and 'after about three weeks after I had been working from home in my position,' I began to create 'some cloth masks where the fabric was donated, and some colleagues and I worked on sewing the masks. I sent out a message to the students that I serve and asked them if they were in any essential roles and if they needed masks. This was before masks were mandated. I was able to provide close to 150 masks to different faculty, staff, and students at LSU. Here's a picture of me handing out masks," Dean pulls out her phone, briefly lowering her mask for Face ID, allowing Supe to see her smile, and shows Supe Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
*Dean Handing out Masks at Large State University*



"That's incredible, Dean, and so generous. It must have been nerve-racking not to have a mask mandate. We had masks in schools fairly early on. Early on, I joined my teachers in an effort to normalize mask-wearing by '*practicing wearing my mask more because I couldn't envision wearing a mask for 8-10 hours a day.*' In addition, '*we were telling the students and the families that they have to wear face coverings when they enter the building, when they leave the building, and when they're in common areas, such as cafeterias*' and '*students that decline masks will be offered an online option, and students must be symptom free. Families are asked to do home screenings and keep kids home if they're sick.*' It's not a perfect system, but it was something," Supe declared. "*We also have a system in our building called [Hearts and Minds Council] that assists with food and personal hygiene items. We have a referral process. So, if the teacher knows or a student discloses to a teacher, 'I'm out of personal hygiene items in my house. There's no food here. We need clothes,' they go through an online form. I get the results as well as 'the guidance counselor. We collect those items and deliver them to those students.'* In other districts, '*they did bus deliveries. I mean, they did a really good job of reaching out into neighborhoods and families that needed help.*" With this resurfacing, Dean and Supe take a deep breath in peaceful, reflective stillness. They were both well aware that they were still recovering and grieving from the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Working From Home**

"Supe, you mentioned that you had two small children at home. How was it working at home during perhaps the most difficult time in your career?" asks Dean. Supe choked up, fighting back tears, "*You know, during my career, 'I have fought for ethnic studies. I fought for bilingual ed. I fought for sex ed. I've not ever had to fight, and never thought I'd have to fight, to keep people from being in a space where they could contract an illness and die. I haven't cried about this yet, but this is a lot of pressure. I feel when you look[ed] at the numbers in [my state] and the politics around it, I mean we lost a teacher who was following all the CDC*

*recommendations and she died' and the day before 'we're talking about everyone going back to school.' If you look at the newspaper (see Figure 2), you can see that we are partnering with school districts across the state to keep our children and families safe. This is all on top of caring for my two children at home and being scared for them." He composes himself, wiping tears away from behind his glasses. "How about you? How did working from home work for you?"*

**Figure 2**

*Supé's Newspaper Indicating Collaboration Across the State*



Well, "I got put in a horrible place with my boss," Dean continues. "One morning after finding out that furloughs were on the table *he called me and basically said you're not getting furloughed. But you have a chance to save our office coordinator. If you want, you can elect to take a different position for the year... The whole thing was just completely unprofessional and very rushed. It just put me in a really bad place because I was then basically putting my career against hers. It just was a really crappy situation to be in. And it's almost like it just permanently broke that relationship with my boss because I don't trust him as much anymore. It made 'things just really tense around the institution right now and there's a lot of people that are very disgruntled.'* Needless to say, it was a rough time."

Supé continued, "Well, like many other K-12 leaders, at first, *'it was a mess, like flying a plane, while also building the plane in the air,'* I worked in a sort of blended manner, where I was in and out of the building. *'We did daily updates at 9:00 am every single day while teachers were on contract. Every single day. We told them what we were doing, who we were meeting with, and*

*concerns we were having...it kept me accountable as a leader.' I felt good about how 'fast and urgent our district acted even prior to city and state mandates. That was pretty incredible. Between gathering resources, making sure that resources were provided to our students in our communities, and making sure that safety was first and foremost for staff, family, and our students was really quite exceptional. If there was a suspicion that someone may have had the illness, there was just no real requirement about really having to take PTO. It was just known that we take care of our folks and we're going to make sure that we keep everyone safe. So, while working from home, this was not universal for all those in my district. We needed to both keep our students safe but also fulfill our duty to educate."*

The conversation begins to meander to asking questions about Supe's children and family. Dean shares that she, too, is married but has no children and discusses the gendered work expectations that she experienced at LSU. "Something that I noticed, particularly at the onset," Dean continues, is that *"more men were still sitting in their office, and they would say that 'god, that remote work with my wife is a lot right now. I'm letting her handle it, and so we are thinking as a department how we are supporting our women, or our single fathers, so they don't have to do more work' and we also get reminders from our Vice-President that 'work from home isn't about sitting in front of your computer from 9-5. It's about this ebb and flow. It's about not about hours but about outcomes.'* That was a really helpful reminder to reconceptualize how we go about our work. I hope that this continues, but *'I just don't think we know what the future will look like' yet."*

### **The Impact on Educational Futures**

"Supe, you spoke about your own children and their experiences with learning from home. How do you think this experience will shape the future of education?" asked Dean.

Supe sighs, signaling to Dean that this is a hard question that he has likely thought a lot about. *"I absolutely love the community and the families and teachers and staff and couldn't be in a better place right now.'* My community united against all odds and formed a supportive greater school community. I would walk down my street and see various displays of thankfulness (see Figure 3). However, in relation to the district's response to the pandemic, I would have to *'say poorly, but if I'm also fair, given the circumstances, probably, you know, as best as they could.'* I constantly wonder how this will impact education in the short and the long term." Supe pauses and takes a drink of his cold brew. *"I will say this: if I didn't have the education I have from [Midsize State University], there would be no way I would have been able to navigate these waters and be able to problem solve and think differently'* about these issues. I am rethinking what school leadership for equity looks like in real time. For example, because we struggled with providing tangible technology and wireless (WIFI) services when we transitioned to emergency remote learning, I thought about other ways we, as a culture, have shifted to making things more accessible and immediately thought of food trucks. In reality, *'everybody actually has food trucks, which is needed as part of the new American culture. Certainly, in the urban areas, but there's variations of that in the rural areas, as well. So, I thought, well, what if we retrofit the food trucks with WIFI.'* However, we needed to do better in regard to *'leaders making decisions quickly. You know, we spend so much time on stakeholder engagement,* " which Supe emphasizes by putting in air quotes, *"and that's cute for the most part, but when you have a pandemic happening, it's like move! Get going!' There is no time to delay, and sometimes leaders need to make decisions and 'if you need to course correct, you can."*

**Figure 3**

*Lawn Display Depicting Supe's Supportive Community*



As Supe pauses for a moment to take another sip of his dwindling brew, Dean adds that she believes that quick decision-making is, at times, fraught and difficult. She notes that, like many other universities, her school *"initially had said we're going to close for like two weeks and then figure out what happens. Then, probably within three days, we were like, nope, we're closing for the rest of the semester and moving to remote learning."* While this may seem easy, *'my director was in these meetings to hear what was going on, but as things were being decided'* due to the fact we have multiple campuses and *'each of them is represented in these meetings, putting their two cents in on what's going to work, but the university wanted one consistent response. Even though we're one university, we are three very distinct campuses, and our students consist of very different populations. So, what might work on my campus might not work for the law school, or the other campus. And so, trying to make everything the same, I'm like, it's not going to work that way. And so, what ended up doing was they would put the same response out there for all campuses.'*

"But regarding learning, and not just leadership, one thing that is necessary," Supe continues, "is that initially, *'there was a lack of consistency. Nobody was planning for a pandemic and for school to be shut down and everybody having to do virtual learning.'* Despite the initial lack of consistency, there are *'some kids who want to remain at home because their parents don't feel the school's situation is safe. And then, there are some kids who are coming in. So, the teacher is teaching both sets of students at the same time. I wish to god that everybody would have just admitted that we were not there yet.'* If we had done that, *'then we can start to structure things that can work.'* Even today, a large chunk of families cannot understand why we aren't just back to normal. *'There's a vaccine out there. We all need to come back because there's some other small district 26 miles south and they're all back and it's totally fine. We need to be totally back to normal. It's like those that come from a really privileged position to say 'we're good, let's just all get back we'll be fine.'* We cannot move forward without acknowledging what we have learned through this experience, and it seems some are reluctant to make changes based on the experience we've all had."

Now it's time for Dean to sigh, which she does heavily before taking a long latte drink while slinking into her armchair. *"I think it's a huge shift. And I think that's why I don't know. And because*

*I..," she trails off before starting again. "When I go into the office, it won't be the same. We're not going back to what was before, and I don't think we know what the future will look like either."*

### **Concluding Thoughts**

What we have presented here is fiction based within the bounds of fact. Because the researchers were practicing educational leaders within the higher education landscape, experiencing the impact of COVID-19, and transitioned to emergency remote learning, they had a deeper understanding and familiarity with the context of these data, lending expertise in crafting a meaningful composite (Willis, 2019). Drawing upon literary inspiration to present a short narrative woven together by the threads of stories of 15 educational leaders based in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate some of the stories that participants shared with us. Weaving this tale is an act of creation. To create a new narrative highlighting the many narratives we lived through in 2020 and 2021. These many narratives were patched together to create the composite characters of Supe(rintendent) representing our PreK-12 leaders and Dean (of Students) representing our post-secondary leaders, brought together as we continue to heal from the past and re/imagine the future of education. As the reader, you may also find convergences within your own experience or those you know within education. While these two experiences (which represent 17, including the authors<sup>3</sup>) are not the definitive version of educational leadership under crisis, we aimed to highlight the differences between contexts (PreK-12 & higher education) but also to highlight the similarities between the individuals in their various contexts coupled with the similarities many others, including the readers, may have experienced.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Because this study occurred under duress for both the researchers and the participants, the study was limited by our space, place, and time. Most noticeably, we did not have the same participation during the semi-structured interviews as the subsequent photo elicitation discussions. In addition, the study did not have participant representation from the international community and the US West Coast.

### **Avenues for Future Research and Practice**

Returning to Geertz (1980), the weaving of human reflection and social scientists' work results in a social analysis drawn straight from the human domain. By using narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) to understand human reflection as narrative storytelling to form arts-based research for the social scientist (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Leavy, 2015), this article presented the composite narratives (Cook, 2013; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Willis, 2019; Johnston, 2024) of the pandemic and its impact on PreK-20 educational leaders as a non-fictional story of two old friends, Supe(rintendent) and Dean (of Students) catching up in a speculative future beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the storytelling nature of composite narrative, it provides an effective means of presenting data to both satisfy scholars and practitioners through future-forming research (Gergen, 2015), lending itself to a greater audience seeking to re/imagine educational landscapes.

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<sup>3</sup> Which should not be discounted as the authors are always ever embedded in the text but are not represented as direct quotes shared within the narratives.

There have been calls throughout history for us to re/ imagine education to be more just and equitable. Since the spring of 2020, there has certainly been a resurgence of this call, with particular consideration given to new modalities of education and work. While Dean speculated that “we’re not going back to what was before,” this has proven to be both true and untrue. Educational administrators have pivoted largely back to educational practices pre-pandemic, taking little of what was learned to heart to re/imagine education. It is much easier to return to an imagined perfect past that never existed (Freeman, 2010), fighting to maintain normality. However, what was never adequate. Instead of settling for what *was*, we, as educators, must continue to fight for what *could be*—the utopia on the horizon (Muñoz, 2009; Roy, 2020). As such, we encourage educational researchers, leaders, educators, students, and families to connect, much like Dean and Supe, to share their experiences to (re)conceptualize education as a space for joy, liberation, and learning.

Suppose we imagine two old friends catching up over a cup of coffee in the speculative future. In that case, we can certainly turn that speculative eye toward re/ imagining educational leadership research and practice. While we have spent countless hours since March of 2020 considering how we can address public health and safety at the intersection of COVID-19, we build on this momentum to turn that attention into sustainably addressing the inequities brought to light during this time. As such, we call on educational leaders who were able to *pivot* during these *unprecedented times* to re/ conceptualize and speculate on more equitable and just educational futures.

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