

**Alabama Early Childhood Education Leadership:
COVID-19, Where Did the Impact Leave Us?**

by

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of ten leaders within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE) during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic forced closures and adaptations across early childhood education programs, these leaders played a crucial role in maintaining operations and supporting stakeholders. The research examines how they navigated the challenges of closures, reopening's, and evolving safety protocols while ensuring the well-being of staff, students, and teachers. Through interviews with the ADECE leaders, the study identifies recurring themes that shaped their experiences. It explores how the ADECE adapted its policies and procedures while ensuring core principles remained intact. The research and this study highlight the leadership approaches that fostered sustainability within the ECE system.

Additionally, the research examined three leadership theories relevant to the needs of Early Childhood Education (ECE) organizations during crises: distributive leadership theory, talent-centered leadership theory, and sensemaking theory. The findings underscore the importance of adaptable leadership styles, such as distributive leadership, in crisis situations. This study offers valuable insights for current and future leaders in the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE), providing strategies for navigating uncertainty and fostering a more resilient ECE system. This research serves as a reference point for the ADECE's ongoing development and preparedness for future challenges.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgments.....	3
List of Tables	9
List of Figures	10
List of Abbreviations	11
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	13
Statement of the Problem.....	17
Purpose Statement.....	18
Research Questions.....	18
Research Design.....	19
Theoretical Framework.....	20
Assumptions.....	21
Delimitations.....	22
Significance of the Study	22
Definition of Terms.....	25
Organization of the Study	26
Chapter 2: Literature Review	28
History of Preschool	30
NAEYC.....	37
NIEER.....	38
NIEER Benchmarks Aligned with ADECE Guidelines	41

Leadership Theory	45
COVID-19 and Educational Leadership	47
Distributive Leadership Theory	50
Sensemaking Theory.....	52
Talent-Centered Educational Leadership Theory	55
Conclusion	57
Chapter 3: Methods	60
Purpose of the Study	61
Research Questions.....	61
Research Design.....	62
Role of the Researcher	63
Sample Population	64
Data Collection Methods	65
Post-Activity Data Management.....	65
Data Analysis	65
Delimitations.....	69
Summary	70
Chapter 4: Results.....	71
Findings.....	79
Research Question 1	79
Theme 1: Adaption	80
Theme 2: Effective Communication and Collaboration	81
Theme 3: Balance in Responsibility and Emotional Support	82

Research Question 2	85
Theme 1: Health and Safety.....	86
Theme 2: Essential Partnerships.....	89
Theme 3: Alternate Methods of Instruction.....	92
Research Question 3	93
Theme 1: Restart/Re-Engage	94
Theme 2: Alterations to Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines.....	96
Theme 3: Reestablishment of Policies and Procedures	102
A Collective Voice for Educational Leadership.....	105
Theme 1: Minimize Academic Interruption	106
Theme 2: Strategic Planning.....	107
Theme 3: The Oxygen Mask Principle and Beyond.....	109
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	111
Research Question 1	112
Adaptation.....	113
Effective Communication	113
Support.....	114
Collaboration.....	114
Research Question 2	114
Essential Partnerships	115
Alternate Methods of Instructions	115
Research Question 3	116
Flexibility with Guidelines	116

Flexibility with Funding	116
Flexibility with Procedures	117
The Conceptual Framework Revisited.....	118
Distributive Leadership Theory	120
Talent-Centered Educational Leadership.....	121
Sensemaking Theory.....	123
Previous Research Surrounding the Findings	124
Implications for Practice.....	126
Significance.....	127
Implications for Future Research.....	131
Conclusion	132
References	136
Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval and Interview Questions	147

List of Tables

Table 1 Enrollment and State Funding of FCPK 2018-2023.....	68
Table 2 Participant Demographics.....	73
Table 3 Participants’ Description of Position Responsibilities at ADECE	75
Table 4 NIEER Quality Benchmarks/OSR Readiness Recommendations.....	98

List of Figures

Figure 1 Preschool Participation Before and During the Pandemic	29
Figure 2 Comparison of NIEER and Alabama Policies and Guidelines	66
Figure 3 Total Years of Participants' ECE Experience in Public School Systems	74
Figure 4 Total Years of Participants' Early Childhood Educational Experience	74
Figure 5 Leading Through Uncertainty: Three Leadership Styles	119

List of Abbreviations

ADECE	Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education
ADECE FCPK	Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education First Class PreK
ASQ	Ages and Stages Questionnaire
BBB	Build Back Better Initiative
CDA	Child Development Associate Credential
COVID-19	2019 Novel Coronavirus
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
DECA-P2	Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschool, 2nd Edition
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EEX	Employee Experience
FCPK	First Class Preschool Program
HSPPS	High/Scope Perry Preschool Study
MIC	Methyl Isocyanate
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NHES	National Household Education Survey
NIEER	The National Institute of Educational Research
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's
PLA	Preschool Learning Activities Surveys
TCEL	Talent-Centered Educational Leadership
UPK	Universal Preschool
USNC OMEP	United States National Committee of the World Organization for Early

Childhood Education

VGS

Vent Gas Scrubber

“The material situation does not simply ‘affect’ what leaders do, it is constitutive of their practices” (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 26)

Chapter 1: Introduction

The disruption of the COVID-19 (2019 novel coronavirus) pandemic was an unprecedented event that had the world at a loss regarding how to handle the effects of illness, death, and mitigate the spread of the virus. Leaders worldwide could only speculate and guess what to do when the disruption continued to stop travel, commerce, and educational systems, learning to adapt as regulations changed to modify to the crisis as it continued to expand from weeks to months to years (Ahern & Loh, 2021). Such a crisis had yet to occur unremittingly in the educational system before the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational leaders were dependent on the assistance of others for answers on how to continue to protect their students, faculty, and staff while trying to determine how to provide students with a relevant education without face-to-face instruction. While many education leaders felt confident about how the situation was resolved, it was meant to be a proper temporary fix. The materials and the means of expertise to maintain an equal and appropriate education were disrupted for an extended time when the pandemic prolonged school closures. This posed a significant issue for academic success for many educational systems. The pandemic was a health crisis that forced educational leaders, stakeholders, and teachers to determine an effective means for their students with an unproportionable amount of responsibility to lead the process of the crisis. Leadership in a crisis is contingent on making decisive judgments; however, leaders must be careful when making important decisions to deliver what is best for the community and maintain trust as policy decisions result in alterations to the choices (Varela & Fedynich, 2020).

It took creativity and a new skill set for the organization to maintain a method of control and constancy, so students' knowledge and valuable skills were preserved. Technology was the most effective method as schools distributed tablets and computers to push curriculum and communicate with videos and social media. Society believed they would need to use these methods as a short-term bridge to education. As the following school year resumed, so did the limited access to contact, which restricted parental visits within the schools to social connections via virtual face-to-face software. Innovation and technology provided a powerful means of communication. Email and texting replaced verbal communication but offered an effective means to communicate with parents and, in some instances, student learning. Decman et al. (2021) identified themes of resilience in their participants, including stakeholders (principals, teachers, parents, and staff). Because the pandemic was new and communities, schools, and businesses had to end abruptly, there were no policies or references on which leadership could refer as strategic ways to handle the immediate crisis. As educational leaders learned through the crisis to accommodate and draw upon creative experiences, it is now time to reflect upon successful practices and build a framework that would serve as a reference should such a crisis reoccur. Themes in the literature surrounding resilience after a crisis have shown that resilience is a skill that can be produced by discussing these disruptive occurrences and learning how leaders develop a seamless method of communication, unity, and calm amidst the chaos. Early in the stages of returning from the March 2020 shut down, a study by Decman et al. (2021) identified three themes that reoccurred when interviewing stakeholders: the significance of personal and social interactions, the nature of communication, and the ability to create a new mindset. Weick (1988) defines crises as "high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organization" (p. 305), and the crisis as it occurs creates a tension

between "dangerous action which produces understanding and safe inaction which produces confusion" (Decman et al., 2021, p. 140).

Research and information are starting to build as scholars reflect on the pivotal change within society and the unprecedented event of school closures. Proceeding into a new error, it has become apparent that educational departments have been affected differently. Education has departments and specialties within each group, such as early childhood education, elementary education, secondary education, and higher education. Within these departments, there are several facets which incorporate different issues when endeavoring to develop the whole student. With that in mind, this research will examine the early education sector in Alabama and the elements that make up the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE). In the educational world, early childhood education encompasses ages birth to eight. While some facilities provide care and services for children from birth to five, this study will focus on the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education's First Class Preschool Program, which provides preschool services to children ages four to five. The ADECE began in 2006 with eight classrooms with the mindset of providing high-quality instruction to four-year-olds (Preskitt et al., 2020). Since then, student numbers have grown significantly to "twenty-six thousand, six hundred and fifty-eight" students in 2023 (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2024, p. 37). Within the past sixteen years, First Class Preschool has been highly regarded for its quality program. It has gained national recognition by receiving the maximum ranking from The National Institute of Early Education Research. ADECE provides training, mentoring, and opportunities for professional development, which will contribute to teachers' learning of high-quality, developmentally appropriate teaching techniques. It also aims to ensure that the state's goal of

increasing access to high-quality pre-k is executed efficiently (First Class Pre-K–Program Guidelines, 2022).

Various departments have been created to ensure the program's quality will be maintained and that the educators have significant support. Within the administrative office, a range of employees assist Dr. Hume, Secretary of the State of Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. Administrative leadership includes accounting, technology, behavior support, liaison programs to Head Start, and other early childhood programs. The various positions in the administrative office then support the field staff, such as the eight regional directors, who oversee their region's monitors and coaches. Several monitors and coaches within each region manage the one hundred seventy-five to two hundred and five classrooms. Each program has at least one director who oversees the program, maintains activities within the building, and assists educators, parents, and students in supervising as needed. Each classroom must have one certified early education teacher and one auxiliary teacher who "must have a Child Development Associate Credential (CDA) or the equivalent of nine hours of approved coursework in child development, at a minimum" (First Class Pre-K –Program Guidelines, 2022, p. 4). Coaches go to the sites and are trained to assist the teachers in the classroom to help with scheduling, lesson planning, and implementing developmentally appropriate practices. Monitors go to the sites, assist the director, and attend to monthly or bimonthly requirements that help maintain the program's guidelines. Guidelines have been put in place to ensure that each facility can offer the same high-quality program at every site, whether public or private. It is systematically built to provide an equal education to every four-year-old who may attend anywhere in the state.

Pearl (2022) reported, "Pre-K in Alabama is like football in Alabama," said Steve Barnett, who runs the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. "They are serious about being a national leader" (p. 1). The state stands behind the program and many people, from Governor Ivey to local communities, have determined that funding to educate Alabama's four-year olds will pay dividends in the future. Unfortunately, in March 2020, First Class Preschools throughout the state were forced to shut their doors and, during the mandate of school closures, much of the world functioned by reconnecting virtually. Still, it was more challenging for four-and five-year-olds to proceed with the social-emotional learning provided in the preschool classrooms with their peers.

Statement of the Problem

With the pandemic came a caveat of change and a disruption to the educational system. The immediate shutdown left many early childhood educational leaders (ECELE) asking how they could effectively continue serving preschool students. This research study was designed to analyze this problem within the Department of Early Childhood Education system in Alabama, identify the challenges created by the crisis, and discern what procedures educational leaders used to navigate the crisis.

Much of the literature investigating the crisis of early childhood education leadership had to be utilized by other countries that have invested more years of research and funding into the early childhood system. Countries such as Australia, Finland, and Europe immediately evaluated the cost of shutting down the valuable early childhood education system. Assessing how other countries develop strategies for their early childhood education leadership practices can give the early childhood programs in the United States the ability to maintain a vision for crisis intervention. While we have learned to maintain and live a "new normal" with the varying

mutations of COVID, there is the reality that we have had a once-in-a-lifetime event that may or may not happen again. Regardless, one must look into the past and research a system that operated and successfully reopened once the government permitted it. The immediate threat of the pandemic has subsided, and we have learned to engage as a circumspect society.

Purpose Statement

The main objective of this research was to analyze the policies and procedures implemented after the pandemic outbreak. This study aimed to identify the effective policies that became a priority and were the most effective within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education system. Additionally, the study examined three educational leadership theories to determine the most successful procedures that emerged during the COVID-19 shutdown. Finally, the study aimed to determine how the lessons learned from these practices could be utilized to build a more resilient and equitable early childhood education system.

Once Governor Ivey approved the reopening of schools on July 3, 2020 (Johnson, 2020), the ADECE started the 2020-2021 school year with various new practices such as wearing masks, social distancing, and sanitizing. The doors opened with little forethought and anticipation as intermittently different systems struggled with high numbers of faculty and students with COVID-19 during the months of restarting school. In this more extensive system were various conversations, analyses, and concerns, knowing that the department had a huge responsibility to educate children while keeping all stakeholders safe from health risks.

Research Questions:

To better understand how the early childhood educational leaders at the ADECE worked through site closures during the 2020 pandemic, the following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways do early childhood education leaders describe how COVID impacted their leadership practices?
2. What methods were formulated to fulfill the policies and procedures of the ADECE from the onset of the pandemic?
3. What are the most influential approaches to the policies that can be re-established within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education system to improve outcomes for children and families, based on examining the procedures maintained since the pandemic?

Research Design

Qualitative research is designed to foster an in-depth comprehension of a social context or activity from the viewpoint of the studied cultural population. Understanding context, conditions, and surroundings is a crucial component of qualitative research and forms part of what is known as cultural anthropology (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Narrative inquiry represents and understands an experience, and narrative inquiry tells the stories through the participants' lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Using narrative inquiry, the stories of early childhood educational leaders reveal how they have been impacted by the pandemic, both before, during, and in their current work. While using an inductive method to discover common patterns, the data was acquired through open-ended interviews and purposeful sampling. Alabama has regional groups that take care of the various facilities in Alabama. For example, coaches, monitors, and the regional director from region eight work within the counties of Lee, Russel, Bullock, Crenshaw, Pike, Barbour, Covington, Dale, Henry, Geneva, and Houston Counties. Coaches and monitors in the eight regions work within the same sites in various counties, and there will be value in their shared experiences.

Theoretical Framework

A crisis in education can mean various things to many different people. Weick (1988) defines crises as "high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organization" (p. 305) and further explains that navigating a crisis as it occurs creates a tension between "dangerous action which produces understanding and safe inaction which produces confusion" (p. 306). During the 2020 COVID pandemic, educational leaders had to operate at a level that could be defined as a crisis mode. Policymakers were continually changing methods to keep everyone safe and moving forward. Because of the multitude of channels by which policy proceeds, political leaders and physicians were assessing a vast amount of information while educational agencies were trying to develop a new action policy to lead their communities and schools. In reflecting on how early childhood education leaders proceeded during the immediate crisis and the following year, three distinctive leadership methods assisted in developing a structure for the organization. They are distributive leadership, sensemaking theory, and talent-centered leadership principles.

Distributive leadership is notable in early childhood education because it allocates leadership responsibilities to multiple people associated with the organization (Heikka & Hujala, 2013). Each of the ECE staff provides a different type of leadership within the capacity they are employed, and each capacity has a form of leadership and responsibility that has to be fulfilled to provide an equitable education to the student population. Distributive leadership provides flexibility so that each capacity has an equal role in providing professional care. It unifies the governance, management, and leadership components into a unified concept (Heikka & Hujala, 2013). This method of leadership is effective in the early childhood educational setting because it fosters continuous dialogue and cultivates relationships (Heikkinen et al., 2022).

Sensemaking theory is essential in a crisis such as the COVID shutdown because there is more to leading than dictation. An educational leader is often considered a voice of reason and trust; therefore, those who take their role as educational leaders are aware of what requirements are crucial within the academic setting and the basic needs of the people around them. Sense-making theory considers the leaders' capabilities to lead through a crisis by the influence of their ethics and the values of the community they lead around them. The concept of sensemaking theory, therefore, is not contingent on policy at a time of need; however, the immediate needs of the community and the empathetic values of the educational leaders have to be taken into account as they lead not just a school but a community that looks to their local trusted educational leaders for answers and assistance in the most critical times (Dirani et al., 2020).

Talent-centered education leadership is the final of the three theories that provide proficient guidance at a time of need in early childhood organizations. The theory of talent-centered educational leadership (TCEL) is an employee-centered method that delegates an emotional response and respect to the employees who have the insight to assist in navigating educational needs and balancing their own needs in a healthy manner (Tran et al., 2020). TCEL is achieved by recognizing the educators as an asset, focusing on their talents and experiences, and letting those with expertise lead a group of educators. Data is used to define areas needing assistance and by letting the employees strengthen areas of concern (Tran et al., 2020). By creating this foundation of group value in empowering the strengths of the educators, the result is a level of respect for each other's strengths and contributions.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made by the researcher who conducted the study:

1. All ADECE leaders participating in the study had worked with the ADECE before the onset of COVID-19, preferably four years or more.
2. Participants in the study would answer interview questions truthfully and thoroughly.
3. Participants expressed their experiences and related how their capacity as educational leaders was purposeful during the various stages of the pandemic.

Delimitations:

This study takes place two years after the crisis of COVID-19 shutdown. Since that time, COVID has mutated and taken on many forms. Although the pandemic may continue in a weakened state, we have learned to live with various methods of control, or we choose to ignore it. The memories of years past may be less prominent. Key players may have changed positions, retired, or do not wish to discuss history. These events may have caused a decreased sample size than was originally anticipated.

Significance of the Study

The education system has had a significant redesigning after the global shutdown in March 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic caused substantial disruptions in social norms and daily life. As a result, certain educational outlets have had to struggle to regain the proprieties of policies and procedures that were growing. One such facet is early education and the establishment of the ADECE First Class Pre-K (FCPK). Following the pandemic, the ADECE FCPK program saw a significant reduction in enrollment during the 2020-2021 school year. Student attendance declined by 1,533 students, which was the trend throughout the country amid the caution of COVID-19 and the national shutdown (The State of Preschool Yearbook, 2020).

This research study identified the shift of what happened during the pandemic based on what ADECE educational leaders have seen happen to FCPK during the years prior to COVID-

19, during the national shutdown, the modifications that had to be made in the midst of a health crisis, as well as the events that led to the current state of the ADECE FCPK program. By interviewing the early educational leaders of ADECE, other educators can relate and learn from their perspective of the importance of change, what incidents they would not repeat, and what methods they would recommend should such a crisis reoccur.

This research study also sought to capture the voices of educational leaders and define the various aspects of leadership which have changed since the pandemic. The role of the leader takes on different dynamics when there is a significant need to maintain order, focus on everyone's health, and develop a new method of educating, especially whilst isolation is a key factor in everyone's safety. This brought about varying new methods of leadership skills and theories.

By examining the impact of the pandemic on the ADECE FCPK program and exploring the perspectives of educational leaders in adapting to the crisis, their perspectives add insight into the importance of adaptability, the challenges they faced during the pandemic, their recommendations for handling future crisis events and identifying the changing dynamics of leadership during a crisis. The role of educational leaders took on a different dimension when maintaining order and ensuring the health and safety of everyone involved became paramount. This necessitated the development of new leadership skills and theories and the implementation of support strategies to address the physical and mental well-being of early childhood educators.

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, support strategies such as solid planning, improved communication, promoting health awareness, and recognizing the dedication of ECEs became crucial for ensuring the safety of young learners and personnel (Dirani et al., 2020). The

crisis also provided an opportunity for reflection and the identification of necessary support strategies for future national threats.

In times of crisis, leadership requires a different approach compared to everyday guidance. Support strategies, such as having a solid plan, improving communication between leaders and personnel, promoting physical and mental health awareness, and recognizing the resilience and dedication of early childhood educators, have become crucial during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Balasubramani & Fernandes, 2022). The crisis also had long-term effects that could have the possibility to change the educational system for the better by providing insight into what methods are dedicated to focusing on relationships and the value of strengthening the leadership skills in others. This study examines three leadership theories that prioritize the welfare of both the care recipients and providers: distributive leadership theory, sensemaking theory, and talent-centered education leadership theory. While each theory offers a distinct approach to tackling the obstacles presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, they provide an essential foundation for educational institutions to confront leadership challenges during difficult events. It is crucial to acknowledge the significance of these theories in promoting effective leadership in early childhood education and ultimately benefiting the growth and development of children through equal and responsible leadership.

As mentioned above, the pandemic has had long-term effects on the educational system, bringing about positive changes. This includes the adoption of innovative technologies and remote learning methods as well as a greater emphasis on health and safety measures within educational settings. The pandemic has also highlighted the resilience and dedication of educators and leaders in the face of adversity.

Definition of Terms:

- **Benchmarks.** Ten research-based criteria that state early education programs must meet to be considered a "high-quality program" by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER) (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2023).
- **Crisis.** "Low probability/high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals" (Weick, 1988).
- **Developmentally Appropriate Practice.** A method of instruction to scaffold to develop a young child's optimal skills by developing strengths through play and engaging students in child-based learning (Copple et al., 2009, p. 1).
- **Early childhood education leadership.** Educational leaders in the early childhood sector of children age birth to eight who may work for the state department, federal department, public school system, or private facility but are not limited to a "formal leadership role" (Gibbs, 2022, p. 689).
- **First Class Preschool Program-** Quality early childhood programs designed to educate four-year-olds in diverse populations within multiple communities in Alabama. These grant-based programs must meet specific quality guidelines to provide a nurturing environment for growth and development (First Class Pre-K – Early Childhood Education, n.d.).
- **Head Start.** Initially established in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. It is a federally funded preschool program that offers education, health, nutrition, and social welfare services to children between the ages of three and five from low-income families, as well as their parents (Ludwig & Phillips, 2008).

- High-quality preschool program. State preschool programs that meet the qualifications of NIEER's Quality Standards Checklist, which includes the ten benchmarks for each policy set by NIEER (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2023).
- Perry Preschool Study. The largest longitudinal study based on early childhood education started in 1962, with data being collected from the same one-hundred and twenty-three students intermittently from the ages of three, eleven, fourteen, fifteen, nineteen, twenty-seven, and forty-one. The study has provided evidence that children from a Midwest disadvantaged community who attended a high-quality preschool program could enhance their chances of improving their IQ, reducing special education placement, avoiding drugs, and becoming incarcerated.

Organization of the Study

This research seeks to evaluate the existing perspectives of experienced early childhood education professionals on how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted their past, current, and evolving leadership practices. The study's introductory chapter provides the necessary context for formulating the problem statement of this research and its corresponding purposes. Chapter 2 provides a literature review based on peer-reviewed journals to further explain the study's purpose. Chapter 3 presents the research design, which gives a qualitative collection of narrative inquiry interviews conducted during the research with both individuals and groups separately. Chapter 4 includes the data collected from the interviews that was analyzed to gain insights from the perspectives of the educational leaders within the ADECE that have been with the department before, during, and post events of the COVID pandemic. Finally, based on the analysis from the literature review, research outcomes, data collection, and analysis, Chapter 5

provides a summary and conclusion of the study and the general implications derived from the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The global shutdown in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in March 2020 has engendered unpleasant emotions and memories among individuals due to the extreme disruption of social norms and daily life. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2023) defines crisis as "an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending is widely regarded as a crisis due to its significant impact on illness and death" (Definition of Crisis, 3a). This clearly represents what happened in the spring of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the world's affairs with a national shutdown of businesses and schools. As fear subsided and the reality of the situation arose to a new understanding of how society would have to deal with the circumstances, health care professionals, politicians, businesses, and school systems became creative concerning how to flourish in the pandemic world. Virtual meetings, curbside assistance, and a myriad of educational techniques were all employed to navigate the world's unknown future. The disruptions to students' education due to the pandemic had positive and negative impacts on many people, and the effects of these changes are widespread.

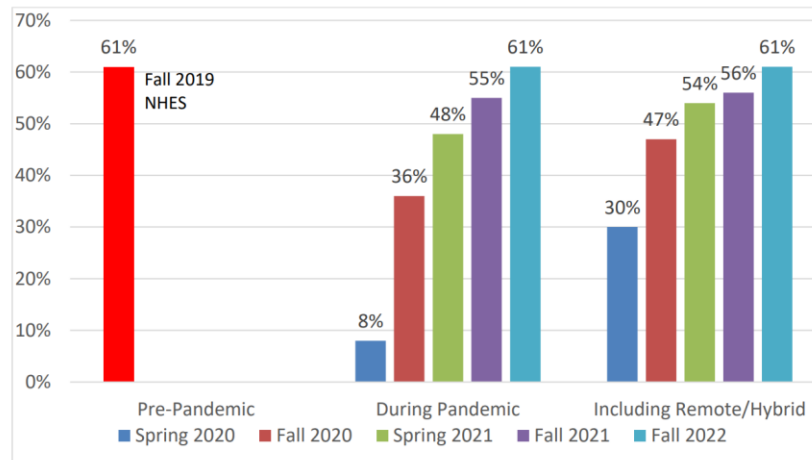
This research focuses on how one organization, the leaders of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, maintained its program during the COVID-19 shutdown in the March of 2020, navigated through the reopening of preschools across the state, and how the effect of the health crisis has shaped the current state of the First Class Preschool Program in Alabama (FCPK). The pandemic has taken many forms, and the system has had to adjust through various modes, from closing the state preschool program to limited access and opening at total capacity. Educational leadership proved vital during these times as the ADECE had to determine how to proceed in educating four-year olds and serve as a bridge to facilitate parents at home. Due to the disruption of the pandemic, state preschool enrollment declined nationwide in

the 2020-2021 school year by two hundred and ninety-eight thousand preschool children (Friedman-Krauss et al., , 2023). As the nation learns to continue with COVID-19, preschools saw a slow increase in enrollment in 2022. Figure 1 demonstrates that by Fall 2022, the overall preschool participation rates returned to their nearly pre-pandemic levels of 2019 after dropping significantly in 2020 and partially recovering in 2021. These estimations were made using the Preschool Learning Activities Surveys (PLA) from 2020, 2021, and 2022 and the National Household Education Survey (NHES) Early Childhood Program Participation module from 2019 (Barnett & Jung, 2023). Data in Figure 1 is reprinted from "Preschool participation in fall: Findings from a national preschool learning activities survey" (Barnett & Jung, 2023, p. 5, New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

Figure 1

Preschool Participation Before and During the Pandemic

Figure 1. Preschool participation before and during the pandemic. NIEER PLA Survey Results 2020-2022 compared to National Household Education Survey Results from 2019.



In chapter two, the literature review provides an in-depth exploration of the history of programs and policies in early childhood education, delving into the First Class Preschool Program in Alabama, the importance of benchmarks and developmental standards for

preschoolers, the impacts of COVID-19 on the FCPK and ADECE leadership, and an analysis of three leadership theories that provided stability during this prodigious crisis event.

History of Preschool Development

By examining the progress of preschool policy, policy implementation, and the resulting product of those initiatives over several decades, we can better understand the importance of preschools and the educational leaders who work with this age group. According to Gordon and Browne (2017), preschool education has a long and storied history, beginning in the late 1700s and continuing to the present day. In the late 1700s, the first organized preschools were established in Germany with the first school opening in 1779 in Griesheim. These schools were founded to provide education and care for children whose parents could not do so. Since then, preschool education has evolved in response to changing societal needs, values, and beliefs. In the late 1800s, the United States began to take notice of early childhood programs in other countries and focused on developing its preschool programs. The first formal preschools were established in the Boston area in 1889 and 1890. These schools were heavily influenced by the philosophy of John Dewey, who believed that children should be taught through play and experience rather than memorization and rote learning. This philosophy of learning through play and experience is still evident today in many preschools. The twentieth century saw a further expansion of preschool education in the United States (Gordon & Browne, 2017).

As noted by Gordon and Browne (2017) Maria Montessori opened the Casa di Bambini (Children's House) in Rome, Italy, in 1907 and developed an educational philosophy and program to guide children's growth through sensory and practical life experiences. This was followed in 1909 by the first White House Conference on Children, organized by Theodore Roosevelt, and ultimately led to the establishment of the Children's Bureau in 1912. Margaret

McMillan opened the Deptford School in England in 1911, an open-air school in a slum district, and coined the term 'nursery school.' This was followed by the opening of the first U.S. Montessori school in 1915 and the first Cooperative Nursery School at the University of Chicago in 1916. Public nursery schools opened in England in 1918. Also in 1918, A.S. Neill established Summerhill School in England, which became a model for the "free school" movement. In 1921, Abigail Eliot opened the Ruggles Street Nursery School and Training Center, and in 1922 the Bureau of Educational Experiments was founded by L.S. Mitchell, a proponent of progressive education for early childhood. During the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration opened emergency nurseries in 1933, and the first toy lending library, Toy Loan, began in Los Angeles in 1935. In 1943-1945 the Kaiser Shipyard Child Care Center was opened in Portland, Oregon to provide care for the children of those who worked in the shipyard center.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) was founded in 1944, the same year *Young Children* was first published. Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* was published in 1946, advocating a more permissive attitude toward children's behavior (Gordon & Brown, 2017). That same year, Loris Malaguzzi started a school in Reggio Emilia, Italy, emphasizing each child's creative expression. The United States National Committee of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (USNC OMEP) was founded in 1948. Arnold Gesell established the Clinic of Child Development at Yale University in 1926 to study children's average growth and behavior. Dorothy Howard opened the first black nursery school in Washington, D.C. in 1927. Susan Isaacs published *The Nursery Years* in 1929, arguing against a scientific psychological view of behavior and stressing the importance of play from a child's perspective (Gordon & Browne, 2017).

In the early 1900s, more states began to develop preschool programs focusing on providing educational opportunities for all children, regardless of background. The mid-1900s saw a shift in the focus of preschool education. With the advent of standardized testing, preschool education focused more on academic development. The Head Start Program further reinforced this shift. In 1965, the U.S. federal government launched the Head Start program in order to create a safety net for economically disadvantaged individuals as part of their "War on Poverty" policy initiative, providing an eight-week summer course for three- and four-year-old children from low-income families (Lascares & Hinitz, 2013). Head Start began as a summer program with 561,359 preschool-aged children enrolled in 11,068 centers (Hupp et al., 2009). Project Follow Through was established the following year to support Head Start graduates in kindergarten through third grade. To ensure that Head Start provided comprehensive support services and extensive parental involvement as children moved into elementary school, the Head Start Transition Project was undertaken in 1990 (Lubek et al., 1997).

There have been various rigorous studies that have gained considerable attention as to the importance of preschool programs. The earliest and most notable study is the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study (HSPPS), which started in 1969. This study was the foundation for all preschool programs and the initial cornerstone of the federal program Head Start (Schweinhart, 2000). The HSPPS is of the few notable longitudinal studies that provided valuable information on the benefits of how a high-quality preschool program can change a young child's life trajectory. HSPPS researched students who lived in a highly populated, low-poverty area of Ypsilanti, Michigan. The program was offered five days a week for two and a half hours daily. One hundred and twenty-three students were randomly assigned to the program, and another randomly assigned group of children did not attend preschool. The study has provided the

following results: compared to the non-program group, the HSPPS group was less likely to be imprisoned, less likely to be arrested for selling narcotics, less likely to have children out of wedlock, and less likely to need government assistance. In addition, HSPPS were more likely to have higher I.Q.s at five years old, graduate high school, and earn more by age twenty-seven (Schweinhart, 2000). With such staggering results, it was the beginning of the preschool era and a significant influence on programs such as Head Start, which has a study of its own, the Head Start Synthesis Project. Research conducted as part of the Synthesis Project, which explored the long-term effects of Head Start on "socially relevant" educational outcomes, found that those who attended Head Start were more likely to complete high school and less likely to repeat a grade or be placed in special education classes (Ludwig & Phillips, 2008). McKey et al. (1985) concluded that, although Head Start's impact on specific cognitive measures declined over time, the participants had gained an important measure of social competence that enabled them to perform better in school, remain in the mainstream, and meet the expectations of teachers better than their peers who did not attend. The effects of Head Start, which were near or above the educationally meaningful level at the end of the program but faded afterward, were also reflected in factors such as self-esteem, social behavior, and achievement motivation in a similar pattern to the cognitive measures (Lee et al., 1990). The benefits outweighed the cost of these studies. The results of these studies had a lasting effect on the education system and have served as a notable reminder of the importance of early childhood education.

Even though studies indicated positive results for children in states that intermittently provided programs until 2013, President Obama's Universal Preschool (UPK) Initiative was a significant breakthrough. President Obama's 2013 UPK Initiative sought to extend access to high-quality preschool programs to all four-year-olds in the United States, aiming to equip

children with the foundational skills, support, and social-emotional and language development necessary for successful academic and future life outcomes (Xu et al., 2018). This was initiated in response to information provided by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) report 'Education at a Glance 2012,' which ranked America twenty-eighth in comparison to thirty-eight countries that have early childhood programs, which showed that the United States was lagging (Genishi and Dyson, 2016; Spencer, 2014). Biden reintroduced the plan for Universal Preschool in the Build Back Better (BBB) legislation to widen the public school system and make pre-K complimentary and widespread. Along with the nationwide financing of pre-K programs, the BBB legislation that passed the House in November 2021 also encompasses a need for states to increase the wages of preschool educators and offer new programs (Bivens, 2023). Although many states provide some degree of pre-K, per the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, most of them do not allocate the sufficient amount of funds per pupil to facilitate high-quality, whole-day pre-K and do not reach numerous three- and four-year-olds (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). With the BBB pre-K provision, the intention was to widen the public school system and make pre-K an option for all.

While the initiative for Universal Preschool and Build Back Better legislation pushed for early childhood education and the funding to provide sufficient grants to offer high-quality early childhood education, the intentions needed to be more evident in what policymakers develop as a high-quality education (Bevins, 2023, Spencer, 2014). Many of the programs that legislation promoted needed to be developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive to the nature of students entering a preschool environment at four years old. Young children should be offered opportunities to explore and develop at an appropriate rate (Genishi & Dyson, 2016).

Preschool has been a contentious educational topic for years. Some believe starting school at four is unnecessary and would argue that few states have mandated kindergarten. Why would government dollars be spent on another educational program when grades first through twelfth need all the funding they can get? Truthfully, less than half of the states have mandated kindergarten, nineteen states, and Washington D.C., yet ninety percent of all United States public schools have kindergartens within their system (Wood, 2022). While kindergarten has become a mainstay in the education system due to the UPK Initiative, early education programs have begun to gain some recognition as state programs have grown vastly in the past ten years. "In the early 1980s, only four states funded preschool programs; by 2015-2016, this figure reached forty-three states and the District of Columbia" (Cascio, 2023, p. 4). State preschool programs present practical and political tensions with statewide implications. There is a need for more consensus among both public and educational policymakers on the purpose and aim of these programs. Preschool programs have become a popular education policy response to issues such as poverty, unequal access to quality education, and racial and gender educational differences. McCabe and Sipple (2011) suggest, however, that even as preschool programs have become more popular, they also often contribute to the collision of practical and political tensions of preschool implementation in public schools.

The political tensions of prekindergarten implementation are primarily about funding, curriculum, and school organizational models. Politicians often need more funds to finance these programs and have to weigh the costs of providing an early educational opportunity against other state educational priorities (McCabe & Sipple, 2011). In addition, there are debates over which curriculum types should be used in these prekindergarten programs, with critical views arguing that traditional schooling models, such as direct instruction, are inappropriate for young children.

In contrast, other models, like play-based learning, are too disconnected from school-ready skills. In response to these political tensions, policymakers often employ strategies that focus on a particular population of students to give them extra access to these programs for free or at reduced costs, thereby contributing to unequal access. McCabe and Sipple (2011) also note that these political tensions are also related to school organizational changes that must occur to accommodate the physical space required to host a preschool program.

On the other hand, practical tensions are primarily related to staffing and range from uncertainties about the appropriate qualifications for prekindergarten teachers to issues about teachers' salaries and benefits. Referencing research conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research, McCabe and Sipple (2011) explain that teacher qualifications vary from state to state, with some mandating a bachelor's degree in early childhood and others requiring only some college or a high school diploma. Because of the vast differences in institutional and state regulations, many educators worry that there needs to be a clear path to professional recognition or advancement within the field.

Too often, context is only referenced in policy to underscore certain students' challenges upon entering school. In such reports, the home's environment is examined through the lens of a "culturally impoverished paradigm" (Spencer, 2014. p. 179). Harmful stereotypes about historically underprivileged children often influence policymaking. Reform initiatives are often based on racist or stereotyped beliefs about specific communities. Genishi and Dyson (2016) have provided insight into the diversity of early childhood classrooms in their extensive research into language and literacy, with evidence that adverse outcomes relate to educational policy efforts, such as scripted curricula in Head Start classes, English-only language regulations, and concepts based on false conceptions concerning development. Genishi (2016) and Spencer

(2014) argue that policymakers should consider the needs of preschoolers when implementing UPK programs. Instead, they should consider the diverse population and various languages that make up each society and allow educators the freedom to develop appropriate practices based on the cultural needs of each class. They emphasize that the development of language and learning comes from the natural environment of the development of play with peers. Ultimately, this would ensure that the needs of preschoolers are adequately met and that pedagogical practices are tailored to the students rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. While UPK programs are beneficial, they are not the piece of the "equality puzzle" (Genishi and Dyson, 2016, p. 19) that has been missing. This policy is a step in the right direction, but early childhood education cannot and should not fit into the standardization of elementary school. Early childhood education is individual and developmentally complex. In an attempt to emphasize the importance of developmentally appropriate practices, the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Institute for Early Education Research have established specific standards for state preschool programs, such as the one in Alabama, providing guidance in terms of quality and efficacy.

NAEYC

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a not-for-profit organization that promotes high-quality standards of early learning for educators, parents, and professionals who work to care for and educate children from birth to eight years old. In 1986, the NAEYC developed the Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs manual to provide a guide for a standard of quality and to develop a professional accreditation to enhance the excellence of early childhood care and education (Friedmann et al., 2021). As expressed in the most recent publication of the NAEYC DAP manual, early education

is constantly evolving and is not based on one research study. The NAEYC acknowledged that the current pandemic brought forth the most recent revolution of change and identified the need to incorporate the need for equality, cultures, and education with a broader perspective, providing the perception of what educators could alter in their views when teaching and communicating inside and out of the classroom.

NIEER

Since 2002, the National Institute for Early Education Research has endeavored to offer objective, investigative-based guidance and aid in creating standards for high-caliber early schooling for all infants (National Institute for Early Education Research, n.d.). NIEER is dedicated to lending an impartial academic view that enlarges the knowledge of early childhood learning and advances tactics and rules supportive of the physical, intellectual, and sociable-emotional improvement needed for kids to succeed in school and life. NIEER is located at Rutgers University and focuses its research on early education regulations throughout the United States. They analyze each state program based on enrollment, financial reports, and ten quality benchmarks (Friedman-Krauss, 2021). Policymakers and state education programs depend on their research to identify the proficiency of services they provide and meet the quality benchmarks they offer and the developmentally appropriate practices for educating young children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Early Education and Identification Resource (NEEIR) are held in high regard among early childhood educators, as their bodies of research and quality standards provide a comprehensive framework for implementing effective practices. These programs serve as invaluable references for educators and programs alike, offering beneficial insight for instruction to young children.

Forty-four states have joined the UPK initiative. Policymakers and educators have examined how other countries thrive in early childhood education and how the benefits outweigh the costs. Countries such as Japan, which outrank the United States by more than forty points on math assessments, make preschools a designated priority in their educational system (Herman et al., 2013). Finland, Italy, Europe, and Switzerland are renowned for their early childhood education programs providing some education programs at the age of two.

While the United States is working to develop substantial programs, this initiative has been gaining momentum in some states over the last twenty years. Studies have repeatedly shown that a high quality preschool can help young students bridge the "achievement gap" that separates low-income and minority students from their more affluent peers. Research has also shown that UPK can benefit children's academic, social-emotional, and health outcomes (Xu et al., 2018). Universal preschool programs have been rapidly expanding in Alabama due to the improvement they can provide to the state's children and families. Alabama's UPK programs have enabled children to transition to kindergarten better prepared and increase their opportunities for success throughout their academic careers (Addy et al., 2020).

One key benefit of UPK is the improvement of academic outcomes for children. According to Veslo et al. (2020), there is substantial evidence that UPK can improve students' test scores, comprehension, problem-solving ability, writing, and math outcomes. UPK also allows children to become familiar and comfortable with the school environment before entering kindergarten, increasing their confidence to achieve and succeed in later school years (Veslo et al., 2020).

In addition to academic gains, UPK has also been shown to have social-emotional benefits. A study by Dusenbury et al. (2019) found that UPK graduates in Alabama were more

likely to accept others with different viewpoints, engage in positive behavior, follow the rules, and cooperate with adults and peers. This suggests that UPK programs provide a supportive learning environment that helps children foster their ability to make friends and become successful community members.

Furthermore, research has indicated that UPK may improve children's health outcomes. A study by Addy et al. (2020) found that UPK graduates in Alabama were more likely to participate in physical activities, have healthier diets, and have lower rates of obesity. These results suggest that UPK can also positively affect students' physical health.

In light of the countless benefits that UPK provides, it is no surprise that Universal Pre-K programs are becoming increasingly popular in Alabama. With improved academic, social-emotional, and health outcomes, UPK can help children become successful citizens of our society.

In 2001, Alabama only served one percent of its in-state preschool population, which increased to thirty-four percent by 2020 (before the pandemic) (NIEER, 2020). The state of Alabama heads the Alabama First Class Preschool funding (FCPK) through the Alabama Early Childhood Education Department (ADECE) and the Office of School Readiness (OSR). "The mission of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education is to innovate, support, and deliver cohesive, equitable systems of high-quality care and education so that Alabama children and families thrive and learn" (children.alabama.gov, 2023). NIEER has rated Alabama First Class Preschool as one of the highest-quality programs in the country for the past eighteen years (Turner, 2024). The program started with eight classrooms, now has 1,239 classrooms, and is still growing (<https://earlylearningnation.com/2020/12/alabama-first-class-pre-k-setting-the-standard-nationally-for-14-years-and-counting>) from its start with eight, Alabama's 4-year-olds).

NIEER standards serve as a foundation for policies that shape the leadership structure and guide the Alabama state government's commitment to communities supporting FCPK. State education programs and policymakers rely on NIEER research to assess enrollment, financial reports, and the overall quality of early childhood programs. This research provides valuable insight for educational leaders to identify areas of improvement to meet quality benchmarks and provide developmentally appropriate practices for young children. A study by Bobula (1996) found that accredited programs significantly improved due to effective communication and collaboration among program staff. Providing professional development opportunities for staff and setting clear goals for quality education is crucial in advancing such programs. Investing in quality early childhood education benefits the entire community, as higher-quality programs have been shown to promote student growth and long-term educational, social, and emotional outcomes, as evidenced by research such as Bloom's (1996) study.

Early childhood professionals rely on nationally recognized programs like NIEER and NAEYC for quality research that informs the development of effective practices. These programs offer a consistent framework that serves as a reference for educators who teach young children in quality programs. These programs offer a consistent framework that serves as a reference for educators who teach young children in quality programs.

NIEER Benchmarks Aligned with ADECE Guidelines:

ADECE provides guidelines based on the following NIEER Benchmarks:

Benchmark 1: Early Learning and Developmental Standards (NIEER, 2021, p. 28)

Alabama has used these systems as guides and framework practices to create the Alabama Standards for Early learning development. The ALSED align learning standards with the DAP into subcategories so young children can learn in a progression. A

curriculum can be appropriately designed to ensure that the whole child is exposed to play, reading, writing, science, math, fine motor, gross motor, social-emotional growth, and physical health (ADECE Guidelines, 2022).

Benchmark 2: Curriculum Supports (NIEER, 2021, p. 28)

ALDECE has worked in tandem with Teaching Strategies GOLD to align the ALS EDs with reassuring that educators had access to a curriculum and an assessment that would effectively develop the whole child (First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, 2022).

Benchmark 3: Teacher Degree (NIEER, 2021, p. 28)

In Alabama, lead teachers must have a bachelor's degree, preferably in Early Childhood Education, Child Development, or Early Childhood Special Education. If the lead teacher has a bachelor's degree in another area of expertise, they must have a minimum of nine hours of early childhood coursework (First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, 2022).

Benchmark 4: Specialized Teacher Training (NIEER, 2021, p. 28)

Alabama requires its teachers to have specialized training in the areas of child development and early childhood education through various platforms. Yearly the ALDECE provides a statewide early childhood conference that offers a multitude of areas of expertise in one location for all ADECE educators and ADECE staff to learn more about research and education methods that promote the growth and achievement of the educator and students they teach (First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, 2022).

Benchmark 5: Auxiliary Teacher Certification (NIEER, 2021, p.29)

As suggested by NIEER, ADECE auxiliary teachers must have earned, at minimum, a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or nine hours of college credits in early childhood education or family and childhood development from an accredited association (First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, 2022).

Benchmark 6: Staff Professional Development (NIEER, 2021, p. 29)

"Research indicates regular professional learning, including coaching, supports teaching practices related to high-quality experiences for children" (The State of Preschool Yearbook 2021: Roadmap to State Profiles Page, p. 29). The ADECE employs coaches in each region to facilitate a collaborative model to assist teachers in on-site modeling and support and professional development on curriculum, behavior, and developmental models to promote ongoing research and development of early learning (First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, 2022).

Benchmark 7: Maximum Class Size Twenty Students (NIEER, 2021, p. 29)

ADECE recommends that the number of students per classroom should be at most eighteen (First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, 2022).

Benchmark 8: Child and Staff Ratio 1:10 (NIEER, 2021, p. 29)

ADECE maintains at maximum a student-to-staff ratio of one to nine to provide the students with the quality and individualized instruction needed to provide students with high-quality instruction (First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, 2022).

Benchmark 9: Screenings and Referrals (NIEER, 2021, p. 29)

ADECE requires all programs to provide a health screening for each student for vision, hearing, dental, and physical. The program also requires the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) and the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschool, 2nd

Edition (DECA-P2) to be administered to determine if a student should need a referral for additional support (First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, 2022).

Benchmark 10: Continuous Quality Improvement System (NIEER, 2021, p. 29)

ADECE provides regional monitors to assist directors with quality guidelines and resources to maintain a high standard of services (First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, 2022).

Note: NIEER Benchmarks acquired from The State of Preschool Yearbook 2021 (Roadmap to state profiles page, 2021, pp. 28-29). ADECE Guidelines adapted from First Class Pre-k program guidelines, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (April 2022, p. 4)

While maintaining a highly effective state preschool program is a priority of the state of Alabama, the program had to alter some guidelines to assist the students, parents, staff, and preschool programs during COVID. These modifications were to lighten the priority of deadlines but remain with the expectation of an effective program. The national pandemic shutdown lasted throughout the remainder of the school year in the spring of 2020. Once the school year began in August 2020, some students needed to go to preschool, whether for education, normalcy, or to assist parents considered as essential workers.

Alabama's First Class PreK program saw a significant decline in enrollment during the 2020-2021 school year. Student attendance declined by 1,533 students, which was the trend throughout the country amid the caution of COVID-19 and the national shutdown (The State of Preschool Yearbook, 2021). During this time, Southern states felt the effects of the spread of COVID-19, and parents were still concerned even though state leaders, doctors, and educators implemented new protocols for wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, and cleaning

procedures to mitigate the spread. From the onset of COVID-19, ADECE leadership had to learn to evolve and find various methods to maintain safety and a continuum of learning.

Because the pandemic was new and communities, schools, and businesses had to end abruptly, there was no policy or reference on which leadership could reference as a strategic way to handle the immediate cause of the crisis. As we have accommodated and drawn upon creative experiences, it is time to reflect, look at experiences, and build a framework that would serve as a reference should such a crisis reoccur. Resilience is a skill that can be built by discussing these disruptive occurrences and learning how leaders develop a seamless method of communication, unity, and calm amidst chaos (Decman et al., 2021).

Leadership Theory

Leadership takes on many different roles in education. Often leadership is thought to be an authoritative position that is the responsibility of one person. With the COVID outbreak and the national shutdown, leadership had to defer to national, state, and local organizations.

Our challenge as leaders is to harness the benefits of the Age of Insight to support the Great Reset, which will be propelled by more than digital technologies; it is a Great Reset fueled by insight and designed to encourage resiliency, safety, inclusiveness, and sustainability. (Neri, 2020, p. 4)

At times of great unpredictability, leaders must continuously seek necessary information on the trajectory of the crisis from dependable sources. In education, this information was sought by state and local community leaders, and in the case of the pandemic, health officials played a significant role in the decisions that had to be made at that time (Ahern & Loh, 2021). Because the information at that time was confusing and often misconstrued, the community looked to central educational leaders. Leaders such as the superintendent, principals, and state-level

educational leaders became a crucial part of informing the community and their students and staff when answering questions regarding future actions. This was a significant burden to bear when there was not a well thought out plan to reference, and nobody knew what the future held for the pandemic. The first solution nationwide was to shut down and reevaluate as the pandemic grew in epic proportions.

COVID-19 has been an upheaval of untimely events, but in this era, it is time to reflect on what could have and, in some cases, should have been done. Nevertheless, instead of regret and blame, it is a time for educational leaders to redefine what methods did and did not work. The leadership lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic could help future leaders develop actionable processes and skills to sustain through future crises, mainly when there are no tried-and-true methods and little information available. Taking stock of the lessons learned should be a priority in research to ensure successful outcomes and continued relevance. (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022).

Leadership during a crisis involves a different mindset from the regular routine of providing daily guidance. Having a well-developed plan, acquiring better communication between leaders and personnel, improving awareness of physical and mental health, and recognizing the resilience and dedication of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) throughout the crisis are some of the support strategies resulting from the pandemic (Dirani et al. 2020). Though COVID-19 has mutated and is ongoing, the immediate threat has been reduced, affording early childhood educators the opportunity to reflect on the necessary support strategies to ensure the safety of early learners and personnel in the event of a future national threat. There are also long-term effects that have occurred to develop lasting impressions of protection and care that have changed the educational system for the future. This research study will look at three leadership

theories that use this insight to include the welfare of those being cared for and those providing care, which is befitting in the framework of the early childhood education system and early childhood educational leadership. These theories include distributive leadership theory, sensemaking theory, and talent-centered education leadership theory.

COVID-19 and Educational Leadership

COVID-19 posed a series of problems and placed many in the roles of innovator and risk taker. Regardless of one's position within the school system, it took an all-hands-on approach to develop a plan for maintaining safety and continued education in the crisis state of the pandemic. Often with a vast amount of personnel, educators designate leaders by their position within the school. The school organization of personnel matriculates top-down, and those who work within the classroom do not consider themselves true leaders. This notion was disrupted because, during the crisis, everyone had a vital role in transitioning from school to home, attempting to maintain education at its fullest potential. Education personnel had to embrace a bottom-up approach to leadership, where recognizing the leadership skills of all personnel was paramount. Schools adopted a collective effort to adapt to a new environment by recognizing strengths, encouraging others to embrace leadership roles, and creating a network of leaders. By identifying leadership potential from those lower within the educational hierarchy, schools could better identify problems, strategize solutions, and take effective action to ensure that students and staff remained safe, and that learning continued (Douglass, 2018). Educational leadership quickly became a method of collective effort within the organization, with multiple leadership roles within the educational organization. Identifying employees' strengths and cultivating leaders by changing the perception of leadership, employees identifying the leadership skills within themselves, and creating a network of leaders to maintain control of an uncontrollable situation

became a model to recognize within a new paradigm of educational leadership evolved. As a result, a new model of educational leadership has emerged to weather the storm of crisis and change education for the better.

This has become a pivotal point in educational leadership theory. The transition of educating beyond the classroom also brought about a change in leadership practices. As educational organizations sought to transition beyond the traditional classroom setting, it was necessary to reassess how leadership could effectively address this new and untested context. In response, there emerged a more collective-oriented approach to educational leadership, in which the individual value of each member of the organization was emphasized, and a sense of leadership community was simultaneously fostered. As such, this shift towards a proactive model of educational leadership has become a critical focal point for leadership theorists.

In the face of a crisis, many people define it differently. Weick (1988) explains a crisis as a situation that opposes an organization's key goals as well as barriers to action and inaction. Such a defining situation occurred in 2020 when the COVID pandemic impacted the entire world, specifically educational systems. To facilitate transitions, various leadership methods were employed.

Distributive leadership, sensemaking theory, and talent-centered leadership principles had common grounds for providing structural help to educational systems. Distributive leadership brings a sense of importance where every position matters, eliminating a "top-down" approach and encouraging collaboration. Ongoing discussion and collective decision-making were possible (Heikka & Hujala, 2013).

Sensemaking theory is the notion that how a leader responds to a situation or crisis can significantly affect the outcome. According to Weick (1988), sensemaking theory posits that

decisions in such a circumstance should arise from the situation rather than an individual's prior experience. Leaders must be willing to actively observe their environment and work with their teams to construct an understanding of the situation. This understanding, or sensemaking, is the foundation of making appropriate decisions for the situation. It involves thoughtfully exploring the situation from different angles and working toward a resolution, ultimately taking into account all of the facts and perspectives involved (Weick, 2021).

Tran et al. (2020) describes talent-centered leadership as a method entirely based on the staff's expertise that identifies areas of improvement and gives authority to those who have a better understanding of it. Data collected from employees and educators are employed to delegate work and power, creating a foundation of group morale and respect for each other's strengths and contributions (Tran et al., 2020).

Various educational leadership styles were employed during the 2020 pandemic; however, based on a subtle understanding of shared responsibility to continue in a crisis mode, three conceptual theories (distributive leadership, sensemaking theory, and talent-centered leadership principles) had common ground to provide structural help to educative systems. Each of them conducted in its unique way the kind of assistance and guidance necessary in times of crisis. The following literary review provides an in-depth look into the conceptual framework and foundation of how each theory provides a method that offers shared responsibility and builds on the strengths of not one leader but the various professionals within the organization. This includes the welfare of those being cared for and those providing care, which is befitting in the framework of the early childhood education system and early childhood education leadership.

Distributive Leadership Theory

Successful leadership is prudent for a quality program and those affected by the organizational outcomes. Several studies have focused on the effects of leadership, but few have focused on the needs of early childhood leadership and what it requires (Aubrey et al., 2013). The effectiveness of leaders is often a topic focused on traits, but it can also include an onset of behaviors that lead to success or even dictate how one effectively handles stressful situations. While a hierarchical approach model is standard in many business leadership theories, early childhood education has multiple needs within its organization that one person cannot meet, but the use of collective leadership and skills can impact a larger cultural context. Early education leaders are the regional teams that reinforce guidelines and funding for centers. Early childhood education center leaders provide leadership for the school teachers and center staff. Teachers provide services to students and pedagogical practices. Each ECE staff offers a different type of leadership within their capacity and with a responsibility that must be fulfilled to provide an equitable education to the student population (Heikka & Hujala, 2013). Considering the highly dynamic cultural backdrop, the distributed model relies on establishing connections via understanding and empowering individuals based on trust and a mutual mindset of focusing on a common goal (Ahern & Loh, 2021; MacBeath, 2005). A leadership practice that emerges across an organization includes a robust learning environment and shared ideas that transfer into respect for each other. Spillane et al. (2004) contend that distributed leadership is produced via the interconnection of "leaders, followers, and the situation" (p. 10) that occurs through a specific assignment. Distributed leadership requires the leader to relinquish their roles and trust others to assist, support, and maintain the objectives of the establishment. In a study conducted by MacBeath (2005), there are varying levels of leadership in play within the school setting and

implementing the distributed leadership model was determined by various situations. These were defined into six different forms of distributed leadership:

Distributed formally—The responsibilities that come with being in the leadership role and the defined limits of the job. Responsibilities of distribution of leadership fall into the arrangement of those who work in direct and indirect contact with the leader.

Distribution as pragmatic—The leadership is distributed as a necessity to share the workload. In a school setting, it is good to know your staff's strengths so that when a new initiative or a situation arises, there are practical thinkers in any given circumstance who can mitigate the situation.

Distribution is strategic—Distributing leadership into committees or teams can assist in extended initiatives. Collective trust must be given to the group to maintain their role and support leadership and the school.

Distribution incrementally—Distribution of leadership is intentionally given to those who have earned the leader's trust and have the aptitude to lead.

Distribution is opportunistic—Leadership role is assumed and not given directly. Individuals are trusted to take the initiative without being requested and have earned the assurance of having the capabilities to do so without assistance.

Distribution culturally—This includes critical elements such as mutual exchange of consideration, trust, and respect (MacBeath, 2005, pp. 357-362).

Much like the six types of distributed leadership, some phases include dictation, observation, delegation, and stepping back. Each leader must determine when it is time to let other staff be included in the leadership and who has the capabilities and the personality to work well with others. Macbeath (2005) documents that the leaders and the staff improved

relationships and the school's overall culture by implementing the distributive leadership model. Educators also learned to identify the necessities of their leadership skills and were able to build upon their own experiences.

In such a time as the pandemic, establishing distributive leadership and adopting collaborative practice would permit the interrelated execution of leadership tasks amongst multiple stakeholders, providing ECE leadership with the ability to maintain communication with policymakers and the organization of the system as a whole.

Sensemaking Theory

COVID-19 was a crisis when vast populations contracted the virus, and the nation had to cease social systems, insisting on a shelter in place. In Alabama, the first announcement directed by Governor Ivey started a stay-at-home order from March twenty-seventh through April thirtieth, 2020 (COVID-19 in Alabama: Timeline of events as pandemic began in March 2020). Weick (1988) defines crises as "high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organization" (p. 305) and further explains that navigating a crisis as it occurs creates a tension between "dangerous action which produces understanding and safe inaction which produces confusion" (p. 306). The COVID-19 pandemic brought a new crisis for educational leaders as policies and procedures were changing continuously. In the most immediate effects of a crisis, there is very little time to pause and develop a plausible plan. The sensemaking theory, however, is driven by making logic of the crisis, which is caused by action to establish order in a plan (Weick, 1988; Weick et al., 2005; Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005).

A crisis predetermines the sensemaking theory. "Sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and serves as a springboard into action" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Because the sensemaking theory is often

used in the reaction to a crisis, it is only possible to speculate on how reactions may unfold. Weick (2005) considers potential responses or the inability to act when examining the structure of such events, like the Bhopal Crisis, focusing on how the reaction can impact the company and, in this case, the community. Human error is often imminent when there is a crisis or trauma; therefore, trying to find a frequent cause for the resolution of a problem is typical for industries that deal with high-risk materials. The Bhopal Crisis is used as an example to examine the enactment process of sensemaking through the levels of commitment, capacity, and expectations (Weick, 2005). According to extensive research by Labib (2015), The Bhopal incident occurred on December 2, 1984. A tank containing methyl isocyanate (MIC)—an intermediate component used to make Cervine, a toxic pesticide—was compromised with water. Data provided from the incident was unclear whether the contamination was intentional or unintentional. The result of the mix was declared an exothermic, energy-producing chemical reaction; the heat output sped the reaction and produced even more heat. Unable to be contained by safety devices like the Vent Gas Scrubber (VGS), this dangerous compound leaked into the atmosphere, taking the lives of approximately 3,400 individuals, and injuring 200,000. Furthermore, many animals and plants within a fifty mile radius were killed due to the incident. Several safety mishaps also occurred before the disaster, such as when the refrigeration unit, meant to control temperature, was shut down and the flare tower was unavailable (Labib, 2015).

Weick (1988) refers to commitment in a situation as the actions someone carries out even if the person is unwilling to see other perspectives. The capacity of enactment is evident in the hierarchy of the response that should be instituted. Still, those in the company's upper ranks often differ from the eyes and ears dealing with the situation at hand. For example, in the Bhopal situation, the workers who were directly dealing with the malfunctioning machinery were not the

ones who could make immediate decisions on how to fix the situation, and those in the hierarchy made misinformed decisions because they were not present or knew enough to make the decisions needed to defuse the crisis at hand. Commitment is the enactment of capacity. "The more a person sees of any situation, the higher the probability that the person will see the specific change that needs to be made to dampen the crisis" (Weick, 1988, p. 311). The workers were dealing with the crisis; they did not have the perspective to realize the overall consequences of their actions. When the machinery was malfunctioning, the employees tried to fix gauges and temperature at the localized problem. Unfortunately, they did not have the insight to evaluate the reaction of the other equipment, and the immediate need to regulate their gauges and pipes caused imminent damage to the rest of the equipment in the plant. The third issue with the protocol and general issues with the plant was also the "enactment of expectations" (Weick, 1988, p. 313). The company was losing money and had made decisions about the cost of the plant and the community's safety. Their turnover at the time was considerably high, and safety was not a priority. New employees were given little education in dealing with the equipment, and safety protocols were lenient. The Bhopal Crisis represents a series of events that could have been prevented had leadership taken the time to develop a protocol for such an incident.

While the crisis of Bhopal was a more regional disaster, the sensemaking theory reflects on critical elements that are useful when navigating through a devastating crisis. The crisis of Bhopal and the educational shutdown of COVID-19 demonstrate how crucial it is for leaders to make informed decisions to avoid catastrophic consequences. The Bhopal disaster, caused by an uncontrolled chemical leak from a factory, led to thousands of casualties and long-term health and environmental damage (Labib, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic, on the other hand, forced educational institutions to modify their operations, including moving some classes online and

restricting access to school buildings. These two scenarios highlight the need for leaders to have the capability to assess the potential risks of each situation and to plan proactively to mitigate any possible damage. These events also illustrate the importance of making sure decisions are based on sound evidence and data, as this can help to ensure that the right decisions are made and that the consequences are managed appropriately. In a crisis, communication is a priority to keep abreast of the problem, which can minimize confusion. Both cases can serve as valuable examples of when leaders must exercise caution when making important decisions to ensure their constituents' safety and well-being.

Enactment plays a significant role in the necessity of valuable sensemaking (Weick,1988). While one cannot determine when a tragedy might occur or even what issues a crisis might hold, leadership can be proactive, look at prior events, and determine the protocol to assemble order. Thus, reflecting and building a resource so that early childhood educational leadership and staff have a hierarchical plan in place at the onset of a crisis is crucial. It is also crucial that all team members know how to enact the plan should a crisis transpire.

Talent-Centered Educational Leadership

The third of the educational leadership theories is talent-centered education leadership. Talent-centered educational leadership has gained attention since the pandemic because of the practice of being employee-centered during a time of duress. COVID-19 brought considerable change as the nation was forced to shut down and reset the public's perceptions . Many early childhood educators felt the emotional pressure of the health crisis while discovering new ways to communicate and new teaching methods without well-defined guidelines and leadership (Atiles et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2020; 2023). The talent-centered education leadership model encourages educational leaders to recognize, address, and serve teachers' needs to ensure a sound

educational system without compromising their well-being (Tran et al., 2020). "TCEL emphasizes an 'employee centered' workforce philosophy to enhance teachers' employee experience (EEX) and subsequent engagement" (Tran, 2022, p. 268). TCEL has seven components that are instrumental in the theoretical structure:

1. Acknowledge that the organization's most significant asset is its staff and that the demands of educators and students are not necessarily "exclusive" (p. 268). This strategy is based on inclusive talent management sources that stress that every person has a capacity in the system and that leaders are accountable for personalizing the workplace. When teacher needs are satisfied, they will prioritize student needs;
2. Utilizing diversity within the system is vital to students and staff needs. Diversity is a strength worth building and highlighting. Everyone can learn from each other;
3. Employees do not emulate each other, and the TCEL looks at the person to create an "employee experience (EEX)" (p. 270). The EEX is referred to as "the sum of [the] perceptions [which] employees have about their interactions with the organization in which they work" (Maylett & Wride, 2017, p. 12). Employees can create a positive work culture by contributing their thoughts and ideas to identify the system's aims and goals;
4. Data analysis is essential since it generates facts to comprehend employee demands and react appropriately. Gathering and examining pertinent information provides businesses with crucial evidence to enhance EEX by incorporating employee feedback into their redesign. Suggestions and modifications are then developed and utilized to establish a process of ongoing development continuously;
5. This data collection should be used to engage in conversations, provide feedback, and establish continuous support based on the staff's concerns and needs;

6. Consider employee involvement a desirable mission and vision. At times, the early childhood environment might seem lonely. If teachers are involved in their program, there will be less teacher attrition and tremendous academic success.
7. Always exhibit and display respect toward the individuals employed within the organization (Tran & Jenkins, 2022).

By following the TCEL framework, educators will be sensitive to the underlying needs that transpire during unstable times. It is impossible to predict any facets of a crisis, and it is time to reflect on educational leadership methods that can develop order, productivity, and stability.

Conclusion

Amidst the caution due to COVID-19 and the national shutdown, Alabama's First-Class PreK program saw a concerning decline in enrollment during the 2020-2021 school year (The State of Preschool Yearbook, 2021). Student attendance significantly decreased, a trend seen throughout the United States. Preschools felt the largescale effects of the pandemic, leaving many parents extremely concerned about their children's safety, even though state leaders, doctors, and educators had instructed new masks, social distancing, and cleaning protocols. In response to the uncertainty, ADECE leadership had to find ways to evolve, providing their students with a safe space and a continuous learning process.

Leadership is a significant component of employee motivation and success. During the 2020 pandemic, many employees developed anxiety caused by societal disruption and the necessity to work. The destabilization of the workforce caused many leaders to question how to maintain success in an unstable market. A valuable employee is difficult to replace, and the leadership knows how employee turnover can affect the organization and the chain effect of employee attrition once one flourishing member leaves. Formative leadership can maintain a

valuable workforce if strategies are implemented during a crisis. Appreciation, communication, and empathy are three of the significant focal points which provide valuable guidance during times of uncertainty. The shift is a positive sign of change in the educational sector as it demonstrates the new behavior that can be found in the educational system. This can be a successful way of handling the changing environment and should be embraced now and in the future.

As this literature review discusses, three leadership theories that emerged in response to the ongoing COVID-19 2020 crisis are distributive leadership theory, sensemaking theory, and talent-centered leadership principles. Each theory aims to develop an ambitious and practical leadership style that builds and nurtures a cohesive and collaborative organization.

Distributive leadership theory offers a non-hierarchical approach that delegates authority among all organization members instead of relying solely on a single leader to make decisions. This system fosters collaboration and collective-oriented decision-making. Sensemaking theory provides leaders with the tools to observe their environment fully and create an understanding of the situation that involves gathering multiple perspectives and employing meaningful conversations. Finally, talent-centered leadership principles consider staff expertise as well as delegate work and power based on data collected from employees and educators to create an environment of respect and equality.

All three of these theories have the potential to secure and sustain a positive and encouraging environment for staff, educators, and students while also helping them shape their academic goals and aspirations in the process. These theories provide a critical foundation for the work of early childhood educational systems, especially now, when the world is facing a new reality after the global pandemic of 2020. It is important to note that while each of these theories

is highly impactful in the educational system, they are not one-size-fits-all solutions. Each theory must be adapted to the specific context; however, they all can provide a template that can create a greater sense of cohesiveness and further enhance how educators lead their organizations. The implications of these theories are, therefore, undeniable in the face of an ever-changing educational system. These theories can better equip educational organizations to face and respond to the educational changes that resulted from the pandemic. Still, they can also create a safe and inspiring environment where leadership is more collaborative and understanding, and academic pathways are constantly re-evaluated. These theories are essential for both the success and reliability of educational systems.

In conclusion, while each of these theories offers a unique solution to the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic caused, when looked at together, they provide an invaluable starting point for educational organizations to face the leadership challenge ahead of them. We must recognize the importance of these theories for the potential of effective leadership in the early childhood education system and the children who will ultimately benefit from the growth and development of egalitarian and responsible leadership. It is up to educators and authorities to ensure that these theories are respected, appropriately implemented, and have a lasting impact on the way educational institutions are run.

Chapter 3: Methods

Early childhood educational leadership is essential during consistent times, even more so amid a global health pandemic. With the added challenges of a nationwide shutdown in 2020, early childhood educational leaders had the arduous task of innovating and adapting to an unprecedented time. This research explores the challenges of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education's Leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 nationwide shutdown while offering various leadership strategies for addressing these challenges. The unprecedented health conditions of the 2020 pandemic necessitated schools and early childhood learning centers to adapt quickly to new guidelines and safety protocols. This means that, in addition to the already challenging responsibilities of managing and providing quality educational experiences, early childhood education leaders had to ensure that all learning spaces undertook processes to ensure the safety of their students and staff. Such tasks were essential to the protection of those involved but could be complex and highly demanding, placing more strain on leaders and their resources.

Furthermore, with the added pressures of the 2020 nationwide school shutdown, early childhood education leaders had to consider the social and emotional issues for children and adults alike. With potential situations such as required changes in staff, drastic shifts in curriculum, and adjusting to new guidelines under pressure, early childhood education leaders had to consider how to nurture all members of the school community best, including providing extra support and resources for staff and children, developing meaningful communication and connection opportunities, and striving to create strong educational continuity systems. By proactively preparing and implementing safety protocols, gathering appropriate resources, and

providing support for their community, early childhood educational leaders could effectively respond to the challenges of this time.

Purpose of the Study

Based on the demands and the sudden disruption of the educational system, this research study was conducted to understand early childhood education leaders' experiences while leading before, during, and after the 2020 nationwide shutdown at the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. Qualitative interviews were conducted with the early childhood education leadership of ADECE to understand the implications of the 2020 pandemic better. The research questions focused on how the pandemic impacted the leadership practices of early childhood education leaders.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do early childhood education leaders describe how COVID-19 impacted their leadership practices?
2. What methods were formulated to fulfill the policies and procedures of the ADECE from the onset of the pandemic?
3. What are the most influential approaches to the policies that can be reestablished within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education system to improve outcomes for children and families, based on examining the procedures maintained since the pandemic?

Research within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education has provided valuable insights into the experiences of professional leaders that led schools during a turbulent time. Early childhood administrators had to develop new leadership strategies during the pandemic, including utilizing technology, expanding communication, and supporting staff and

families (Dirani et al., 2020; Decman et al., 2021). The second question focused on how NIEER's research on quality indicators for early childhood education support the sustainability of high-quality early childhood programs in Alabama during COVID-19. The use of technology for communication, the implementation of health and safety guidelines, and the need for frequent updates to stakeholders were identified as essential components for maintaining school success during the pandemic (Varela & Fedynich, 2020)). Furthermore, leaders utilized a differentiated approach when making decisions during a crisis situation. Training and education on health protocols, such as handwashing and mask-wearing, were also essential for sustaining a safe and healthy learning environment.

The third and last question examined the successful policies reinstated within the ECE system. Recent research shows that early childhood leaders have reinstated essential practices from before the pandemic, such as providing emotional and social support, creating an inclusive environment, and promoting collaboration among staff members (Grooms & Childs, 2021). Furthermore, interdisciplinary teams were established to encourage collaboration and offer guidance to early childhood leaders as they navigated the changes brought on by the pandemic (Logan et al., 2021). Through personal interviews, this study aimed to gain insights into how the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education system adapted to the pandemic and which previous successful practices have been reintroduced. Knowledge of these experiences provides valuable information for early childhood practitioners in other states planning to open school settings during a pandemic or even during times of less volatility.

Research Design

Qualitative research is designed to foster an in-depth comprehension of a social context or activity from the viewpoint of the studied cultural population. Understanding context,

conditions, and surroundings is a crucial component of qualitative research and forms part of what is known as cultural anthropology (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Narrative inquiry seeks to find the truth when participants share their lived experiences and it helps to identify the differing perspectives of the participants, as well (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Using narrative inquiry generated the layout of how early childhood educational leaders were impacted before, during, and after the pandemic. The data was acquired through open-ended interviews and purposeful criterion sampling, using an inductive method to discover common patterns.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this narrative inquiry will be to share the stories of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education educational leaders through their eyes as they share the impact that COVID had on the department and those they lead and to reflect on practices that were a part of their organization previous to the COVID pandemic. I highlighted the most common issues and effective leadership practices that have been maintained in this organization to work through the varying stages of the COVID crisis and define methods that will help educational leaders as society continues to learn from the diverse practices of educational leaders in unprecedented times of crisis.

While I have been working with the ADECE since the beginning of this research, I did not work with the department during the COVID-19 shutdown. My interest in this topic was driven by observing and realizing that there were certain procedures in place two years after the pandemic occurred. I also recognized that administrators, staff, directors, and educators still had to make adjustments to the guidelines in place due to the onset of COVID-19. Although I have been employed as teacher and now serve as a monitor, which might introduce biases, I believe my experience gave me a deeper understanding of the overall structure and challenges faced by

the ADECE organization. Although I cannot directly relate to the experiences of those who navigated the initial closures, the emotions they expressed regarding the ongoing impact of the pandemic resonated with me.

Sample Population

The sample population for this study comprises educational leaders in the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education responsible for maintaining the OSR First Class Preschool Program. The academic leaders in this group will include administrative staff from the head office, regional directors, monitors, and coaches. The administrative personnel of the ADECE are responsible for managing and operating different departments related to funding for early childhood education, behavior programs, and technology, among others. These departments are supervised by the Secretary of the ADECE, a position appointed by the governor. Regional directors are educational leaders divided amongst eight regions and oversee the OSR FCPK Program within their region and assist with site implementation, director needs, monitor assignments, and coaching responsibilities. Monitors help directors meet guidelines, budgeting needs, and teacher professional development implementation. Coaches assist teachers in the classroom setting, implementing curriculum and in-class training. The two hundred and fifty ADECE staff strive to develop a high-quality program that offers equal educational opportunities to the children of Alabama.

To ensure that experienced educational leaders who have worked in different COVID-related situations were selected, I used criterion sampling as the recruitment method. With the permission of the ADECE, emails were sent to educational leaders who worked with the ADECE in the past four years or longer. Working within the ADECE also provided me with personal relationships with colleagues who have worked within the department and who personally

volunteered. Making personal contact via phone calls, text, email, and ZOOM assisted in the final recruitment of subjects within ADECE. The emphasis was on the stages and the reflection of ADECE policies before the COVID-19 nationwide shutdown, during the Covid-19 nationwide shutdown, the reopening of the early childhood programs, and the current state in which the FCPK programs were functioning at the time of the study . To develop thorough collective insight into the purpose of the study, the minimum number of participants was set to a range of a minimum of eleven and a maximum of twenty participants.

Data Collection Methods:

Data collection was in the form of virtual interviews and/ or audio calls.

Interviewing provided personal accounts of how the COVID shutdowns affected their position as educational leaders and what changes they perceived were necessary at the time. Interviews also inquired about methods that were not successful and what practices they would eliminate should a crisis reoccur. As education has continued to evolve, it is important to understand which policy implementation factors effective during COVID are still being maintained and how people perceive current practices.

Post-Activity Data Management

After each interview, information was transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes. Interviews were examined in full context and then reviewed several times as other interviews proceeded to determine if there were familiar data, issues that needed reevaluating, member checking to determine what they said was what they meant to say, or if a discrepancy needed to be clarified.

Data Analysis

In order to prepare for interviews that accurately reflected the past, I conducted a data analysis of the written policies and procedures document for ADECE. This analysis covered the period between 2018 and 2020, before the onset of COVID-19. The purpose of this was to gather relevant information before conducting interviews and assist in recollecting procedures that may have changed over time.

Figure 2

Comparison of NIEER and Alabama Policies and Guidelines for High Quality State Preschool Programs

Policy	AL PRE-K Requirements	Benchmark
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Early learning & Developmental Standards •Curriculum supports •Teacher degree •Teacher specialized training •Assistant teacher degree •Staff professional development •Maximum class size •Staff-child ratio •Screening & referral •Continuous quality improvement system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Comprehensive, aligned, supported, culturally sensitive •Approval process & supports •BA •ECE, CDA, ECE SpEd •CDA or 9 ECE/CD credits •30 hrs./year (teachers); 20 hrs./year (assistants); PD plans; coaching •20 (4-year-olds) •1:10 (4 year-olds) •Vision, hearing, health, & more •Structured classroom observations; data use for program improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Comprehensive, aligned, supported, culturally sensitive •Approval process & supports •BA •Specializing in pre-K •CDA or equivalent •For teachers & assistance: At least 15 hrs./year; individual PD plans; coaching •20 (4-year-olds) •1:10 or better •Vision, hearing, health screenings; & referral •Structured classroom observations; data use for program improvement

Note: Figure 2 is reprinted from “The State of Preschool 2018-2022: State Preschool Yearbook. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research,” by Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Garver, K. A., Hodges, K. S., Weisenfeld, G. G. & DiCrecchio, N., 2018-2022, pp. 34, 36, 46, 51, 55, New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

Figure 2 uses the data from NIEER (National Institute for Early Education Research). NIEER uses analysis to provide unbiased, research-based analysis and technical assistance to help create standards for high-quality early childhood education for all children. NIEER is committed to

providing nonpartisan research that advances the field of early childhood education and promotes policies and practices that support the physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development children need to thrive in school and beyond. Policymakers and state education programs rely on NIEER's research to assess the quality of the services they provide and to ensure that they are meeting the quality benchmarks and developmentally appropriate practices for educating young children. The quality indicators are the policies the state follows to maintain a high-quality program and ensure all preschool students are provided with an equitable organization throughout the state, as seen in the first column of Figure 2. The second column shows how Alabama associates with the policies in column one and the benchmarks in the third column. The benchmarks are a set of standards that each state program should adhere to in order to be considered a high quality program. These benchmarks are outlined in the "First Class Program Guidelines," and are associated with the program's quality when an affiliation wants an FCPK grant. If any of the ten guidelines are not followed in the program, education leaders will first notify and assist in maintaining the policy through regular communication and guidance. If there is a refusal to make the necessary adjustments or comply with any of the policies, it may result in a fine, suspension, or a recommendation for termination of the grant (First-class pre-k program guidelines, Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, 2022).

During the COVID-19 shutdown, Alabama's NIEER/state policies remained unchanged, and the state was able to meet all ten benchmarks in both the 2019-2020 and the 2020-2021 school years. The guidelines that were established at the beginning of the 2019-2020 fiscal year were sustained, and adjustments were made to ensure that assessments and conferences with parents were completed. In data analysis, the most significant indicators of change were fluctuations in student enrollment. Educators faced challenges due to COVID-19, but they were

able to overcome them by regrouping and finding alternative ways to meet the needs of their students. Despite the difficulties, the quality of Alabama's FCPK program remained high.

Table 1

Enrollment & State Funding of FCPK 2018-2023

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Enrollment	16,052	18,756	20,439	18,906	21,939	23,388
State Funding Total	\$ 77,462,050.00	\$ 95,962,050.00	\$ 122,798,645.00	\$ 126,450,264.00	\$ 152,532,676.00	\$ 173,745,22.00
State Funding Per Child	\$ 4,826.00	\$ 5,116.00	\$ 6,008.00	\$ 6,738.00	\$ 6,953.00	\$ 7,429.00
Federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG B-5)	10.6 Million	11.2 Million	11.2 Million	11.2 Million	4 Million	4 Million

Note: Table 1 is adapted from “The State of Preschool 2018-2023: State Preschool Yearbook. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research,” by Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Garver, K. A., Hodges, K. S., Weisenfeld, G. G. & DiCrecchio, N., 2018-2022, pp. 33, 35, 45, 50, 54, 37 New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

Table 1 displays the data for the program of the ADECE to identify the variability of enrollment, total spending per year, and funds spent per child. Despite fluctuations in student enrollment due to the pandemic in 2021, student spending remained consistent after adjusting for annual costs and education assistance during the 2020 shutdown. Based on this data, the ADECE developed a "2019-2020 Local Education Agency Academic Continuity Plan: Home Instruction for Early Learning (LEA-ACP)" implemented on March 31, 2020. This plan was designed to provide support for students and families by creating a resource for communication and learning for preschoolers attending the FCPK program in Alabama. The LEA-ACP provided helpful suggestions from educational leaders to support directors and teachers in promoting the development of preschoolers while ensuring their safety at home. The plan also included guidance to comply with FCPK program procedures to guide continued growth and development despite being unable to meet face-to-face due to the risk of contracting COVID-19.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some policies had to be set aside; however, the education authorities made sure to prioritize essential measures such as conducting developmental assessments, creating a plan for virtual instruction, and finding alternative ways to conduct parent-teacher conferences. The LEA-ACP provided guidance to teachers on how to develop effective virtual classroom instruction and sent instructional supplies and age-appropriate links to children and parents who attended FCPK in the previous school year. Additionally, the LEA-ACP provided consistent support through the ADECE program with communication from regional coaches. The ADECE program also recognized the importance of providing meal assistance, mental health support, and accommodations for students with disabilities or those who spoke English as a second language. These initiatives were outlined in the 2019-2020 Early Learning Home Instruction Plan (2020).

Delimitations

Three years have passed since the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, the virus has mutated and manifested in various forms. Although we may never see a total return to pre-pandemic normality, humanity has learned to adapt, implementing control measures and, in some cases, choosing to ignore the presence of the virus altogether. This amount of time may have affected the memories of those going through the experience, with some key players having since changed positions, retired, or simply no longer wanting to discuss the issue, leading to a potentially reduced sample size for any study of these events.

This study only focuses on one organization in education, the ADECE. This is only based on the perceptions of early childhood education leaders and ADECE staff in the in Alabama. One can only get the perspective of the overall impact of the educational system by looking at each facet separately because of the different limitations, cultures, and climates of other schools.

While watching the news of the pandemic's immediate threat, various aspects depended on where one lived and what one experienced.

Summary

In conclusion, qualitative methods were used in concordance with narrative inquiry so that other educators could see the perceptions of the educational leaders as they tried to process how to navigate through the pandemic. Looking back at this pivotal time, educational leaders and the ADECE staff looked at what worked and what needed to be changed. As educational leaders move forward, they can gain valuable insights into the transformations and enduring elements that have emerged during uncertain times, ultimately enhancing early childhood education.

Chapter 4: Results

This research investigated the impact of post-pandemic policies and procedures within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE). The study utilized the perspectives of early childhood educators who worked with the ADECE for five years or more to identify the impact of the pandemic and how leadership practices helped to implement educational procedures during the COVID-19 school closures, as well as the current progression of education. Individual interviews were conducted as part of the research process to thoroughly understand the challenges and complexities of the past five years, including pre and post-pandemic periods. This study utilized a qualitative approach to analyze the narratives of education leaders, with thematic analysis conducted by iteratively examining interview data and relevant quotes to identify underlying themes.

Narrative inquiry was the methodology used to guide the interviewing process and share the findings. As explained by Connely & Clandinin (1990), "We say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect, and tell stories of them and write narratives of experience" (p. 2). Thus, these stories help us make sense of our experiences and present the narrative inquiry as a lived experience of collective stories to develop a synopsis of events (Connely & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2016). These stories are a powerful way to connect with others and build a sense of community, as they allow us to share our thoughts and feelings in a safe and supportive environment. By exploring the collective stories of a group or community, we can gain valuable insights into the events that have shaped our lives and the world around us. Ultimately, this process of sharing and exploration helps us better understand ourselves, each other, and our world (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Connely & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2016).

While everyone has their own unique story about their time in quarantine, reflecting, sharing, regrouping, and learning from these experiences as an organization is essential. Experienced early childhood educators who have worked with ADECE for over five years were interviewed to gain insights into the impact of the pandemic and how leadership practices helped implement educational procedures during COVID-19 school closures. I have had the opportunity to analyze and apporportion how their experiences can be reflected upon and the changes that occurred to develop a substantial organization that provides an equitable and constructive framework for the young children of Alabama as they maintained the program throughout these educational adaptionns.

In this study, participants were carefully chosen through purposeful sampling, which involved selecting a specific educational leadership group. This method was preferred because it allowed for acquiring rich insights from early education leaders (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Gupta et al., 2018). Because the Alabama Department of Early Education (ADECE) provides services for First Class Preschool (FCPK), Challenging Behaviors Birth to Five Initiative, and partners with Alabama's Head Start Program, it has been an influential part of shaping and maintaining the policies and guidelines for birth through pre-K programs since 2001. The various ADECE educational leaders interviewed provide support and assistance to public and private preschools through various grants and services. These individuals have firsthand knowledge of the fundamentals of the program, as they have worked with ADECE for six to fourteen years. Ten female ADECE education leaders who met the specific criteria requested volunteered and participated in the interviews. Participants included four regional monitors, two regional coaches, two CONNECT Team associates from the Challenging Behaviors Project (ages birth to five

years), one ADECE Credential Evaluator, and a Regional Director (Participant Demographics, Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Current Position @ ADECE	Years @ ADECE	Prior Employment
Regional Monitor	9 years	20+ years: Educator Kindergarten - First Grade
Regional Monitor	10 years	17 years: Educator Pre-K - First Grade, PreK Coach
Regional Monitor	8 years	16 Years: Educator- Special Education Kindergarten-Sixth Grade
Challenging Behavior Project Administrator	9 years	30 + Years: Educator Pre-K & Third Grade, Early Childhood Director, Pre-K Coach
Academic Credential Evaluator	12 years	50 Years: Educator K-Third Grade, Faculty in Early Childhood & Elementary Reading Department, Graduate Admissions Advisor, & Pre-K Monitor
Challenging Behavior Project Facilitator	6 years	20+ Years: Special Education Teacher Pre-K- Kindergarten
Regional Monitor	9 years	20+ Years: Educator Kindergarten - Third Grade
Regional Coach	10 years	15 Years: Educator- Pre-K Special Education,
Regional Coach	14 years	20+ Years: Educator Pre-K & Kindergarten,
Regional Director	11 years	30 Years: Pre-K Director, School System Coordinator, Grant Specialist, Food Programs Coordinator; Higher Education-Supplemental Instructional Coordinator

Figure 3

Total Years of ECE Experience in Public School Systems

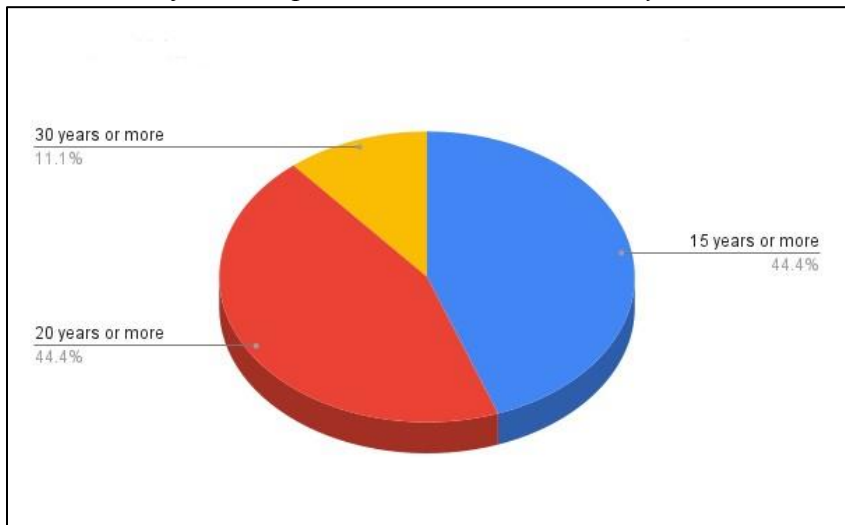


Figure 4

Total Years of Early Childhood Educational Experience

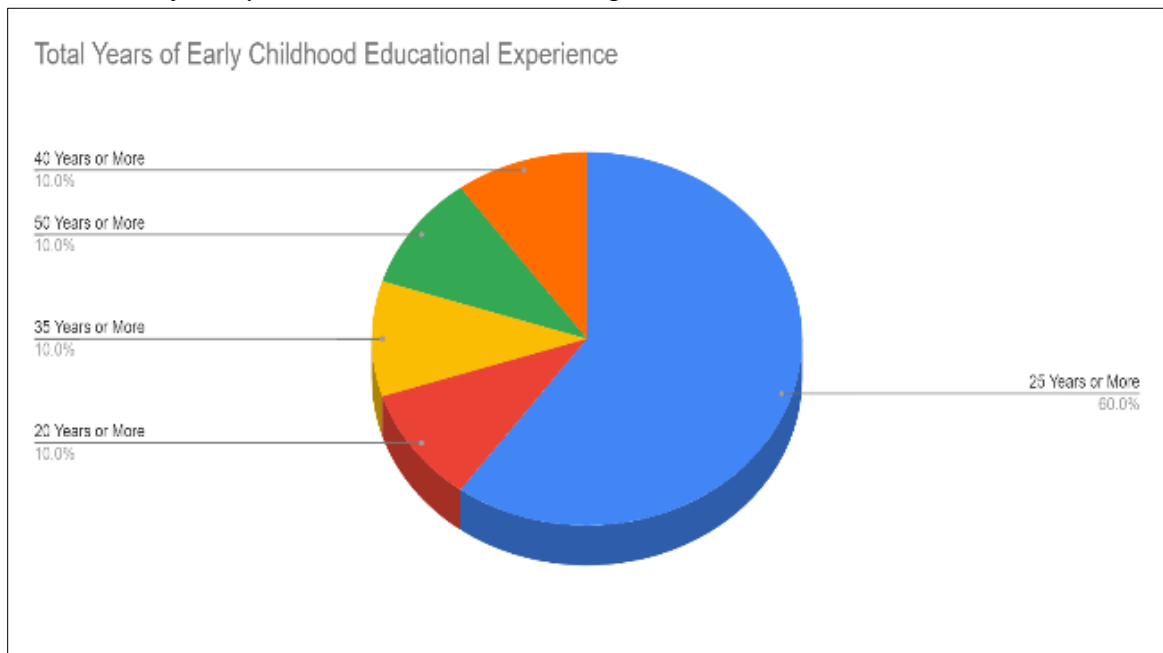


Figure 3 represents the years of experience the participants had taught in some capacity in the public school system or public university before their employment at the ADECE. Figure 4 represents the total number of years, including working at the ADECE, in the field of Early Childhood Education. The participants' years of experience in this field demonstrate their expertise as educational leaders, which they can impart to those they lead professionally. Each participant in the Alabama Department of Early Childhood serves as an educational leader in one of the following positions: Regional Monitor, Regional Coach, Regional Director, Academic Credential Evaluator, Challenging Behavior Project Administrator, or Challenging Behavior Project Coach. They are responsible for implementing the model of developmentally appropriate practices, complying with NIEER guidelines, and providing evidence of ADECE policies and procedures to develop a highly qualified and equitable program for all young children. In Table 2, participants share their explanation of what their position involves within the ADECE.

Table 3

Participants' Description of Position Responsibilities at ADECE

ADECE Participant Responsibilities	
Regional Monitors	<p>Anna: "To establish good relationships with directors and teachers. We keep up with data and keep expenditures up to date and a lot more (2:58)."</p> <p>Betty: " I do lots of record-keeping. I made sure that all teachers have done their required trainings. I make sure that they have access to each database, or I don't know what you would say, like a platform that they need to use for pre-K. A lot of times I act as the liaison between them and their coach or them and their director or even them Then our regional director (3:20)."</p> <p>Cheri: I have to make sure the teachers are staying up to date on their professional development hours. I have to make sure that the directors are following the program guidelines. The teachers will follow the classroom guidelines. I have to make sure everybody is lining up with our procedures and protocols and that they're staying honest, so to speak (4:03).</p> <p>Gabby: It varies; I'm responsible for a lot of private sites budgets, a monthly checklist that we do to make sure that you're following the program guidelines, and making sure that the right kids are in ALACEED, GOLD, and IEPs are up to date.</p>
Regional Coaches	<p>Hilary: "To support Teachers and students (3:47)?"</p> <p>Michelle: "Lending support to classroom teachers would maybe be a nutshell, and it includes observing and give feedback. We plan to gather and reflect on what I see and what I've observed in the classroom. Any specifics we have with GOLD. Mainly supporting, you know, there to support them and help them improve in just all areas and generally the areas that they choose a focus area that they want to improve in (9:30)."</p>

<p>Challenging Behavior's Project Facilitators</p>	<p>Dacia: "So what we do, it is a where prevention and intervention is needed for challenging behaviors birth to 5. We work in family homes and group childcare centers. They have to be licensed. It's really a social, emotionally social, emotional literacy project. It's where we're trying to build resilience in adults and children, adults first and then children and just supporting those classrooms (3:59)."</p> <p>Francis: "Coaching and support for DHR-licensed childcare centers, and we get that we model strategies and give them up to \$2,000 for participating. We just help them with challenging behaviors and help them identify children who may be struggling so they can close that gap, hopefully before they get to preschool and kindergarten (3:41)."</p>
<p>Regional Director</p>	<p>Janice: "Sure, as a regional director responsible for comprehensive early childhood learning, I think from the perspective of ensuring quality assurance that classrooms develop appropriate practices, supporting coaches and managers in their role as support to the teachers and directors, and also just being available in carrying out the mission and vision of the Department (1:09).</p>
<p>Administrator</p>	<p>Emily: "I'm evaluating credentials for teachers. What I'm doing is receiving all of the requests throughout the state for hiring any new auxiliary or lead teacher and making sure that their credentials meet the NIEER qualifications (2:27)."</p>

This narrative inquiry interview process began with obtaining approval from The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Auburn University. The following documents are included in Appendices A-D in the IRB approved application: a letter to the Secretary of the Department of Early Childhood Education requesting her permission to request volunteers via email to the

employees of the ADECE, interview questions, an email that outlined the study and requested recruitment, as well as the letter of consent. Once the email was sent to the Secretary of the ADECE, it was requested that a copy of the IRB-approved information, the purpose of the study, research questions, and research protocol be sent to the Director of Research and Program Evaluation. Following the approval of all documents from the Director of Research and Program Evaluation, the Secretary of the ADECE sent an email of approval to request volunteers within the Department of the ADECE (Appendix: E).

Individuals who expressed interest in volunteering could communicate with me in person, or by phone or email. Scheduling of appointments was done via email, including relevant attachments such as the consent form, interview questions, and Figure 2, a visual aid that explains ADECE policies and procedures. While interviews initially took place through ZOOM video and audio, technical issues with the video caused instability, so I eventually switched to conducting interviews without the Zoom video and recorded only to Zoom audio while still using the transcriptions via the AU Zoom Platform. Within twenty-four hours to seven days of the interview, audio recordings were listened to repeatedly and transcribed. Transcriptions included only the pseudonyms of the participants to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms began with initials based on the sequence they were scheduled, for example, female A, FA, female b, FB, etc., which evolved to the false name of the transcribed pseudonym to reassure privacy. Once transcriptions were complete, the audio recordings were deleted, and transcriptions were uploaded and stored in AU Box, which is password-protected. Transcriptions with only the pseudonyms were then uploaded into the qualitative database Atlas.ti. After assembling the necessary transcripts, the researcher imported the transcripts into Atlas.ti for further analysis. Using narrative inquiry as the chosen methodology assisted in further examination of the data

using in vivo coding. The in vivo coding method proved to be more effective because it "focuses on the words or short phrases" (Saldana, 2021, p. 137) of the participant's quotes to develop a coding method (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This coding method can categorize and examine data into information sets, and labels can be assigned to the codes. This led to analyzing data codes, comparing themes and transcripts, and developing subcodes to identify a clear description based on participants' accounts from March 2020 to February 2024 framed in their educational leadership practices. After multiple cycles of aggregating the data, the "codeweaving" (Saldana, 2021, p. 345) process assisted in interpreting how the codes developed into the major themes that emerged and related to the guiding research questions within the research study. The codes were then narrowed down to four main topics, with twelve themes.

The following research questions guided this process:

1. In what ways do early childhood education leaders describe how COVID-19 impacted their leadership practices?
2. What methods were formulated to fulfill the policies and procedures of the ADECE from the onset of the pandemic?
3. What are the most influential approaches to the policies that can be reestablished within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education system to improve outcomes for children and families, based on examining the procedures maintained since the pandemic?

Findings

Research Question 1

In what ways do early childhood education leaders describe how COVID-19 impacted their leadership practices?

Research question one generated the most information due to the participants' perspectives of how the *impact* of COVID-19 affected the emotional state of their constituents. The *impact* was not felt at just the initial stages of the pandemic but has continued to have a ripple effect even after four years, as the educational system readjusts from a crisis state to a new normal. This impact caused educational leaders to adapt to the various changes, prioritize communication and collaboration across various systems, and learn how to balance their family and work responsibilities while providing their educational staff with emotional support during a crisis.

Theme 1: Adaption. Education leaders had to make quick decisions while adapting to constantly changing circumstances. They also had to be innovative to find new solutions for learning or managing health protocols.

As Cheri explains, after being a monitor for the past three years, she finally felt as though the year was going along great until the pandemic,

So I got my footing, and then COVID came. And it's just like the bottom fell out; we had to go all virtual, we weren't able to go in and meet with our directors and teachers, things were all pretty much primarily all computer, Zoom calls, or phone calls or whatever. And the teachers were doing what they were supposed to be doing. But I felt like a disconnect. Because it was like, they were stressed because they're worried about their family, they're worried about their students and the whole status of the world as I as it was I and it's just, they didn't, we just didn't know how to make it work, because you never knew what the next day was going to bring. Because there's always something changing, and it wasn't looking good. (3:74)

In the wake of the pandemic, educational leadership required an exceptional level of flexibility. Each situation presented distinctive obstacles that demanded constant adjustments, sometimes even hourly. Whether aiding faculty, tending to students' and families' concerns, or navigating unfamiliar frameworks, the capacity to adapt was indispensable. As noted by Dacia,

I had to really adapt and become, I'm pretty flexible, become very flexible. Because everywhere I went, there was a different need. Right. And I had to adjust daily, hourly, every two hours to whatever that need was when I was out in the field or for my people, or, you know, just so many different needs and structures that needed to be built and followed through with.

Theme 2: Effective Communication and Collaboration. Clear communication and strong collaboration were crucial, as schools were fragmented between in-person and remote learning. Early childhood education leaders needed to bridge the gap between directors, teachers, parents, and students in this potentially disjointed environment.

Our regional director will stay at the ship if you will. And she got us together as the monitors. We work together really well. And we bounce ideas off of each other and say, Okay, this is my idea. What do you think about this? How does this work? You think this could work? And we make it work? So we got like phone messages, you know, texts with our directors, with our teachers. We relied heavily on email with our teachers because a lot of them they were at home, and they had their issues with their families because some of them they lost family members, some of them were sick with COVID themselves. So, like I said, were a lot of moving parts, but we were able to think outside of the box, and then think outside of that box, and just kind of regroup and just make the most of it. (3:81)

As Cheri shared, staying in communication and developing a plan was necessary as priorities were changing. As professionals, they had to continue to adapt to the needs of their directors and teachers during the various transitions of the pandemic.

As we adjusted to the new routine, virtual meetings emerged as a valuable alternative for situations where in-person gatherings were impractical. As stated by Hilary, "So, because of COVID, we used Zoom calls or TEAM calls more frequently. I think that is actually a good thing that happened, that everyone became more comfortable with that." The experience has led her to integrate virtual meetings as an option for communication with teachers beyond traditional face-to-face interactions. All ten participants mentioned using virtual communication as a necessary means during the pandemic. It has been a necessary adaptation during the time that educators had to stay at home to allow educational leaders to stay in contact with the various stakeholders to meet more safely, frequently, and efficiently. Overall, the change has been crucial in ensuring a means of communicating effectively and working towards collective goals.

Theme 3: Balance In Responsibility and Emotional Support. As the initial impact of COVID-19 began to subside and the realization that the transition back to school was not going to happen before the fall, early childhood education leaders had to prioritize work and the needs of their staff to navigate the uncertain landscape. In such a dynamic situation, shared accountability was critical to ensure everyone contributed to finding solutions during the crisis. As time progressed, the impact of isolation became increasingly apparent. The transition to remote work, the need to balance work and home life, and emotional support became more important than ever before.

Among the participants interviewed, four of the ten had children who were at home and working on homeschooling and learning to navigate, assisting their children in school, maintaining their workday, and regulating the nuances of the ever-changing threat of COVID-19. The ADECE made various attempts to devise a plan for maintaining the productivity of their staff, but they encountered challenges due to the realization that a one-size-fits-all approach was not feasible.

It got to be a big ordeal with kids if you have kids at home. Yeah. It couldn't be in the room. It just got to be it was a mess. Yes, it was. They're like, well, your kids can't be there if you're working and blah, blah, blah. They weren't in school. What are you supposed to do, just kick them out of the house? It was funny. And so I think finally they realized kids can't go to school either. So they have little grace. They're like, well, just keep your kids out of the room. So she's just so that was probably the hardest thing was figuring out what to do with your child. The office's telling you you can't have your children around you while you're working. That is not always easy. Not when they aren't at school, either. They're stuck working. They're doing all virtual learning, and they don't know what they're doing. So they're coming to ask you to help them, 'Hey, I need help with my virtual learning.' Hey, I'm not supposed to be helping you because I'm supposed to be working. (Francis, 8:02)

Amongst those with children, this became a difficult situation to deal with in trying to satisfy the ADECE while fulfilling the need to be a parent. Frustration is apparent when Hilary, who had two children at home at the time, states, "Like I know our department, post side note, our departments like our priorities are children, but when that happened, it was like you forgot that a big portion of your employees also have children (7:20)?" Gabby and Hillary both discuss

how the ADECE required their staff to find a place to work during the day outside the home, "So my boss literally told all of us in multiple emails that we had to go out and find our own office space, that they weren't going to pay for anything, but that we had to get up like we had an office to go to (Gabby, 14:24)." Hilary shared similar experiences, "So, while everyone else was coming home to work, we were told to go find office space, which blew my mind (6:29)." They both explained the difficulty they and the other ADECE staff had finding a space to work outside their home during the pandemic. They had to create office spaces at daycares, restaurants, and churches, and one created a workspace in the equipment room at the school where her husband coached. Realizing this was not a viable solution,

Finally, our office said okay, you know what, we're gonna give you really flexible hours if you have to do virtual learning with your kid. You can start working at two, and what two to eight allows you? You can work at night; just get the work done. (Francis, 9:18)

Education leaders recognized the toll it was taking on their staff and early education sites, and instead of the usual small talk, education leaders needed to sit back and listen, as noted by Cheri,

The same thing for the directors of directors, they're trying to, for like, my privates, they're trying to keep a business going. And my public school principals, they're trying to make sure they keep their staff safe, and the children safe, the students safe, and along with all the other hats that they're wearing being fathers, mothers, you know, husbands, wives, it's just, it was a lot. Um, and as far as what I, the best thing I could do was, personally, I would pray for them every day, I pray for them for their safety. And then, when I was able to communicate with them via phone, zoom, or whatever the case may

be, I would the first thing I would say was, how are you doing? How are things going in your world? Because, yes, I have a job to do. But I can't do my job if I see somebody struggling. So I try to be as personal and introduce that human factor as much as possible, letting them know like, okay, we're in this together, I feel your pain, we're going through the same thing, just at different levels. (26:25)

This insightfulness became a part of the weekly meetings that the staff had with their teams. They would take the time to vent their frustrations, collaborate on solutions, and pray for each other, and the regional director also started to include a weekly meeting with the mental health consultant. Janice notes, "I had a mental health consultant, and she would do something, you know, to kind of like, you know wellness and all of that (17:21)." This became an overriding theme when discussing the qualities of influential education leaders, including understanding, flexibility, communication, and listening because of the results of stress, change, illness, and public health.

Research Question 2

What methods were formulated to fulfill the policies and procedures of the ADECE from the onset of the pandemic?

Because COVID-19 was a health crisis, it took a myriad of methods to ensure the safety of all those involved. Educational leaders had to become innovative in assisting staff, families, and students to proceed with their education while trying to navigate the ever-changing landscape of warnings, guidelines, and reassurance for the safety of all those associated with their organization. ADECE educational leaders encompassed the gravity of the pandemic while trying to implement a continuum for pre-k educators to pass on to their directors, teachers, and

students. In order to ensure the safety and well-being of children in Alabama amidst the pandemic, certain methods were formulated. As outlined in the themes, these precautions involved adhering to the health and safety protocols established by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) as well as collaborating with other essential partnerships that aid in educating young children. Additionally, alternative approaches for providing instruction were devised to continue the flow of education while students remained at home or limited access to in person instruction. Throughout it all, the education leaders' top priority remained the health and well-being of their staff, families, and students.

Theme 1: Health and Safety. Before the March 15th implementations for shutdowns of businesses and schools, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a statement regarding the spread of COVID-19 and how the nation should prepare for March 11, 2020. As I reflect, I know why I did not pay attention (I was on Spring Break), but now that I have the knowledge of what proceeded, it is quite chilling, to say the least. Near the end of the WHO Director's remarks, he states, "Communicate with your people about the risks and how they can protect themselves – this is everybody's business; Find, isolate, test and treat every case and trace every contact; Ready your hospitals; Protect and train your health workers. And let's all look out for each other because we need each other" (WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19 - March 11, 2020, n.d.).

Ensuring the health and safety of everyone's safety protocols was of utmost importance. To achieve this, educational leaders had to implement new guidelines and ensure compliance with the constantly changing health regulations. This also involved assessing and mitigating risks to safeguards with other programs to ensure that their guidelines aligned not to confuse the students, staff, and the community and to provide them safety in a critical situation.

The health and safety shaped the way the new school year started. As indicated by Hilary, "I think the priority was making sure that they (directors & teachers) were, they were safe and they were doing the best supporting that. Believing in that and not feeling like, I was feeling like I was staying above water" (9:26). Anna also had concerns for her teachers as the school year started back in August 2020,

I didn't know what to tell them, especially the older teachers, you know, they were just some whose health wasn't as good. You've got teachers that were getting over cancer, and you know, their situation is a lot different for them than you know somebody else's as though it was. I was scared of giving the wrong advice, you know, letting it harm somebody or, you know, just especially the beginning. (1:161)

Protocols and methods of instruction had to change to ensure that students were provided with appropriate clean spaces,

When they first came back after the pandemic, the teachers did space out seating, some of them sort of doing like you can't rotate to when we ask them to rotate centers freely. Some places said no; they couldn't let students go to centers at all. So the teachers, if they let them go to centers because you know they would have to document who would play with that day in case one got sick or whatever, it was sent home, and so at the very beginning, it was really tough for the mostly the teachers I would say you know for them to try to monitor all that. (Anna, 1:133)

Cleaning was now a significant part of the classroom schedule. This was not just the regular wipe-down of the tables, as noted by Anna,

We would have to look at what you might say about proper procedures and things to do, cleaning, basic clean toys, and all the rooms had to be kept very clean. Turned on fans to blow air out of the classroom. Some would hire professional cleaners to come in and put some kind of fog cleaner out. We ask them to wipe off tables and toys at the end of the day even though they know to do that anyway, especially with the cleaner that kills the virus, you know.

Grant funding was adjusted so programs could buy thermometers, spray cleaners, sinks for the classroom (for handwashing), and more cleaning supplies. The state provided masks for staff, children, and teachers to support proper hygiene and offset the cost for schools and parents.

Once sites reopened, there were various expectations that different sites asked the employees of the ADECE to wear masks, use hand sanitizer, and stay at a safe distance if they came to their building or visited the classroom, which is a significant part of many of the early educational leaders' jobs to ensure implementation of teaching, learning, assistance, and monitoring. Some of Dacia's and Emily's sites, as mandated through the Department of Human Resources (DHR), had to be opened so that essential workers would have access to childcare. Visiting the center took on a different method as they navigated the transition of meeting in person. Darcia states,

And that was difficult. Because, you know, yeah, we, you know, this center may say this childcare center may say, yes, you can come to my parking lot. Yes, I will come out to the door, and we'll speak and all this stuff. Lots of them would not let us in the center, and some would, though. (7:17)

While the guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) may have seemed excessive or difficult to implement, these measures were crucial in ensuring the safe return of both students and educators to a normal educational routine. As some continued with this protocol beyond the CDC timeline, educational leaders learned to comply on an individual basis as a form of respect, as indicated by Gabby,

I did learn something our RD told us, and I still believe it, we are visitors in these schools, and these daycares, and these Head Starts. If they ask you to put a daggum mask on, put it on, if you just out of respect and the relationship that you have with these directors and teachers is imperative. (21:30)

Education leaders had to remain flexible and address the evolving needs of students, staff, and families to ensure a safe and equitable learning environment. Adapting to the challenges of the pandemic while ensuring adherence to CDC guidelines was crucial for effective educational leadership during these difficult times.

Theme 2: Essential Partnerships. The WHO and the CDC are the two systems that guide our nation's risks, health, and safety. It is important to note that other organizations were either in correspondence with the ADECE or in a partnership that collaborated with the department to enforce regulations. This highlights the importance of working with various stakeholders to ensure that children receive the best possible care and education, especially during times of crisis. This involves building strong relationships and working effectively with public school officials, social service agencies, and other entities to meet the diverse needs of students. By collaborating with external organizations, educational institutions can provide additional resources and support that may not be available within their institutions. Collaboration

with external organizations and resources is critical in ensuring students receive the support they need to thrive academically and personally.

The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education has developed partnerships with other programs to better serve young children through their families by implementing programs that start at birth and maintain education and assistance. Janice, who serves as a regional director, assisted in laying out the foundation of what programs coincide with the ADECE, such as DHR, Head Start, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership, Home Visitation, Challenging Behaviors Program, Children's Policy Council, The Dolly Parton Imagination Library. While each program is uniquely different, they all serve in some capacity to assure the health and well-being of babies, young children, and their families.

Education leaders and teachers were left wondering who to listen to during the pandemic, as the partnerships were interrelated. As shared by Dacia,

I mean, we would go back and forth through ADECE and DHR, as did the coaches and monitors that were working at that time too. I mean, they would send down stuff to us weekly and say, Okay, you can do this, but you can't do this. We're going to do this, but don't do this. And whatever those CDC guidelines that the country was going through, we would get the department's version of what they expected. (13:21)

This continued through the pandemic. Because it was all new and issues would evolve daily, they would discuss issues daily as they tried to transition back to providing services. One leader of ADECE would write down the staff's questions and then meet with DHR, as noted by Dacia,

What we would do, we would get, and we would bring our concerns that didn't match up between both departments. And we would just literally send them up and say, Can y'all have a conversation? And then, of course, we have an admin team meeting every week that Suzy Q did with us, and we still do that with someone else now, you know. But we do that. And so we made sure we brought those things to the table. And that we would come to an agreement between the two. (26:00)

Working in public schools and deciding how to interact and develop a plan was also difficult. Anna states,

We always have to say, I would have to find out because it was changing daily for us as well because you are hearing so many different things, but most of all, our privates they had it all and abide by DHR and whatever the government was saying do, that was first, you know, and then the school system, every district, we just told them to go by their district policies because it even though we would say there's no online platform at this time if you're not face to face, but it started slacking off (COVID) some systems came back, and some systems stayed closed, you know, and we can't control that, you know. And so they were, they were worried about, you know, trying to do what we said we should do. And trying to figure out what other districts were going to do what the DHR said to do. And it was just, it was a very confusing time. (1:122)

Eventually, the ADECE determined that following their local school system or DHR guidelines would be best for the teachers. This would lessen the stress of uncertainty and encourage the safety of all those involved.

Theme 3: Alternate Methods of Instruction. Once it was definite that schools were not going back in session the ADEC, like other education systems, began looking at alternatives for young learners to learn from home. Alternate methods of instruction provide the ability to explore and implement creative approaches to teaching and learning beyond traditional methods. Thus, new techniques and adaptation became a focus to address the needs of Alabama's pre-k students, who now needed to be met at home. The ADECE worked to implement and create new approaches that cater to diverse learning styles and address the needs of all students. Michelle states,

You know, we still expected our teachers to teach and to provide developmentally appropriate activities. But I think my focus was also to make this a fun and happy time for these children. I have time for these parents to understand that we don't know what they're going through. (20:30)

The ADECE believes developmentally appropriate practices are generated through personal interactions, communication, and play. While providing writing opportunities and worksheets are not excluded from the program, it is preferred that students learn in various ways through peer interaction, problem-solving in real-life situations, and self-regulation. In the preschool environment, the ADECE recognizes that the teacher can facilitate an environment that assists in providing these activities for preschoolers through play and various interactive activities. So, meeting on a virtual platform allowed educators to meet with their students and parents to generate a makeshift small group or whole group time. For example, as Anna states,

They also let them make bags to carry home. Like, we had a little bag with some counting cubes, construction paper, scissors, colors, markers, and all kinds of little things.

So, a kid was sent home with supplies to use at home. The teacher was supposed to send that home with them, and then when she would do a Zoom whenever she would say takeout counting cubes, and then she would do a small group one one-on-one with them. (1:147)

Information to assist families with the transition was created on the virtual platform. Also, as Janice shares, "We did a blueprint for our programs; it was, I think it was called a home instruction manual (18:41)." The main educational platform that the ADECE uses in pre-k is Teaching Strategies and Teaching Strategies GOLD which also includes an app for parent's cell phones. According to Janice, with the adjustment of having to provide home instruction,

One of the things is, that's when we got a lot of our support through Teaching Strategies, they were doing more the parent piece, where we could assign things to parents for the parents to do, and upgrade what we were doing with Teaching Strategies, and using all those components of it. (22:25)

This also offered teachers with another means of communication between the parent and the student.

Research Question 3

What are the most influential approaches to the policies that can be reestablished within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education system to improve outcomes for children and families, based on examining the procedures maintained since the pandemic?

The pandemic brought about exceptional changes in how early childhood education was delivered in Alabama, with many established procedures being put on hold during school closures. As society gradually moves towards a return to normalcy, it is essential to assess which

approaches to education will be most effective in this evolving context and the influential approaches to reestablish quality.

As the COVID-19 threat slowly began to subside, educational leaders had to consider how to assist in reopening schools and daycares as stay-at-home orders were lifted in phases. With new restrictions in place, the educational setting had to be modified to mitigate the threat of the virus. This involved altering teaching methods, classroom setups, and student engagement to comply with the guidelines that were in place. These changes were necessary until the overall threat of the pandemic hopefully diminished. Although policies and procedures were important, they were not the sole focus. The primary goal was to provide an educational space that cared for students and provided optimal learning experiences, support for educators and parents, and an environment that promoted growth and learning. The themes discussed in this context provide insight into the process of reestablishing various classrooms through a crisis.

Theme 1: Restart/ Re-Engage. When the pandemic occurred in March 2020, everything had to pause. Then, there was a brief moment to regroup and implement new practices to maintain the early childhood program's framework for distance education, but there was also the need to open some private centers so that the essential workers had a safe place for their children to go since they were in demand to still go to work. As indicated in Dacia's statement,

Well, childcare didn't really close. So they could take care of the essential workers' children. I guess that would make daycare workers essential workers also. So, while the department was shut down and public schools were closed, we were the first people to actually get back out in the field. Yes, mid to late May. (5:38)

Reinitiating in a time of uncertainty posed its problems. Dealing with the fear of getting the virus was apparent in how care workers interacted with the children. Dacia observed,

We would see infants not being held due to the fear factor in the childcare, caregiver in childcare, they're scared, they're getting COVID. So they would hold babies away from them, they would hold a baby's turn from them, they would keep them in containers [playpens] and walkers and those little bouncy seats and things. And they would do as little contact as possible, especially with infants and toddlers. And that, you know, is not okay. (12:10)

In a situation like this, educational leaders had to come in and provide guidance and reassurance to the teachers.

We really had to work through that. We actually worked with some directors of "goodness of fit," that's a term we use in, you know, B - three, really, and the B - five, like, is the teacher and the child, is it a "goodness of fit," and we work with them to support them to move some teachers with older children, because they didn't want to pick up the younger children, you know, an infant to rock them or anything or even to give them a bottle. (Dacia, 12:25)

The educational environment is inherently high-stakes. Educators are entrusted with the well-being and development of children, a responsibility that can weigh heavily on their shoulders. From a parental perspective, the act of entrusting a child to an educator represents a significant act of faith. This dynamic necessitates the management of a complex web of human emotions, including concerns for student safety, fostering a student's emotional well-being, and navigating the pressures as schools restarted in the fall of 2020. As Cheri stated,

But it's the human element; we can't take the human element out of what we do; when that goes away, you're doomed for failure. And that was one of the reasons I think COVID was such a chaotic experience because it really affected the human factor.

(24:24)

Reinitiating in the fall of 2020 did not prove to be any easier as pre-K across Alabama restarted with Alabama's public school systems. Although the ADECE attempted to restart as the pandemic subsided, attendance in pre-k's across the United States had declined from 61% [Fall 2019] to 8% [Spring 2020] (Barnett & Jung, 2023). While these numbers reflect only pre-k, they indicate how daycares were functioning. Francis noted,

Yeah, I think of mine. Like 2-3 shut down because they just couldn't financially make it. A lot. A lot of businesses had issues, especially the smaller childcares, which said they couldn't make it because they only had a few kids coming at a time because it was only essential workers. So if your parents weren't nurses, doctors, or grocers, they were all home and didn't need childcare. And they weren't allowed to send their kids, only essential workers, because their kids were away for a little while. If there's a childcare center who didn't have children of those who were essential workers, and they had stay-at-home moms or other types of moms. They had their families. They didn't have enough students to support the caregivers and, therefore, didn't survive, unfortunately. (16:29)

Theme 2: Alterations to Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines. The ADECE is known for its initiative to meet NIEER quality Benchmarks and has based its policies on its framework. Because they believe that high-quality early learning programs ensure student success by adhering to state-approved early learning standards, utilizing developmentally appropriate

curriculum supports, requiring teachers to hold at minimum a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or child development, with auxiliary teachers completing at least 9 hours of early childhood education (ECE) coursework or a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, maintaining a student attendance rate of 18 or higher, conducting regular health screenings for students, implementing structured classroom observations to monitor teaching effectiveness, and providing ongoing professional development opportunities for all staff (see Table 4).

Table 4

NIEER Quality Benchmarks/OSR Readiness Recommendations

Quality Indicators	Office of School Readiness Recommendations	Adaptations Made During COVID	Currently Resumed
Early Learning and Development Standards	Alabama Standards for Early Learning and Development (ASELDs)	None	Yes
Lead Teacher Degree	Lead teacher must have a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education or Child Development, at minimum	Provisions made for waivers	Provisions pending
Lead Teacher Specialized Training	Lead teacher must have specialized training in early childhood field	Provisions made for waivers	Provisions pending
Auxiliary Teacher Degree	Auxiliary teacher must have a Child Development Associate credential (CDA) or equivalent of 9 hours of approved coursework in child development, at minimum.	Provisions made for waivers	Provisions pending
Professional Development, coaching, individualize plans for lead and auxiliary teachers	Lead teacher must have at least 30 hours yearly in-service professional development and training; auxiliary teacher must have at least 20 hours yearly in-service professional development and training; Twelve of the hours will be earned through required participation in the Early Childhood Education Conference	Trainings were moved to 100% online during 2020-2022	F2F is Preferred but Online Versions are still an option
Maximum Class Size	Maximum number of children per classroom must be 20 or fewer; recommended number is 18	Classroom sizes varied considerably in locations.	Improving
Staff/Child Ratio	Lowest acceptable ratio of staff to children in classroom must be 1:9 1:10 is permissible only for Head Start classrooms	None	Yes
Screenings and Referrals	Provide physical, vision, hearing, and dental screenings and referrals and at least one additional support service to families; the Ages and Stages Questionnaire 3 (ASQ-3) developmental screener and the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschool, 2 nd Edition (DECA-P2) are also completed for each child	Provisions were made	Yes
Supports for Curriculum Implementation	First Class Pre-K classrooms will implement the Alabama First Class Pre-K Framework, which consists of the Alabama Standards for Early Learning and Development, First Class Program Guidelines, First Class Classroom Guidelines, the ASQ-3 Developmental Screener and the Teaching Strategies™ GOLD® Assessment. Classroom guidance and support will be provided by Region Coaches.	Initially provided virtually but resumed with caution fall 2020	Yes
Continuous Quality Improvement System	Site visits and monitoring will be provided by Region Monitors to ensure continuous quality and compliance. A Learning Environment Checklist (LEC) and other assessments are administered to ensure the program is meeting children's needs and high-quality standards.	Initially provided virtually; resumed fall 2020	Yes

Note: Table 4 is adapted from First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines. (n.d.). Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, p. 4. <https://children.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2022-2023-Program-Guidelines.pdf>

While Alabama met The NIEER benchmarks established at the beginning of the 2019-2020 fiscal year, adjustments were made to ensure that assessments and conferences with parents were completed. Policies did not stop, but as indicated in Table 4, alterations were made to ease the stress of the effects of COVID-19 in the following year as students returned and teachers had very little control over daily schedules, changes in how students could interact, rules about student absences, and attempts to mitigate illnesses.

Each program that has received a grant to offer pre-k services is given a set of *First Class Pre-K –Program Guidelines*. These guidelines ensure that the program adheres to the NIEER quality benchmarks and the policies of the ADECE, providing a high-quality and equitable program for students aged 4-5. The following narratives are examples of procedures that had to be altered due to the effects of COVID-19 and how education leaders perceived the changes. Changes were made in the hiring of teachers. Janice notes,

COVID did affect that fact. We lost some teachers to retirement, you know, the pandemic, so we had to make some adjustments. And I think we're still feeling the effects of our waiver process because, at one time, we did experience a great loss with our teachers. (23:12)

Lead teachers must have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, early childhood development, or an early childhood special education degree (TS 1.3 Education Requirements). Auxiliary teachers must have either a Child Development Associate credential (CDA), have completed at least nine credit hours of college coursework in Early Childhood Education or Child Development from an accredited institution, or have a high school diploma (TS 2.2 *Employment Requirements*. *First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines*, n.d.). The

lead teacher credential waiver makes allowances for educators who do not have an early childhood degree but have completed a bachelor's degree and are willing to take nine hours of early childhood coursework. Auxiliary teacher waivers must prove they are in a CDA course in early childhood education. Prior to the pandemic, waivers were not as prevalent as they have been in the past three years.

As noted on the quality indicators, FCPK will screen children for vision, hearing, physical, and dental screening. Often, sites that do not have a nurse on staff will have a nurse or doctor come in to provide health screening, but as the 2020-2021 school year started, this became an issue, as mentioned by Gabby,

I didn't know what my job was, much less how to help a pre-K teacher or director follow our guidelines during that time. This continued until the fall of 2020, when we're telling them they've got to have health screenings. That meant I got to find somebody to come in and do health screenings, but nobody wanted to come to the schools to do the health screenings because of COVID. (22:00)

These complications affected attendance due to illness; changes to attendance policies were made if students were out beyond the mandated amount and students were allowed to stay in the program. Before COVID, if a student had excessive absences, after accessing, discussing, and appraising the situation with OSR if appropriate, the student was unenrolled from the program (CF 3.2, *Chronic Attendance Issues*. First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, n.d.). However, as Anna points out, this was not the case during the pandemic: "We tried to keep some normalcy in the classroom just to keep their schedule going. You know, we didn't

count, of course, against them when they were sent home for COVID. We wouldn't count their absences" (1:158).

Schools also struggle to maintain the required days for instruction and professional development. As Francis notes, when trying to complete visits, the visit would often have to be canceled, "The classroom has to close because this teacher has COVID, and let's try to listen to them and kind of work with them. I mean, there were so many times when they'd have two classrooms closed with COVID or a couple of teachers were out (15:41)." Because of the multitude of instances that Francis described, the usual requirement of having one hundred and eighty days of classroom instruction during the 2020-2021 school year was waived (*PA 4.1 Instruction Time and Number of Days*. First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, n.d.). Some school sites had to close temporarily when multiple COVID cases were reported, so students were not required to complete the usual number of days in the classroom.

Best practices required in the classroom guidelines pertaining to the class environment, which promotes social skills and self-regulation, had to be changed. Most centers involve children interacting with one another, so center time had to be altered so toys were not cross-contaminated. While all students and teachers had to wear masks, that was not enough to ensure the spread of germs. Social distancing was encouraged but nearly impossible with young children. However, teachers did what they could to change the way center time occurred so that children would not choose the center they wanted, but teachers would bring toys to the children so they could play. Abby explains how her teachers have devised inventive ways to change their procedures to comply with the suggested safety protocols.

Well, we work on a lot in small groups, closeness, and engagement. So in whole group, they always come to the rug, and instead of all sitting together, she kind of spaced them

out to place them all so they weren't so close and tried to separate by moving to the corners or a certain taped-out space, you know, for the kind of seating and try, try, try, to stop them from being so touchy feeling and, some didn't let them go to centers at all like, they, would put toys on each table, instead of centers because their district policies.

The FCPK program guidelines prioritize parental involvement as a crucial component for success (*CF 2 Parent/ Family Engagement Expectations*. First Class Pre-K – Early Program Guidelines, n.d.). Cultivating family partnerships within the classroom is essential for fostering the growth and development of each child. Due to the pandemic, outside visitors were not permitted to enter the classroom during the 2020-2021 school year. As a result, parent activities once held within the classroom were adapted for family hours at home.

Open house is really what I'm referring to. They didn't have a September beginning of the school open house. I do know parties were limited. Visitors to programs were not allowed. I think that holds true. So, there were no parents or visitors in the classrooms. They didn't see. I do remember they have a lot of parents who said they had not even seen their child's pre-k room or their kindergarten room because we weren't allowed in the classroom. (Michelle, 27:28)

Despite some ongoing changes, the educational sector is gradually adapting to the new COVID-19 reality by implementing measures to mitigate the spread of the virus. As a result, we are witnessing a shift towards a different kind of standard in the educational landscape, with students and educators learning to navigate this unprecedented situation and resume their academic activities safely and effectively.

Sub Theme 3: Reestablishment of Policies and Procedures. Since March 2020, COVID-19 has changed and evolved as society has adjusted to it. Many things were modified for

safety's sake, but as educational leaders reflect and move past the pandemic and can see the effects in hindsight, it is time to let go of the altered practices due to the necessity to reestablish the policies and procedures that make the ADECE a high-quality program. Many factors have made educational leaders realize the importance of the policies, and they would like to see a return to maintain the program's quality.

Classroom visits with coaches and monitors. And that was suspended, you know, during that time, but that has also resumed, adjustments, you know, one of the policies, you know, that no, making sure that programs did the daily schedule, according to our guidelines, were adjusted at a time, but now we suspended that. We're wanting programs to go back to fully operating the 6.5 hour day, assuring that the children are in centers, and a small group and all of that. And so I'm trying to think of any direct things that affected the staff. (Janice, 47:41)

Once educators returned to the classroom, educational leaders noticed a difference in their teachers' emotional state, which also directly affected the children. Returning to the classroom was not an easy task with new regulations (that were still changing occasionally), students wearing masks, and the COVID had not subsided. This was also reflected in the practices in the classroom, as mentioned by Emily,

A lot of my directors are principals of the school. And on the grand scheme of things, what kind of instruction I'm getting in pre-K was like, at the bottom of the list, you know, so I just saw a lot of abandonment of teaching and abandonment of responsibilities. And as far as I could tell, they all picked it back up. (Emily, 14:42)

The ability to return to the classroom has proven to be a preferred method in preschool. The following policies that were altered have pretty much returned to normal. Mandated

procedures that benefit the students, such as health screenings, parent involvement, and instructional days, are back to the standard. Attendance is still a factor, but COVID has made educational leaders, directors, and teachers more aware of the necessity of the influence of illness on the classroom community. As pointed out by Anna,

I think teachers are more keen when a child is sick when they're, you know, I think when they sneeze, they may attend more, you know they will automatically go walk by them kind of feel them see if they're a little bit warm, you know, did you take some medicine? You know, just kind of be checking on those kinds of things and send them to the nurse and, you know, nipped in the bud pretty quick because, you know, back before COVID. You know we weren't so scared. Your okay. Let's just carry on, you know, but now everyone is more cautious that might say of sickness, and you know if you have a fever, you know they are not going coming back to school for 24 hours. (1:137)

The ability to provide quality services through coaching and monitoring, which is a significant factor in providing education and guidance directly within the site's confines, has also resumed. Hilary states it best, "currently, I'm back to coaching. I'm in the classroom hands-on and involved with my teachers. It's a better place to be in" (8:45).

While there are some things, such as the current teacher shortage or attendance, there are still issues all schools face. Overall, the ADECE educational leaders have provided in their narratives that the pandemic was disruptive and altered the state of education. It has taught us all resilience and lessons to learn should an event ever happen again.

One theme that could not stand alone because it was present in the various themes of adaptation, alterations to guidelines, and health was the conscious nature. Each educational leader said they learned to be patient, flexible, provide grace, and listen.

I think the major lesson I learned is flexibility, being able to access what is needed at that time, being able to accept that, you know, this might be temporary, or this might be something that needs to be long term. But I think that one of the major things I learned during the pandemic, with our policies and procedures, was that, first of all, I think that we had some good policies in place, which allowed us, and they were flexible enough to allow us to be flexible in some areas. And I think that was one of the things that some of our policies, but then some of our policies really needed to be reviewed because we went back. Now, we had to look at some of the policies that were put in place temporarily to meet those needs. And people, it was hard to make the shift. Yes. It is still a hardship. Some people still haven't shifted (as she laughs). (Janice, 29:43)

Education leadership is an important factor in any educational establishment. Following policies and procedures is an investment we create to develop a functional organization. These policies have helped the program stay aligned and grow exponentially. However, as stated by Janice, "Procedures are only as good as the implementation of them as well" (3:10). While we all have a job to do, at the end of the day, it is providing a safe place for students to come to daily and learn without fear.

A Collective Voice for Educational Leadership

This theme does not have a research question but has an overreaching theme that pertains to the afterthoughts of how future educational leaders could prepare for another crisis. Although each question sparked discussions among participants, the final inquiry is a theme unto itself: "When reflecting on your experiences from the pandemic, what information would you share with other educational leaders should such an event occur again?" This question could have fit into some of the broader themes of the study, but it warranted its own attention. Educational

leadership is a multifaceted, profoundly personal undertaking that demands both a personal and professional investment. While not an outlier, it remained within the realms of how the pandemic shaped the participants' outlook on their role as an education leader and their suggestions should such a crisis occur again. The responses received provided valuable guidance for investigation.

After analyzing the data, it was found that the collective voice of the participants revolved around three main themes. The participants desired normalcy for the children, indicating that returning to the classroom would have been more beneficial than canceling school altogether. The second theme was related to devising a substantial plan for future crises, indicating that the participants believed in being well-prepared within the ADECE for potential crises. Lastly, the third theme was focused on the mental health of all stakeholders involved, highlighting the need to provide support and address the mental well-being of those within their organization.

Theme 1: Minimize Academic Interruption. It is easy to say what we would do once an event is over, so it was indispensable to get the perspective of what the AECE education leaders would like to pass on as future leaders outside the realm of panic and uncertainty during a crisis event, such as the pandemic. During the interview, Anna and Michelle had referred to the disruption to students' schedules and academics more than once. So, their final thoughts led to the need to remain in school (not at the initial state) because throughout the pandemic, the world around us resumed, but face-to-face education stopped. Anna notes,

I think we needed to get back to some normalcy. It didn't matter what we did. But then the next pandemic, or the next whatever, it may be totally different. And I do think that we leaned on it a little too long [by delaying the reopening of school]. Yeah, excluding that first month, which was just everyone in a smooth panic. (Anna, 1:144)

And Michelle in agreement,

If I were a leader who had any control, I would encourage you to keep the schools open. I would say keep them open, period, but I do know that the ones that need to be quarantined, quarantine those, those that have not been exposed, I don't think you should quarantine shutdown. I just didn't believe in the shutdown. I don't think it was as effective as they thought. I think that research is going to show that in a few years, if not already, they will go ahead and keep the schools open. (Michelle, 9:90)

Theme 2: Strategic Planning. Planning for a crisis during COVID-19 proved challenging due to the many obstacles that arose. However, by examining the various issues the education system struggled to cope with, educational leaders can ensure a more effective and responsive education system, even in the face of unforeseen difficulties. Beth emphasized that the curriculum does not have to be complex for young children. Instead, children would benefit more by engaging with their families, and it does not require extensive resources.

I wish that my teachers had more regard with implementing hands-on activities and giving resources to their families... doing something that would be more meaningful like, then some kind of unpurposeful, unmeaningful worksheet. In my opinion, and I mean, you know, giving them, like, just everyday tasks that are meaningful to engage with their children. Yeah, like, helping set the table, count how many people are in your family, count how many windows are in your house, sort socks, sort clothes, you know, do things around the house, nothing with that would really that you would need some grand supplies for or a lot of time for, but just everyday activities like for families to engage with their own child? That might be, you know, [parents] didn't have that information or they didn't know those things really are so valuable. (2:21)

Inconsistency in educational systems posed a problem for early childhood educational leaders because the Department of Education implemented guidelines while DHR implemented another guideline for private schools. Meanwhile, the ADECE was trying to implement what they felt was the most significant with each facility. Which often caused changes and confusion among directors, educators, parents, and children, as noted by Emily,

Well, obviously, they need to have a plan in place for how they're going to do it. And I know that the State Department and the superintendents all had a plan in place, but pre-K sometimes falls through the cracks because not all the pre-K's are at public schools. In fact, there's a lot that isn't. And not all of them, do the school systems really even pay attention to, so there really needs to be a program, I mean, a plan in place, and the teachers need to be trained. (5:63)

Gabby also felt that communication and collaboration would be more beneficial if the department shared the responsibility of planning.

I think that if it ever happened again, it needs to be the time that we sit down and say, Okay, these are the things as a department we were about to start working on. We're going to divvy you up into groups, and you're going to help work on this with us. So, in other words, not just the RDs and the people in Montgomery, but we as monitors and coaches, are a part of some kind of committee that decided they wanted to change the program guidelines. Okay, they've decided they want to revamp the budgets. These people in the field are going to help us work on this because, ultimately, when you go back out, you're the ones that are going to be handling this new change.

Theme 3: The Oxygen Mask Principle and Beyond. One of the crucial lessons learned during the pandemic is the necessity of self-care for educators, highlighting that a healthy workforce is essential for effectively supporting others. Cheri states,

The main thing I learned, and I can share with others, is that you can't help people if you're sick yourself. So you have to use some common sense, and follow protocols to keep yourself healthy. And do what is right to keep yourself healthy. So you can do your job and be effective. Even with the pandemic and all the craziness that ensued, you still have a job to do. But you have to remember, these are people. They're going through things. They're experiencing things in a different way from you. They have different life experiences from you. So you have to know how to talk to people, and not at people, because there's a difference. (3:33)

Hilary reinforces this notion, "Remember to prioritize our cause, which would be children, and I feel like the mental health of our teachers" (11:51) and Janice underscores the need for realistic plans and strong support systems, ensuring the wellbeing of all staff members.

I think one of the things is developing a strong plan that is actually able to be implemented, doesn't overreach, doesn't have expectations that are not, you know, feasible during a time of crisis. And also, being supportive of those around you, and ensuring that they are okay, doing these things, because sometimes we focus a lot of attention on ensuring that our teachers are okay but do we focus enough time on the ADECE staff are and make sure they are okay. I think one of the major things in leadership is realizing who your people are and what their needs are. And during a pandemic, or any crisis like that, is being aware of those things, being flexible, and knowing enough to respect those things. (40:45)

Francis simply states that a leader's effectiveness is to "be flexible and compassionate, and maybe if you get a windfall, just be more transparent. This is just going to be temporary. This isn't going to be a permanent thing" (6:60) and Dacia reminds future leaders of the importance of self-care, echoing the "oxygen mask metaphor"- the necessity of taking care of oneself before being able to help others effectively.

I think that I would share that take a breath. Know that flexibility is the key. And then be open to trying things a different way. And the biggest one is what I teach. And we share. We use this on our team with teachers every day: put the oxygen mask on yourself first and take care of yourself a little bit because you can't help others until you do that. Right. [You] got to make sure that you're okay before you can help others and take that time to do that. (4:102)

Through these shared experiences, educators gained valuable insights into leadership, resilience, and the importance of prioritizing well-being during a crisis.

In chapter five, I discuss the three conceptual educational leadership theories and how the analysis of the narratives generated by the ten ADECE educational leaders interviewed and pinpoint the most successful practices that emerged during the pandemic. Additionally, I discuss how these theories can be adapted for future early education leadership practices in crises.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In response to the unprecedented challenges faced by the education system, this research study examined the perceptions of the experiences of early childhood educational leaders at the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE) before, during, and following the nationwide shutdown in 2020. During uncertainty and change, these educational leaders demonstrated remarkable resilience. Participating in qualitative interviews, the leadership team at ADECE provided valuable insights into the implications of the pandemic for their leadership practices. The primary focus of the research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of the pandemic on the leadership approaches adopted by early childhood education leaders and investigate the outcomes of the crisis imposed on those under the guidance of these leaders.

The participants from the ADECE were purposely selected using criterion sampling. By focusing on the selected group of early childhood educational leaders, the study aimed to gain their lived experiences as education leaders on how the pandemic impacted their organization and the various methods they developed to care for their stakeholders. The narrative inquiry approach was chosen to capture comprehensive and insightful viewpoints on leadership within early education (Suri, 2011). This method was particularly effective in gathering input from a carefully selected group of educational leaders affiliated with ADECE, which oversees a majority of Alabama's early childhood programs and the diverse programs they support.

The ADECE participants who volunteered to participate answered questions through semi-structured interviews. The interviews consisted of a series of open-ended

questions that focused on their educational leadership perspective. The interviews were recorded and transcribed into AUBox and video and audio recordings were deleted. The transcriptions were written without identifying data, and pseudonyms were applied to protect the participants' identities. The transcriptions were downloaded into Atlas.ti and coded through various cycles before developing into themes. Following iterative cycles of data coding, the identified codes were subjected to cross-analysis alongside the guiding research questions. This process facilitated the extraction of the most salient themes within the data. This chapter delves into a nuanced interpretation of the identified themes, drawing connections between the findings and the established conceptual framework, which then critically compares the results with the extant literature. Finally, the chapter identifies the broader implications of this research and proposes recommendations for future studies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the education system, advancing to uncharted territory as educational leaders have been forced to navigate the situation without established guidelines during exigent circumstances. The process of educational leadership needs to be a collective effort and interactive within the organization. Several themes identify the relationship between the changes in educational leadership practices due to the pandemic and the impact of those changes is discussed in detail. The following is an overview of the findings.

Research Question 1

In what ways do early childhood education leaders describe how COVID-19 impacted their leadership practices?

The impact of the pandemic crisis provided a catalyst for education leaders to internalize qualities

that made it necessary to become someone who provided support and guidance to those with whom they worked within their organization.

Adaptation

During the initial stages of the COVID-19 crisis, educational leaders were faced with a situation requiring them to possess leadership qualities that they did not recognize within themselves prior to the pandemic. The need to adapt quickly and process information became apparent as they assessed the different needs amongst their constituents. The longevity of the pandemic forced education leaders to reevaluate their methods and look for ways to handle the changes at hand. As a result, they identified the need for swift adaptation to navigate the crisis successfully. Eight out of ten of those interviewed referred to the importance of maintaining the ability to be flexible and adapt to the ever changing landscape of information, guidelines, and precautions they faced when dealing with the onset of COVID-19 throughout the next school year.

Effective Communication

The findings further underscored the critical role of communication as a leadership skill subject to adaptation. This emphasis on communication stemmed from the need for leaders to conduct precise situational assessments and provide clear direction to their followers. The provisions that were made daily had to be assessed by the ADECE and then relayed to the regional teams, who could then discuss them with directors and teachers. All ten participants shared the various levels and types of communication that had to be utilized because of the assorted types of information that had to be discussed and confirmed to provide pertinent information. Janice states, "They [ADECE] wanted us to remain in contact with our teams every day. So, we had to set up a time every day to meet with our teams and then [meet online] periodically and also correspondence through emails."

Support

During the interviews with the ten educational leaders, it was highlighted that providing care to their staff was a challenging task. Balancing the responsibilities of parenting, work, and emotional support was discussed, and nine out of the ten leaders emphasized the need to prioritize and support their team members within their region.

Collaboration

Collaboration at varying levels became an essential strategy for education leaders, whether within the department, "I mean, they could call me at any time, they still can, that's who we are, we're very connected, and we work as a team, and as a family, we have created that family environment on our team. (Dacia, 4:93)." Collaborate with the directors and teachers, "We communicated through telephone calls and emails. I try not to text directors and teachers because I want a more concrete record of my communications than a text. They know if they needed something, they could call me (Emily, 5:47). Collaborate with other early childhood organizations," If we had a question within our department [ADECE] or with DHR, what we would do is take it to them and discuss it. Then we would come back with a happy medium, like, this works in this situation (Dacia, 4:103)." Collaboration with everyone was the key to improving a difficult situation and an attempt to work as a team during an isolating crisis.

Research Question 2

What methods were formulated to fulfill the ADECE policies and procedures from the onset of the pandemic?

During the pandemic, health and safety were the top priorities in every decision made by

educational leaders. This included the well-being of everyone involved, including students, teachers, and staff. To ensure safety, leaders continually revisited CDC guidelines when implementing new methods.

Essential Partnerships

Participants emphasized the importance of communication and collaboration with various interconnected systems through the ADECE. These partnerships proved to be crucial in shaping procedures and safety protocols during the crisis. Early childhood educators faced daily challenges as they navigated frequently changing health guidelines. To streamline guidance and reduce stress, ADECE eventually encouraged programs to adopt the guidelines of their local school systems or DHR. The pandemic reaffirmed the power of collaboration with various systems that work alongside the ADECE. Building strong relationships with diverse stakeholders, including public school officials and social service agencies, allows early childhood programs to access a wider range of resources and address the complex needs of students.

Alternate Methods of Instruction

As a result, alternative methods of instruction were developed during the last few months of the 2020 school year. These methods were implemented to keep students safe and engaged by learning at home. Teachers provided virtual instruction, and ADECE sent home backpacks filled with manipulatives, books, and school supplies to help parents support their children's learning. As one coach said, "I encouraged them when they did their virtual lessons to limit it to 20 or 30 minutes just like we would do a small group lesson or large group lesson, into work on focusing on interacting" (Michelle, 9:92).

Research Question 3

What are the most influential approaches to the policies that can be reestablished within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education system to improve outcomes for children and families, based on examining the procedures maintained since the pandemic?

Flexibility with Guidelines

Findings indicated that alterations to the guidelines and the program's setup had to be adjusted to provide students, teachers, and parents with a safe environment. Even though schools and daycares were back in session, the need for limited contact was pertinent to reestablishing the school day. Masks were an essential part of the restart, as well as limited contact. Fear also significantly affected how staff, parents, and students behaved. While the threat had lessened, many had either underlying issues themselves, loved ones whom they had to protect due to immunity issues, or just carried the knowledge of the complications that the virus could cause.

Due to the severity of the threat and the need to mitigate the virus, guidelines had to be altered or stopped due to restricted access for visitors, limited contact, and the need for health and safety protocols. This study determined that the policies were not stopped but modified or temporarily suspended due to COVID. Nine of the ten participants shared scenarios of what they could recall of the procedures implemented to ensure safety protocols.

Flexibility with Funding

Health supplies became a new important priority and moved to the forefront of budgeting items because cleaning supplies, disinfecting every inch of the classroom area, masks, and extra devices such as thermometers became highly significant. As mentioned

by Anna when she stated, "We would have to look at what you might say about proper procedures and things to do, cleaning, basic clean toys, and all the rooms had to be kept very clean" (1:118).

Flexibility with Procedures

The findings underscored the critical requirement for leaders to possess adaptability when navigating the application of ADECE guidelines. Regulations before COVID requested that classrooms maintain specific procedures, such as health screenings, required in the ADECE guidelines. Nevertheless, as Gabby mentioned, "nobody wanted to come to the schools to do the health screenings because of COVID" (7:69). Such regulations had to be suspended due to the inability to find medical personnel to provide screenings. Other policies, such as the requirement of eighteen students in each pre-k classroom and the attendance policies, were also suspended due to various scenarios such as illness, exposure, and fear. Michelle notes, "Obviously, there was lower enrollment at some sites. Some parents just chose not to send their child, but the site was not required to take them off the role" (9:82). While the guidelines were altered during the initial impact of COVID-19 and the first year of reengagement in the classroom, most of the procedures have been reinstated. However, the department is still trying to assess what other guidelines have not returned to their prior pandemic status. As Janet mentioned,

I do think that quality, what we have done and what we do overall, has been negatively impacted by the pandemic. I think we are not back to understanding that the bar is high. Right now, we are in that phase, and we're gradually moving back into the phase [of improvement], (10:88)

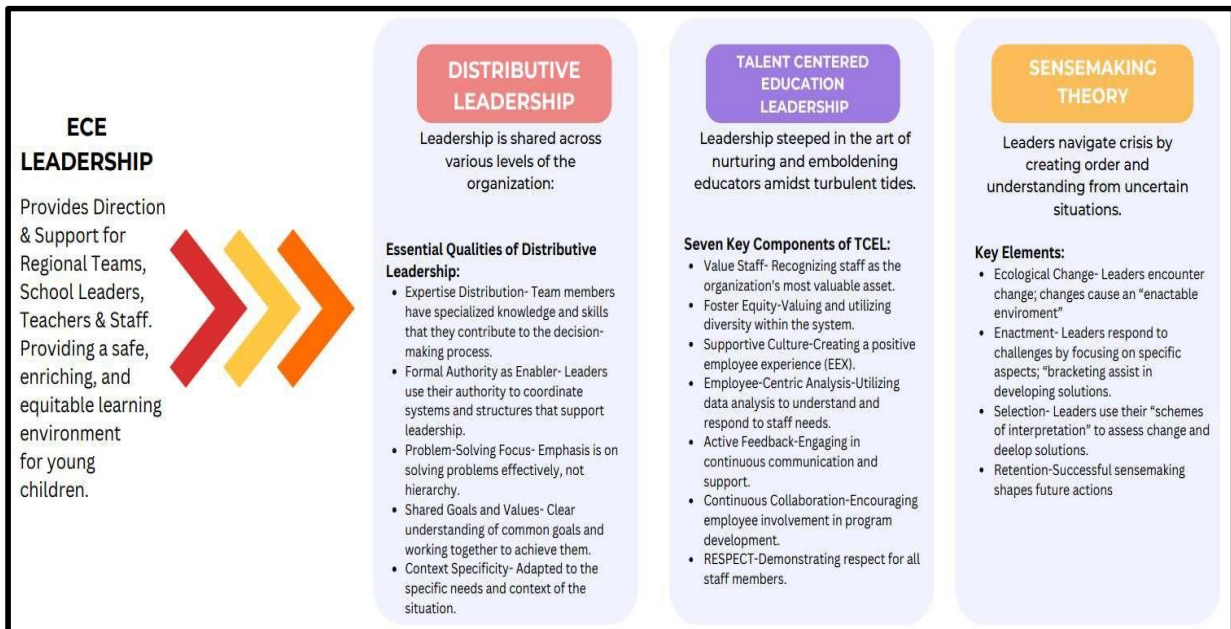
Although the ADECE has maintained all ten NIEER Quality Standards for the last eighteen years with the amelioration of the pandemic to pre-pandemic conditions, the ADECE has refocused its efforts on developing high-quality programs (G. Maiola, press release, April 18, 2024). This renewed emphasis aims to reestablish the necessity of adhering to policies and procedures. By prioritizing these protocols, ADECE strives to ensure the well-being of program participants and solidify its position as a national model for early childhood education.

The Conceptual Framework Revisited

Education leadership within the early childhood setting had to take a different capacity when adapting to a crisis. The frameworks explored through the early childhood education paradigm were distributive leadership, talent-centered leadership, and sensemaking theory. The selection of these three categories aligns with the fundamental principles of early childhood education (ECE) and acknowledges the diverse leadership structures found across early childhood settings. These structures can vary depending on the setting's type and can be modified to the situation.

Figure 5

Leading Through Uncertainty: Three Leadership Styles



Note: The information for distributive leadership is from Spillane et al., 2004 and Spillane, 2005. The information for talent-centered education leadership is from Tran, 2022 and Tran and Jenkins, 2022. The information for sensemaking theory is from Weick, 1979 and Weick et al., 2005.

Figure 5 identifies three leadership theories used to identify essential leadership qualities: distributive leadership, talent-centered leadership, and sensemaking theory. These theories highlight how leaders can parlay information during a crisis and provide collaboration, support, and guidance to those they work with within their organization. The findings of the ADECE study reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced educational leaders to navigate uncharted territory without established policies or guidelines. The process of ECE leadership needs to be a collective effort and interactive within the organization. The impact of the pandemic crisis provided a catalyst for education leaders to internalize qualities that made it necessary to become someone who provided support and

guidance to those with whom they worked within their organization.

Distributive Leadership Theory

According to Spillane et al. (2001), distributive leadership involves more than just sharing experiences and promoting employee collaboration. It leverages specific qualities to empower a broader range of individuals. One key aspect is where team members with specialized knowledge contribute their skills to the decision-making process. This dismantles the traditional notion of leadership solely residing in a formal position. Influencing beyond position empowers anyone with valuable insights to shape decisions. Formal leaders, still play a crucial role, but they function as someone who does not hold the centralized power but coordinate the process with their staff (Spillane, 2005). Their authority is used to create systems and structures that support this distributed approach. The focus is not on individual recognition or rigid hierarchies but on problem-solving and ensuring the most effective solutions are found. This is achieved through a foundation of shared goals and values, where the team is united in its purpose and works collaboratively. Continuous learning is also emphasized, ensuring everyone involved has the opportunity to develop their skills. The implementation of distributed leadership will vary based on specific contexts and unique needs (Spillane et al., 2001). Strong leadership is essential for high-quality ECE programs. While traditional leadership models often focus on a single leader, research suggests that a distributed leadership approach is more effective in ECE settings (Aubrey et al., 2013). This is because ECE programs have diverse needs that require leadership expertise from various stakeholders (Heikka & Hujala, 2013)

Distributed leadership recognizes that leadership can exist at different levels within an ECE organization. Regional teams provide leadership by ensuring grants and funding

reach individual centers along with professional guidance. Center directors lead the school staff, while teachers directly impact students through pedagogical practices. Each member of the ADECE staff plays a leadership role, contributing to the overall quality of education for the children.

This collaborative approach fosters a rich learning environment built on mutual respect and shared ideas (Ahem & Loh, 2021; MacBeath, 2005). Leaders empower staff members by trusting them to contribute and participate in decision-making (Spillane et al., 2004). This improves staff relationships and overall school culture and allows educators to develop their leadership skills (Macbeth, 2005).

The research based on the perspectives of the ADECE suggests that the pandemic forced educational leaders to adopt a more distributive leadership style. Eight out of ten leaders emphasized the need for swift adaptation. This involved processing information quickly, assessing diverse needs, and constantly revising strategies. The focus shifted from individual leadership to a collaborative effort, leveraging expertise within the organization (Macbeth, 2005). Leaders also reported using various communication methods to keep staff, parents, and other stakeholders informed. Coordinating systems also emerged as a critical strategy, with leaders working together within departments, regional teams, and other early childhood programs (Spillane, 2005).

Talent-Centered Education Leadership

Successful organizations prioritize strategies that cultivate a thriving workforce, and this begins by recognizing staff as the organization's most valuable asset. This translates to fostering a culture of equity where diversity is valued. Creating a positive employee experience (EEX) through a supportive culture is crucial. Data analysis becomes

a powerful tool in this approach through employee-centric analysis to understand and address staff needs. Active feedback fosters continuous communication and support, while continuous collaboration encourages employee involvement in program development. At the heart of these practices lies respect for all staff members, fostering a work environment where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute. By implementing these strategies, organizations can cultivate a dedicated and high-performing workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of supporting educators' well-being. Traditional leadership models often prioritize student needs at the expense of teachers. Talent-Centered Education Leadership (TCEL) offers a different approach. TCEL emphasizes an "employee-centered" philosophy, prioritizing teacher needs and experiences (Tran, 2022). This translates into several key practices: recognizing teachers as the organization's most valuable asset, valuing diversity within the staff, and personalizing the work environment to meet individual needs (Tran & Jenkins, 2022).

By focusing on employee experience (EEX), TCEL fosters a positive work culture where personnel feel valued and supported. Data collection and ongoing conversations ensure employees' needs are informed in leadership decisions. This collaborative approach strengthens staff engagement and ultimately leads to a more stable and productive learning environment, even during times of crisis.

In the interviews with ADECE leaders all participants stressed the need for clear and frequent communication across all levels. Leaders facilitated communication between ADECE, regional teams, directors, teachers, and parents. This ensured that everyone had the information needed to navigate the changing landscape. Supporting the staff's wellbeing emerged as a critical leadership function during this time. Nine out of ten

leaders emphasized prioritizing the needs of their team members as they were dealing with balancing work, parenting, and emotional wellbeing. This aligns with talent-centered leadership, where leaders nurture and support the constituents within their organization. The study highlights the importance of communication, recognition, fostering equity, and collaboration during the crisis (Tran & Jenkins, 2022). All ten participants emphasized the need for clear and consistent communication across different levels which aligns with TCEL but with further research is this theory compatible within a larger organization such as the ADECE.

While TCEL appears well-suited for school settings with close teacher interaction, its applicability to larger organizations like ADECE requires further consideration. This makes it more challenging to assign roles solely based on individual strengths; a key element of TCEL. Additionally, during a crisis, rapid decision-making is crucial, leaving limited time for extensive research and discovery. Therefore, while TCEL offers valuable insights, its direct implementation within ADECE may need adaptation. Further research could explore how TCEL principles can be effectively integrated into a distributed leadership model, particularly during times of crisis.

Sensemaking Theory

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique crisis for educational leaders. Sudden school closures and rapidly changing policies created a situation of high consequence, threatening core educational goals (COVID-19 and Student Performance, Equity, and U.S. Education Policy, n.d.). This aligns with Weick's definition of a crisis: disruptive events that challenge an organization's fundamental objectives (Weick, 1988).

In such situations, leaders grapple with the tension between taking action amidst

uncertainty and remaining inactive, which can lead to confusion (Weick, 1988).

Sensemaking theory is designed to navigate this tension. In his sensemaking framework, Weick (1979) identifies four fundamental elements: ecological change, enactment, selection, and retention, each of which plays a critical role in the leader's decision-making process (Weick et al., 1979). Ecological changes can take many forms in educational settings, from new policies to budget shifts. Leaders engage in enactment by focusing on specific aspects of these changes, such as analyzing data or gathering staff input. Selection involves drawing upon past experiences to interpret the change and create cause maps that explain its potential impact (Weick et al., 2005;).

Sensemaking theory examines the immediate situation, and changes are based on reacting to the environment rather than relying solely on leadership's relationship with the personnel. This approach is more top-down, with leaders encountering, responding, assessing, and developing changes based on the success of certain methods in a particular environment. It is more mechanical than personal, focusing on retaining successful methods rather than considering the human element.

Previous Research Surrounding the Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrust ECE supervisors into a leadership role demanding a new approach. Support strategies, like well-defined plans, open communication, and programs promoting mental and physical well-being, have become essential to recognize their resilience and dedication (Balasubramani & Fernandes, 2022). The study's themes define the impact of leadership practices, which caused early childhood education leaders to learn to adapt to crisis situations as they occurred. Because

the pandemic was unprecedented, there was a constant, everchanging flow of information that had to be deciphered amongst leadership that continually was changing (Neilson-Hewett, 2022). As mentioned by the education leaders interviewed and stated by Dirani (2020), "continuous learning and adjustment of responses are necessary [in leadership]."

Effective communication was imperative during the initial stages of the COVID-19 crisis and throughout each subsequent level of change and progression in every affected community. Dirani (2020) noted that successful leaders like Jacinda Ardern, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, were exemplified by her ability to keep their nation informed, "This level of clarity and frequent communication provides comfort in otherwise uncomfortable times, as a leader provides information instead of leaving a vacuum for others to fill with potentially false information" (p. 386). During the interviews, education leaders at ADECE indicated how effective communication helped to provide clarity, alignment, conformity, and mental well-being for those within their organization.

Communication paired with compassion was also a valuable leadership skill that staff and stakeholders needed during the pandemic. During a crisis, employees need "connection rather than correction" (Balasubramani & Fernandes, 2022, p. 6). ADECE leaders mentioned that COVID-19 was a problematic time laden with fear and uncertainty. In times of crisis, leaders must be in tune with those they work with and listen to develop a more vital organization through trust (Dirani, 2020; Spillane et al., 2004; Tran & Jenkins, 2022).

Collaboration was also imperative during the pandemic. With continual change, there was a need to figure out varying situations in how to adapt to the changes in communication, alterations to curriculum, student health, student engagement, parent needs, and so much more. ADECE leaders had to look at each level and collaborate with each employee and constituent at

some level to determine the needs of their site and staff. To better understand each level of the organization during a disruptive change such as COVID-19, educational leaders need to collaborate with the varying systems that make up an organization to run effectively and assess each element of change within the organization (Balasubramani & Fernandes, 2022; Kaul et al., 2020).

Alterations to instructional practices, attendance, and procedure changes were also inevitable during the pandemic, and the rebuilding process has been slow. A transparent leadership model has been proven through literature that there is a need to balance decision-making in authority, established rules, and expectations to influence an organization's readiness for crisis (Decman et al., 2021). It is important to remember that these factors only have a positive impact if they align with the organization's objectives.

Implications for Practice

As the pandemic moves further into the past, so do the thoughts, recollections, and memories of the events that occurred during the following year. As indicated by those I interviewed, it was also a difficult time for many, and the idea of revisiting the chain of events that occurred reminds us of memories that may be riddled with loss, illness, financial insecurities, and stress. Nevertheless, a crisis is not a planned event. As defined by Meriam Webster online dictionary (2023), it is "an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending is widely regarded as a crisis due to its significant impact on illness and death" ("Definition of Crisis," 3a). During this time of rebuilding and returning to a post-pandemic normal, I suggest a substantial plan be built upon what we know.

As indicated through the stories told through the interviews of the ADECE

leaders, fear and uncertainty drove a plethora of emotions as they tried to navigate through the various positions in which they worked. Using the narratives the ECE leaders shared, educational leaders should take the time to reflect and use these stories to build a leadership plan that would assist should another crisis occur.

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to educational leadership. However, ADECE leadership has indicated the need for a framework based on adaptation, empathy, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking. Distributive Leadership emphasizes a leader's sensitivity to the people involved and highlights key qualities like authenticity, embracing complexity, and fostering a shared purpose where educational leaders can participate and learn (Heikka & Hujala, 2013). Distributive leadership goes beyond information sharing and collaboration. It empowers individuals with specialized knowledge to contribute to decision-making, fostering a collaborative environment focused on problem-solving and shared goals. It is also sustainable within the confines of the organization's daily routine; thus, if the method is in place, then the crisis plan should be an easier transition to add to the needs of those during a crisis.

Implications for Future Research

The current study, focusing on the First Class Pre-Kindergarten Department (FCPK) within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE), provided valuable insights into a specific program within a larger organization. However, the research also identified opportunities for future investigations that could broaden our understanding of early childhood education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The existence of the Birth to Five Initiative and collaborations with Early Head Start and Head Start Alabama suggest a more comprehensive approach to early childhood

education within ADECE. Future research could explore these programs' structure, practices, and pandemic experiences to gain a holistic understanding of ADECE's response to the crisis. Comparing and contrasting these programs with the FCPK could reveal valuable insights into how ADECE tailors its services to different age groups and funding sources.

The current study focused on the FCPK department's perceptions. Future research could benefit from a multi-programmatic approach, including interviews and analyses of Early Head Start, Head Start, and Birth to Five Initiative personnel. This broader investigation could reveal variations in pandemic experiences across different programs and funding streams, providing a richer picture of the challenges and adaptations within ADECE.

The research identified a potential difference in oversight between public and private FCPK sites, with public schools working with Local Education Agencies (LEA) and private sites collaborating with the Department of Human Resources (DHR). Future research could explore these discrepancies through interviews and analyses of administrators and educators in both settings. This investigation could yield valuable insights into how school culture, leadership styles, and varying departmental policies influenced the implementation of pandemic practices and the overall experiences of educators and children.

Future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of early childhood education during the pandemic by addressing these areas. Examining multiple programs within ADECE and investigating the experiences of different stakeholders across public and private settings will provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators

working to improve early childhood education systems in the face of future challenges.

Significance

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the ADECE. School closures necessitated the suspension of established procedures, prompting a reevaluation of effective pedagogical approaches within this evolving context. As restrictions eased and schools reopened, the ADECE prioritized the reestablishment of a quality program while maintaining adherence to its NIEER quality benchmarks.

As indicated by the narratives of the ADECE leaders the reopening of schools and daycares necessitated adaptations to minimize viral transmission. Teaching methodologies, classroom layouts, and student engagement strategies were strategically modified to comply with the newly established safety guidelines. While these changes were essential, they presented unforeseen challenges. Maintaining mandated attendance levels proved difficult due to illness-related absences, and implementing crucial procedures like regular health screenings and professional development became more complex. Furthermore, fostering social skills and self-regulation through traditional interactive play practices had to be reconsidered in light of social distancing requirements.

However, a return to in-person learning has yielded a return to normalcy and some positive unintended consequences. While specific adaptations remain, core policies surrounding health screenings, parent involvement, and instructional days have primarily reverted to pre-pandemic standards. Notably, the pandemic has heightened awareness of the importance of these policies in fostering a high-quality ECE program.

The alterations implemented due to the pandemic have also served as catalysts for innovation. New methods for professional development support, facilitated through various

platforms, have emerged to enhance curriculum implementation. The need for increased parental engagement in their child's learning has also become more apparent. Most importantly, the crisis has underscored the crucial role of fostering social skills in student development and well-being, prompting a reevaluation of program structures to nurture these skills more effectively.

This study also employed a literature review to examine three educational theories relevant to the research question. They are not the only leadership theories that deal with crisis leadership, crisis education leadership, or early childhood education leadership. In this research study, the three theories fit the landscape of early education leadership and the many qualities and varying systems that work with the ADECE. Talent-centered education leadership focuses on leveraging the expertise of the staff to identify areas that need improvement and empower those with the most knowledge to take action (Tran, 2022). After interviewing participants and analyzing their perceptions, it does have value in the fact that it is employee-centered, thus enhancing the focus on employee strengths to build a better plan, which was an important focus during the pandemic but fell short of the need for leaders to coordinate systems for practices.

Distributive leadership offers a compelling framework for early childhood education leadership, particularly in the face of challenges that demand adaptability, collaboration, communication, and compassion. In comparison, distributive leadership does share similarities with TCEL in that the distributive leadership theory dismantles traditional leadership hierarchies and promotes shared decision-making across the team. Team members with specialized knowledge and skills are empowered to contribute to decision-making, ensuring a more comprehensive range of expertise informs crucial

choices (Spillane, 2004). Distributive leadership also fosters a collaborative environment where influence extends beyond formal positions. The leader acts as an enabler, coordinating systems and structures that empower team members to contribute effectively (Spillane, 2005).

Problem-solving takes center stage, focusing on collective action to find the most effective solutions, not adherence to rigid hierarchies. Shared goals and values become the foundation for collaboration, uniting the team towards a common purpose. Continuous learning is also emphasized, ensuring everyone involved has the opportunity to develop their skills and contribute meaningfully.

The adaptability inherent in distributive leadership makes it particularly well-suited for early childhood education's dynamic and often unpredictable environment. By fostering collaboration, communication, and a compassionate approach that prioritizes the well-being of both staff and children, distributive leadership empowers ECE leaders to navigate challenges and build resilience.

The abrupt shift to online work and isolation during the pandemic highlighted the critical need for responsive leadership within the Early Childhood Education (ECE) system. Research based on the perceptions of ADECE leaders underscores this point. Effective leadership during such upheaval demanded flexibility and compassion. Leaders needed to be attentive to the health and well-being of their constituents while simultaneously managing the constant flow of new information and its impact on daily operations.

This reality challenges the sole applicability of sensemaking theory, which emphasizes environmental cues and reactive leadership. Sensemaking often adopts a top-

down approach. Leaders encounter a situation, respond, assess its effectiveness, and then implement changes based solely on environmental factors (Weick et al., 2005). However, the ADECE research suggests a more nuanced approach. Effective leadership in the ECE system hinges on distributive and talent-centered models. These models prioritize the needs and strengths of the people involved in the daily workings of the system.

Distributive leadership empowers individuals to share decision-making, while talent-centered leadership focuses on fostering and utilizing the unique abilities of each member. By prioritizing human connection and building upon existing strengths, leadership in the ECE system can foster a more resilient and adaptable environment during times of change.

Our nation's challenges in March 2020 will forever reflect the pivotal change for many, whether it was personnel or within the organization. While many will reflect on what was difficult, some will look at that time as an opportunity to incorporate change. This research study chose to look at both and determine what can be done to develop a better organization based on the narratives of others. While this only represents a small portion of a larger organization, the stories lead to a complex story of empathy and change, which has developed a formidable, more valuable workforce that knows the complexities of a crisis as they navigate the unforeseeable outcome as the crisis of the pandemic unfolded.

Conclusion

This research study focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a significant reevaluation of ECE delivery methods in Alabama's FCPK programs. While policies never ceased, established procedures related to the policies were suspended during widespread school closures, prompting educators to explore new approaches within this evolving context. As

restrictions eased and schools reopened, a key focus for educational leaders became the reestablishment of quality ECE organization while ensuring adherence to safety protocols. This involved modifying classrooms, teaching styles, and student engagement strategies to comply with newly implemented guidelines. These adaptations, while necessary to mitigate viral spread, served as a reminder that fostering a nurturing and supportive learning environment for students, educators, and parents remains paramount.

The insights shared by ADECE leaders on their experiences during the pandemic offer valuable guidance for future crisis preparedness and leadership practices. They believed that returning to in-person instruction, whenever possible, was crucial for student well-being and learning. They emphasized the need for comprehensive crisis planning that involves collaboration with various stakeholders and clear communication across different early childhood education settings. A core theme that emerged was the importance of prioritizing self-care for educators and staff. The participants recognized that mental health support is crucial for everyone involved in the education system, as a healthy workforce is essential for effectively supporting children. These insights provide a valuable framework for building a more responsive and sustainable ECE system moving forward.

Listening to the narratives of the ADECE leaders also gain insight on how the COVID-19 crisis compromised traditional educational models, thus demanding a new approach to leadership. The ADECE which was accustomed to traditional leadership methods had to adapt to a more collaborative style. Previously, leadership roles were assigned mainly by position, with staff not typically seen as leaders themselves. The pandemic disrupted this notion. Regardless of position, everyone played a critical role in the sudden shift to remote learning, prioritizing safety, and continued education. This crisis revealed a wealth of

leadership potential throughout the educational system.

ADECE embraced a collective approach, recognizing individual strengths and encouraging staff to step into leadership roles. This shift required a change in mindset that acknowledged leadership skills existed beyond traditional positions of authority. By building a network of leaders, the ADECE organization was better equipped to identify problems, strategize solutions, and navigate the uncharted territory of remote learning. This approach ensured the safety of students and staff while maintaining the continuity of education.

In line with the research objectives the conceptual framework of three leadership theories were chosen due to the types of leadership theories they proposed that align with ECE methods. Distributed leadership emphasizes delegating leadership tasks across various organizational members, fostering a collaborative environment (Heikka & Hujala, 2013). Talent-centered educational leadership is an employee-centric approach that prioritizes emotional well-being and respect for staff expertise. It recognizes staff's insights in navigating educational needs while promoting their well-being (Tran et al., 2020). Sensemaking Theory emphasizes the importance of crisis assessment, focused analysis, and leveraging past knowledge to create meaning. These methods are crucial for effective leadership and driving positive change during challenging situations (Weick, 1979). While each theoretical approach had qualities that can be useful in times of crisis, the Distributive Leadership approach aligned to the needs of adapting to the changes and procedural needs during the COVID-19 pandemic within the ADECE organization. Its emphasis on shared decision-making and collaboration can help create a more responsive and sustainable leadership style during a crisis and in normal times.

It is impressive to see how the education leaders at ADECE demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges and utilized qualitative interviews to provide valuable insights into the implications of the pandemic for their leadership practices. The findings further underscored the critical role of communication as a leadership skill subject to adaptation and the need for swift modifications to navigate the crisis successfully. In conclusion, this crisis has provided invaluable lessons and insights. By critically examining these experiences, we can develop a more robust framework to navigate future disruptions and ensure the continued well-being and education of Alabama's young learners.

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Appendix A

Revised 09/13/2023

AUBURN UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM (HRPP)

1

EXEMPT REVIEW APPLICATION

For assistance, contact: **The Office of Research Compliance (ORC)**

Phone: 334-844-5966 E-Mail: IRBAdmin@auburn.edu Web Address: <http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohe>

Submit completed form and supporting materials as one PDF through the [IRB Submission Page](#)

1. Project Identification

Today's Date: **October 24, 2023**

Anticipated start date of the project: **November 1, 2023** Anticipated duration of project: **1 Year**

- a. **Project Title:** *Dissertation- Alabama Early Childhood Education Leadership: COVID-19, Where Did the Impact Leave Us?*

- b. **Principal Investigator (PI): Katherine Martin** Degree(s): Bachelor's Degree-Early Childhood Education; Master's Degree: Early Childhood Education; Education Specialist Degree-Early Childhood Education
Rank/Title: Graduate Student Department/School: Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology
Role/responsibilities in this project: **Lead Researcher**
Preferred Phone Number: **(334)400-6247** AU Email: kjh0049@auburn.edu

Faculty Advisor Principal Investigator (if applicable): Dr. Lisa Kensler

Rank/Title: Professor Department/School: Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology
Role/responsibilities in this project: **dissertation chair and data analysis support**
Preferred Phone Number: **(334)844-3020** AU Email: lak0008@auburn.edu

Department Head: William Murrah Department/School: Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology
Preferred Phone Number: **(334)844-3806** AU Email: wmm0017@auburn.edu
Role/responsibilities in this project: *Click or tap here to enter text.*

- c. **Project Key Personnel** – Identify all key personnel who will be involved with the conduct of the research and describe their role in the project. Role may include design, recruitment, consent process, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. ([To determine key personnel, see decision tree](#)). Exempt determinations are made by individual institutions; reliance on other institutions for exempt determination is not feasible. Non-AU personnel conducting exempt research activities must obtain approval from the IRB at their home institution.

Key personnel are required to maintain human subjects training through [CITI](#). Please provide documentation of completed CITI training, with course title(s) and expiration date(s) shown. As a reminder, both IRB and RCR modules are required for all key study personnel.

Name: Katherine Martin Degree(s): **Bachelor's Degree-Early Childhood Education; Master's Degree: Early Childhood Education; Education Specialist Degree-Early Childhood Education**
Rank/Title: Graduate Student Department/School: Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology

Role/responsibilities in this project: **Lead Researcher**

- AU affiliated? Yes No If no, name of home institution: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel? [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Do you have any known competing financial interests, personal relationships, or other interests that could have influence or appear to have influence on the work conducted in this project? Yes No
- If yes, briefly describe the potential or real conflict of interest: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Completed required CITI training? Yes No If NO, complete the appropriate [CITI basic course](#) and update the revised Exempt Application form.

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from
11/27/2023 to
Protocol # 23-

Revised 09/13/2023

- If YES, choose course(s) the researcher has completed: Refresher Course 5/18/2026
Human Sciences Basic Course 10/29/2026

Name: Dr. Lisa Kensler **Degree(s):** B.S. in Biology, M.S. in Biology, S.E.C. in Biology/Life Sciences, Ed.D. in Education Leadership
Rank/Title: Professor **Department/School:** Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology

Role/responsibilities in this project: dissertation chair and data analysis support

- AU affiliated? Yes No If no, name of home institution: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel? [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Do you have any known competing financial interests, personal relationships, or other interests that could have influence or appear to have influence on the work conducted in this project? Yes No
- If yes, briefly describe the potential or real conflict of interest: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Completed required CITI training? Yes No If NO, complete the appropriate [CITI basic course](#) and update the revised EXEMPT application form.
- If YES, choose course(s) the researcher has completed: Human Sciences Basic Course [Choose a course](#) [Expiration Date](#)

Name: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#) **Degree(s):** [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
Rank/Title: [Choose Rank/Title](#) **Department/School:** [Choose Department/School](#)

Role/responsibilities in this project: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

- AU affiliated? Yes No If no, name of home institution: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Plan for IRB approval for non-AU affiliated personnel? [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Do you have any known competing financial interests, personal relationships, or other interests that could have influence or appear to have influence on the work conducted in this project? Yes No
- If yes, briefly describe the potential or real conflict of interest: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)
- Completed required CITI training? Yes No If NO, complete the appropriate [CITI basic course](#) and update the revised EXEMPT application form.
- If YES, choose course(s) the researcher has completed: [Choose a course](#) [Expiration Date](#)

d. Funding Source – Is this project funded by the investigator(s)? Yes No

Is this project funded by AU? Yes No If YES, identify source [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

Is this project funded by an external sponsor? Yes No If YES, provide name of sponsor, type of sponsor (governmental, non-profit, corporate, other), and an identification number for the award.

Name: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#) Type: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#) Grant #: [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

e. List other AU IRB-approved research projects and/or IRB approvals from other institutions that are associated with this project. Describe the association between this project and the listed project(s):
N/A

2. Project Summary

a. Does the study TARGET any special populations? Answer YES or NO to all.

- Minors (under 18 years of age; if minor participants, at least 2 adults must be present during all research procedures that include the minors) Yes No
- Auburn University Students Yes No
- Pregnant women, fetuses, or any products of conception Yes No

Revised 09/13/2023

- Prisoners or wards (unless incidental, not allowed for Exempt research) Yes No
- Temporarily or permanently impaired Yes No
- b. Does the research pose more than minimal risk to participants?** Yes No
If YES, to question 2.b, then the research activity is NOT eligible for EXEMPT review. Minimal risk means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research is not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. 42 CFR 46.102(i)
- c. Does the study involve any of the following?** *If YES to any of the questions in item 2.c, then the research activity is NOT eligible for EXEMPT review.*
- Procedures subject to FDA regulations (drugs, devices, etc.) Yes No
- Use of school records of identifiable students or information from instructors about specific students. Yes No
- Protected health or medical information when there is a direct or indirect link which could identify the participant. Yes No
- Collection of sensitive aspects of the participant's own behavior, such as illegal conduct, drug use, sexual behavior or alcohol use. Yes No
- d. Does the study include deception? Requires limited review by the IRB*** Yes No

3. MARK the category or categories below that describe the proposed research. Note the IRB Reviewer will make the final determination of the eligible category or categories.

- 1.** Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices. The research is not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn or assessment of educators providing instruction. 104(d)(1)
- 2.** Research only includes interactions involving educational tests, surveys, interviews, public observation if at least ONE of the following criteria. (The research includes data collection only; may include visual or auditory recording; may NOT include intervention and only includes interactions). **Mark the applicable sub-category below (I, II, or III). 104(d)(2)**
- (I)** Recorded information cannot readily identify the participant (directly or indirectly/ linked);
OR
 - surveys and interviews: no children;
 - educational tests or observation of public behavior: can only include children when investigators do not participate in activities being observed.
- (II)** Any disclosures of responses outside would not reasonably place participant at risk; **OR**
- (III)** Information is recorded with identifiers or code linked to identifiers and IRB conducts limited review; no children. **Requires limited review by the IRB.***
- 3.** Research involving Benign Behavioral Interventions (BBI)** through verbal, written responses including data entry or audiovisual recording from adult subjects who prospectively agree and ONE of the following criteria is met. (This research does not include children and does not include medical interventions. Research cannot have deception unless the participant prospectively agrees that they will be unaware of or misled regarding the nature and purpose of the research) **Mark the applicable sub-category below (A, B, or C).** 104(d)(3)(i)

Revised 09/13/2023

- (A) Recorded information cannot readily identify the subject (directly or indirectly/ linked); **OR**
- (B) Any disclosure of responses outside of the research would not reasonably place subject at risk;
OR
- (C) Information is recorded with identifies and cannot have deception unless participants prospectively agree.
Requires limited review by the IRB.*
- 4. Secondary research for which consent is not required: use of identifiable information or identifiable bio-specimen that have been or will be collected for some other 'primary' or 'initial' activity, if one of the following criteria is met. Allows retrospective and prospective secondary use. **Mark the applicable sub-category below (I, II, III, or IV).** 104 (d)(4)
 - (I) Bio-specimens or information are publicly available;
 - (II) Information recorded so subject cannot readily be identified, directly or indirectly/linked investigator does not contact subjects and will not re-identify the subjects; **OR**
 - (III) Collection and analysis involving investigators use of identifiable health information when us is regulated by HIPAA "health care operations" or "research" or "public health activities and purposes" (does not include bio-specimens (only PHI and requires federal guidance on how to apply); **OR**
 - (IV) Research information collected by or on behalf of federal government using government generated or collected information obtained for non-research activities.
- 5. Research and demonstration projects which are supported by a federal agency/department AND designed to study and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine: (i) public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or service under those programs. (must be posted on a federal web site). 104.5(d)(5) (must be posted on a federal web site)
- 6. Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives and consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The research does not involve prisoners as participants. 104(d)(6)

*Limited IRB review – the IRB Chair or designated IRB reviewer reviews the protocol to ensure adequate provisions are in place to protect privacy and confidentiality.

**Category 3 – Benign Behavioral Interventions (BBI) must be brief in duration, painless/harmless, not physically invasive, not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on participants, and it is unlikely participants will find the interventions offensive or embarrassing.

*** Exemption categories 7 and 8 require broad consent. The AU IRB has determined the regulatory requirements for legally effective broad consent are not feasible within the current institutional infrastructure. EXEMPT categories 7 and 8 will not be implemented at this time.

4. Describe the proposed research including who does what, when, where, how, and for how long, etc.

Revised 09/13/2023

a. Purpose

This research proposes to analyze educational leadership practices implemented by the educational leaders at the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Identifying the methods that were put in place to maintain the ADECE policies and utilize the lessons learned from educational leaders.

b. Participant population, including the number of participants and the rationale for determining number of participants to recruit and enroll. Note if the study enrolls minor participants, describe the process to ensure more than 1 adult is present during all research procedures which include the minor.
This study will include adult participants who work within the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE). To develop thorough collective insight into the purpose of the study, the minimum number of participants will be within the range of minimum five and the maximum of ten.

c. Recruitment process. Address whether recruitment includes communications/interactions between study staff and potential participants in person or online. *Submit a copy of all recruitment materials.*
Upon receiving permission from the Secretary of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, an online request will be sent to educational leaders who have collaborated with ADECE in the last five years. The purpose of this request is to gain insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from employees' perspectives. The emails prepared for recruitment are submitted in the downloads for required documentation (#11).

d. Consent process including how information is presented to participants, etc.

After receiving communication from interested personnel via email, the researcher will communicate with them through emails, text messages, or telephone conversations to discuss the interview protocol. Before the interview, a copy of the consent letter will be emailed to the participant. If the interview is in person, the participant will be given a personal copy of the consent form. Once the participant signs and consents to the interview, the interview will be scheduled, with the understanding that the participant can stop or retract the interview at any point. The interview process will be discontinued if the participant chooses not to sign the consent form. The consent form is attached to the requested documentation of this form (#11).

e. Research procedures and methodology

This study will use the methodology of qualitative procedures through narrative inquiry to gain a perspective of the ADECE educational leaders interviewed. Interviews used to achieve this perspective will be recorded via Zoom video conferencing or in person, recorded using Zoom audio. Identifying information recorded in Zoom video and audio files will be stored separately from the research data in AU Box, which is password-protected. Transcriptions will be completed within 24 hours to 7 days of the interview. Zoom video and/or audio files will be deleted from AU Box once transcribed. Transcribed information will only include the participant's pseudonym, thereby removing any personal identifiers from the research study.

f. Anticipated time per study exercise/activity and total time if participants complete all study activities.
The interviewing process may take a minimum of thirty minutes and a maximum of one hundred eighty minutes.

g. Location of the research activities.

Interviews will be performed through Zoom video conferencing or in person. In person interviews will be recorded through Zoom audio. In person interviews will be performed in a private location agreed upon by both parties.

h. Costs to and compensation for participants? If participants will be compensated, describe the amount, type, and process to distribute.

There will not be any compensation for participating in this research study.

Revised 09/13/2023

- i. Non-AU locations, site, institutions. *Submit a copy of agreements/IRB approvals.*
Interviews will be performed through video conferencing or in person.
- j. Describe how results of this study will be used (presentation? publication? thesis? dissertation?)
The result of this study will be used to complete my dissertation and may be used in a presentation and/ or publications.
- k. Additional relevant information.
N/A

5. Waivers

Check applicable waivers and describe how the project meets the criteria for the waiver.

- Waiver of Consent (Including existing de-identified data)
- Waiver of Documentation of Consent (Use of Information Letter, rather than consent form requiring signatures)
- Waiver of Parental Permission (in Alabama, 18 years-olds may be considered adults for research purposes)

<https://sites.auburn.edu/admin/orc/irb/IRB 1 Exempt and Expedited/11-113 MR 1104 Hinton Renewal 2021-1.pdf>

- g. Provide the rationale for the waiver request.
N/A

6. Describe the process to select participants/data/specimens. If applicable, include gender, race, and ethnicity of the participant population.

The sample population for this study consists of educational leaders from the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education who are responsible for maintaining the OSR First Class Preschool Program. The targeted sample for this study will include employees who have worked with the ADECE for more than five years and will include individuals from different racial backgrounds and various genders. An email will be sent to the ADECE requesting eligible candidates to reply via email and schedule a video conference interview.

7. Risks and Benefits

7a. Risks - Describe why none of the research procedures would cause a participant either physical or psychological discomfort or be perceived as discomfort above and beyond what the person would experience in daily life (minimal risk).

There are no identifiable risks in participating in this study.

7b. Benefits – Describe whether participants will benefit directly from participating in the study. If yes, describe the benefit. And, describe generalizable benefits resulting from the study.

There are no identifiable benefits in participating in this study.

8. Describe the provisions to maintain confidentiality of data, including collection, transmission, and storage. Identify platforms used to collect and store study data. For EXEMPT research, the AU IRB recommends AU BOX or using an AU issued and encrypted device. If a data collection form will be used, submit a copy.

Participants will be assigned a pseudonym instead of their name to protect their identity. Identifiable information will be kept in a separate file only the researcher can access. The data will be stored in a password-protected software program and only accessible to the researcher. By following these provisions, the confidentiality of participants' data will be maintained throughout the research process.

- g. If applicable, submit a copy of the data management plan or data use agreement.

Revised 09/13/2023

9. Describe the provisions included in the research to protect the privacy interests of participants (e.g., others will not overhear conversations with potential participants, individuals will not be publicly identified or embarrassed).

Participants in the research study will receive informed consent regarding the study and the privacy of the information they provide. They can withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. The privacy of the participants will be ensured during video conferencing, which will be conducted in a secure and private environment. During transcription, anonymity will be maintained to protect the privacy of the participants.

10. Does this research include purchase(s) that involve technology hardware, software or online services?

YES NO

IF YES:

- A. Provide the name of the product and the manufacturer of the product** [Click or tap here to enter text.](#) Scientific Software Development GmbH
- B. Briefly describe use of the product in the proposed human subject's research.**
To ensure compliance with AU's Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility Policy, contact AU IT Vendor Vetting team at vetting@auburn.edu to learn the vendor registration process (prior to completing the purchase).
- C. Include a copy of the documentation of the approval from AU Vetting with the revised submission.**

11. Additional information and/or attachments.

In the space below, provide any additional information you believe may help the IRB review of the proposed research. If attachments are included, list the attachments below. Attachments may include recruitment materials, consent documents, site permissions, IRB approvals from other institutions, data use agreements, data collection form, CITI training documentation, etc.

Consent form, recruitment email, interview questions, copy of table with National Institute of Early Education Research policies aligned with Alabama PreK requirements and benchmarks, and CITI training certification.

Required Signatures (if a student PI is identified in item 1.a, the EXEMPT application must be re-signed and updated at every revision by the student PI and faculty advisor. The signature of the department head is required only on the initial submission of the EXEMPT application, regardless of PI. Staff and faculty PI submissions require the PI signature on all version, the department head signature on the original submission)

Signature of Principal Investigator: Katherine Martin Date: 12/6/2023

Signature of Faculty Advisor (if applicable): [Signature] Date: 12/6/2023

Signature of Dept. Head: [Signature] Date: 12/06/2023

Version Date: 10/31/2023



Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Technology
4036 Haley Center
Auburn University, AL 36849

Dear Dr. Hume,

I kindly request permission to correspond with the educational leaders in your department. The purpose of my outreach is to conduct interviews with individuals who have worked with the ADECE program for five years or longer. The aim of the study is to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational leadership within the ADECE program while adhering to established policies. I (Katherine Martin) am conducting this research as part of my dissertation requirements to receive my Ph.D. under the guidance of Dr. Lisa Kensler (lak0008@auburn.edu) in the Auburn University Department of Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Technology.

The study will involve a one-on-one interview, lasting approximately 90 minutes, conducted remotely via Zoom or a similar video conferencing platform. Participants will be asked about their experiences as educational leaders amidst the pandemic, including the challenges and opportunities they faced, the decisions they made, and the lessons they learned.

Please note that participation in this study is purely voluntary, and individuals may withdraw at any time without consequence. Responses will be treated with utmost confidentiality and will not be linked to any identifying information.

Attached is the IRB Consent Form which will be provided to those that volunteer to participate.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Katherine Martin
Doctoral Candidate
Auburn University
Department of Educational Leadership,
Foundations, and Technology

Email: kjh0049@auburn.edu

Phone: (334)400-6247

Dr. Lisa Kensler at Auburn University (lak0008@auburn.edu).



Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Technology
4036 Haley Center
Auburn University, AL 36849

Dear _____,

My name is Katherine Martin. I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology at Auburn University. I am conducting a dissertation study to better understand how the early childhood educational leaders at ADECE worked through site closures during the 2020 pandemic and, in reflection, what methods were used to maintain the policies. I am writing to invite you to participate in an interview.

I am interested in interviewing individuals who have worked at the ADECE for more than five years. Your experience and expertise in this area would be invaluable to my research.

The interview will be conducted at the participant's discretion, either virtually through Zoom or in person. In-person interviews will be recorded through Zoom audio and performed privately in a location agreed upon by both parties. The duration of the interview is approximately 90 minutes. I will ask about your experiences prior to, during, and following the pandemic-induced closures of 2020. Additionally, I will inquire about any acquired procedures during the pandemic and the current methods being utilized.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and participants can withdraw anytime. All responses will be kept confidential, and your name will not be used in any publications or presentations without your permission. Identifying information recorded in Zoom video and audio files will be stored separately from the research data in AU Box, which is password-protected. Transcriptions will be completed within 24 hours to 7 days of the interview. Zoom video and/or audio files will be deleted from AU Box once transcribed. Transcribed information will only include the participant's pseudonym, thereby removing any personal identifiers from the research study.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please reply to this email with your availability for an interview. I will then send you a scheduling link.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

If you have questions about this study, please contact Katherine Martin at Auburn University (kjh0049@auburn.edu) or Dr. Lisa Kensler at Auburn University (lak0008@auburn.edu).

Sincerely,

Katherine Martin

Email: kjh0049@auburn.edu

Phone: (334)400-6247



INFORMED CONSENT

Perceptions of COVID-19's Effects on Educational Leadership Practices in Alabama's Department of Early Childhood Education

You are invited to participate in a research study to determine the effects COVID-19 pandemic had on the educational leadership in the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education. The study is being conducted by Katherine Martin, under the direction of Dr. Lisa Kensler in the Auburn University Department of Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Technology. You were selected as a possible participant because you are in an educational leadership position within the ADECE and are age 19 or older.

What will be involved if you participate? If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked to respond to interview questions. The interview will be conducted at the your discretion, either virtually through Zoom video conferencing or in person. In-person interviews will be recorded through Zoom audio and performed privately in a location agreed upon by both parties. The duration of the interview is approximately 90 minutes.

Are there any risks or discomforts? There are not any foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? I cannot guarantee any specific benefits.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether to participate or stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University, the Department of Educational Leadership, or the ADECE.

Participant's initials _____

Your privacy will be protected. All responses will be kept confidential, and your name will not be used in any publications or presentations without your permission. Identifying information recorded in Zoom video and audio files will be stored separately from the research data in AU Box, which is password-protected. Transcriptions will be completed within 24 hours to 7 days of the interview. Zoom video and/or audio files will be deleted from AU Box once transcribed. Transcribed information will only include the participant's pseudonym, thereby removing any personal identifiers from the research study.

The Auburn University Institutional
Review Board has approved this
Document for use from
11/27/2023 to
Protocol #

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Participant's signature Date Investigator obtaining consent Date

Printed Name Printed Name

The Auburn University Institutional
Review Board has approved this
Document for use from
11/27/2023 to —

Protocol #

Version Date (date document created): 11/06/2023

Interview Questions



1. Age?
2. What is your position in ADECE?
3. How long have you worked with the ADECE?
4. How would you describe your responsibilities in your current position?
5. Have you been employed in another position within ADECE or elsewhere? If so, can you describe your professional history in more detail?
6. Explain whether your position and responsibilities underwent any changes before, during, or after the COVID-19 outbreak?
7. How long was your office closed during the pandemic?
8. How did you and your colleagues communicate during the pandemic? How often?
9. What protocols were implemented during the COVID-19 shutdown?
10. What new methods were implemented due to the pandemic to maintain policy and procedures? Are these methods still in place?
11. What procedures were suspended during the pandemic? Have they resumed?
12. What lessons did you learn about implementing policies and procedures during a crisis?
13. What were your biggest challenges as an educational leader during the pandemic?
14. How did you work to overcome any challenges?
15. How did the onset of the pandemic and the resulting changes affect your staff, directors, teachers, and students?
16. How did you adapt your leadership style to meet the needs of your staff, children, and families during the pandemic?



17. When reflecting on your experiences from pandemic, what information would you share with other educational leaders should such an event occur again?

Note: Figure 1 will be given to the interview participants to clarify what department policies I refer to in the interview questions.

Figure 1

Policy	AL PRE-K Requirements	Benchmark
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Early learning & Developmental Standards •Curriculum supports •Teacher degree •Teacher specialized training •Assistant teacher degree •Staff professional development •Maximum class size •Staff-child ratio •Screening & referral •Continuous quality improvement system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Comprehensive, aligned, supported,culturally sensitive •Approval process & supports •BA •ECE,CDA,ECE SpEd •CDA or 9 ECE/CD credits •30 hrs./year(teachers); 20 hrs./year (assistants); PD plans; coaching •20 (4-year-olds) •1:10 (4 year-olds) •Vision, hearing, health, & more •Structured classroom observations; data use for program improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Comprehensive, aligned, supported,culturally sensitive •Approval process & supports •BA •Specializing in pre-K •CDA or equivalent •For teachers & assistance: At least 15 hrs./year; individual PD plans; coaching •20 (4-year-olds) •1:10 or better •Vision, hearing, health screenings; & referral •Structured classroom observations; data use for program improvement

Figure 1 is reprinted from “The State of Preschool 2018-2022: State Preschool Yearbook. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research,” by Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Garver, K. A., Hodges, K. S., Weisenfeld, G. G. & DiCrecchio, N., 2018-2022, pp. 34, 36, 46, 51, 55, New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.