District Gifted Education Coordinators’ Leadership Roles and Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
Gifted education coordinators play critical roles in administration and supervision of gifted education and accelerated learning programs in their districts. However, these roles are ill-defined in the literature. During the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders have been called upon to support educators and administrators in a variety of ways. This exploratory study sought to investigate the experiences of district gifted education coordinators during the first year of the pandemic. Qualitative data were collected from a national sample of 11 district gifted education coordinators through semi-structured interviews. An inductive thematic analysis revealed four categories that addressed their roles during this period: (a) professional responsibilities, (b) instructional leadership, (c) program management, and (d) communication and collaboration. The overarching theme across all interviews was the rapid need to pivot and adapt to constant change to ensure equitable access to advanced instruction. Implications for administrators of gifted education programs and areas for future study are addressed.

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to transition from face-to-face instruction to virtual learning environments practically overnight. Students and educators across the United States left for spring break in 2020 and many did not return to their buildings for the rest of the year. During this period of unexpected disruption, educators were thrust quickly and with little or no preparation into virtual classrooms as remote instruction was implemented. School systems worldwide were not widely prepared for this rapid shift to emergency remote instruction (Kong, 2020; Patrick et al., 2021). District and school administrators faced unique challenges during this transition, including how to ensure access for both faculty and students to necessary technology devices, software, and adequate internet service (Cardullo et al., 2021). Concerns over inequities in technology access for students and educators and the widening of achievement gaps particularly among students in poverty were raised (Gross & Opalka, 2020; Patrick et al., 2021). Elementary student services that exist outside of the core general education classroom, such as gifted education and special education services, may have been lost in the shuffle initially as schools shifted into survival mode (Duraku & Hoxha, 2020; Reich et al., 2020).

Gifted education services are not mandated by federal law. Administrative policies and mandates to identify and serve students with gifts and talents and to fund such programs are left to the discretion of each state. According to the 2018–2019 State of the States in Gifted Education Report (Rinn et al., 2020), 38 states have legal mandates that require identification of students with gifts and talents, yet only 24 states reported having a law or rule mandating such services for those identified. Site-based decision-making is common with many gifted education choices left to local school districts. In response to the pandemic crisis and the sudden shift to virtual learning management systems (LMS), we were interested in learning from district gifted education coordinators how their roles and responsibilities may have changed and how gifted education services were impacted. We sought to learn from district-level administrators of gifted education programs about their experiences during the first year of the pandemic from the end of the 2019–2020 school year to the end of the 2020–2021 school year. The following overarching research question guided this study:

**Research Question 1:** What were the lived experiences of district gifted education coordinators during the first year of the pandemic?

We aim to contribute to the literature in the field through the voices of those who lead programs for advanced learners across the United States. By bringing light to their experiences including their challenges, silver linings, and leadership perspectives
during this unprecedented time in history, we may gain insight and creative solutions that can lead to innovation for gifted education services. To ground this research, we synthesized literature on the roles and responsibilities of district-level administrators and on leadership during change or crisis. Due to the emergent nature of research on gifted education administrators, we drew on studies related to other content area supervisors and school principals.

District Administrator Roles and Responsibilities

Leaders of district gifted education programs have a variety of responsibilities. Some may supervise other academic content areas in addition to overseeing gifted and talented programs. Only two studies were found that directly addressed roles or responsibilities inherent to this specific position (Ezzani et al., 2021; Kennedy, 1997). One challenge in locating relevant literature is the lack of consistent terminology. For example, in Maryland alone, out of 24 school districts, 24 different job titles are used to refer to the person who oversees K–12 Gifted and Talented Education. Of these titles, 54.16% (n = 13) are categorized as supervisors, 37.5% (n = 9) are categorized as coordinators, and 8.3%, (n = 2) are categorized as teacher specialists or content specialists (see Table 1 for a list of job titles). Related research informs us of the roles of district special education supervisors, content area supervisors, principals, and other district leaders.

Research on the responsibilities of other district-level instructional leaders revealed a variety of common responsibilities. These include but are not limited to the following: content expert, advocate, program monitor and evaluator, professional development facilitator, budget manager, and teacher evaluator (Dawson, 1972; DiScala et al., 2019; Honig, 2008; Stosich, 2020; Young et al., 2021).

Leadership and Administration in Gifted Education

In the United States, local education agencies (LEAs) may have one or more central office leaders designated to oversee advanced learning programs across all schools in a district. Not all school districts have a gifted education coordinator and many coordinators wear multiple hats. District gifted education coordinators typically work closely with other content supervisors to ensure the curricular needs of advanced learners in their district are met (Peters & Brulles, 2018). Such collaboration with content supervisors and support services is critical especially when budgets are limited and needs are high. District gifted education coordinators help shape policies and practices and are increasingly accountable for focusing on equity and addressing gaps in identification and advanced learner services (Ezzani et al., 2021; Guilbault & Kirsch, 2020). Program administration, hiring school personnel, supporting classroom teachers, advocacy for gifted education programs and students, and communication also fall within the purview of the gifted education coordinator’s position (Ezzani et al., 2021). In addition, district-wide data collection and monitoring is required for compliance and
accountability mandates. This vital role helps ensure equitable student identification practices through the evaluation of services, programs, and gifted educator effectiveness. Thus, the district gifted education coordinator plays a vital role in building sustainable and equitable programs and services. What is evident from the literature, however, is the need for a comprehensive understanding of the leadership roles of gifted education coordinators.

### Table 1. Job Titles of District Coordinators of Gifted Education in Maryland.

| District | Job Title |
|----------|-----------|
| 1        | Advanced Learner Programs Teacher Specialist |
| 2        | Content Specialist for Gifted and Differentiated Services |
| 3        | Coordinator of Acceleration and Enrichment |
| 4        | Coordinator of Advanced Academics |
| 5        | Coordinator of Advanced Learning |
| 6        | Coordinator of English Language Arts, Social Studies, Grants, and GT Education |
| 7        | Coordinator for Gifted and Advanced Learning |
| 8        | Coordinator of Gifted and Talented Education Programs |
| 9        | Coordinator of Instruction |
| 10       | Coordinator of Special Programs |
| 11       | Instructional Coordinator |
| 12       | Supervisor of Accelerated and Enriched Instruction |
| 13       | Supervisor of Advanced Academics |
| 14       | Supervisor of Gifted and Talented |
| 15       | Supervisor of Gifted and Talented and Advanced Academic Programs |
| 16       | Supervisor of Instruction-English Learners, Gifted and Talented, and 504 |
| 17       | Supervisor of Instructional Programs and Gifted Programs |
| 18       | Supervisor of K–8 Education Gifted and Talented |
| 19       | Supervisor of K–12 Mathematics, Computer Science, and GT Education |
| 20       | Supervisor of Mathematics and Gifted and Talented Education |
| 21       | Supervisor, Personalized Learning and Leadership Development |
| 22       | Supervisor of PreK–12 Advanced Programs |
| 23       | Supervisor of Science, Mathematics, STEM, and Gifted and Talented |
| 24       | Supervisor of Talented and Gifted Programs |

*Note.* There are 24 school districts in the state of Maryland.

Leadership During the Emergency Transition to Online Teaching

Huck and Zhang’s (2021) systematic literature analysis of 49 school-related COVID-19 studies discovered numerous themes related to caretaking leadership, higher levels of social-emotional responses to educators, and high degrees of flexibility. District and school leaders adapted their instruction, program administration, communication, and policies in order to maintain and sustain the education programs that were mandated by
These leadership adaptations varied greatly in response to the COVID-19 school closures and transitions to online teaching and learning. Variations in leadership and instructional practices were observed around the world (Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hidayati & Sukirman, 2021; Weiner et al., 2021). What has been missing from the research on COVID-19 leadership studies are reports on the diverse lived experiences of district gifted education coordinators through this historical period of time.

Purpose of this Study

While some literature has provided general themes about gifted education coordinator responsibilities, no studies have delineated the critical nature of this role or investigated what gifted district leaders do explicitly. Further, studies have not examined how district gifted education coordinators adapted their leadership roles during the pandemic when schools closed and transitioned to emergency remote instruction. Therefore, the present study aimed to reveal challenges and creative solutions implemented to facilitate continuity of district gifted education programs and services during this period of constant change and stress to the system. This study was designed to address the gap in the literature in two areas: (a) the limited research on the critical roles of administrators of gifted education and advanced academic programs, and (b) the limited research on how gifted education coordinators adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disclosure Statement

In qualitative inquiry, it is important to acknowledge researcher bias as the researcher “is the main instrument for analysis and interpretation” (Coleman et al., 2007, p. 56). As Mendaglio (2003) stated, “Data do not speak for themselves, they speak through the researcher as an instrument of the research process” (p. 164). The first author is a former elementary teacher of gifted students and former district supervisor of accelerated learning programs in a large school system in a mid-Atlantic state. She wrote memos during initial data collection after each interview to bracket potential biases. Because of her leadership roles in professional associations, some interview participants may have had previous interactions with the first author. The first author recognized her potential power or influence issues and carefully emphasized the confidentiality and voluntariness of participation with the administrators who agreed to be interviewed.

The second author was an elementary and middle school music teacher and now is an assistant professor in an education graduate program and specializes in teacher self-efficacy, cultural competence, and equity research. This author was given access to de-identified transcripts at the conclusion of the interview process, and she was jointly responsible for coding, identifying themes, analysis, and interpretation of data. The third author was an elementary teacher for a STEM magnet school and an independent school for gifted students and is now an assistant professor in early childhood education and specializes in educational psychology and gifted education. The third author
contributed to the review of literature and interpretation of results. All three authors were identified as gifted when they were children, and they are now parents of gifted children. Therefore, their sensitivities for participants’ experiences were important to acknowledge as they read, analyzed, and reviewed the transcripts. They frequently had to acknowledge their biases and memo their feelings and reflections about their own experiences during the pandemic as they read about the gifted education coordinators’ experiences sustaining services for advanced learners across districts.

**Methods**

This phenomenological study was rooted in an interpretivist paradigm (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This exploratory study investigated the experiences of district-level coordinators of gifted education programs during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic through semi-structured interviews. In phenomenological research, interviews may be conducted with participants who have firsthand knowledge of their experience (Patton, 2002). We sought to understand what the experience of leading and supervising advanced learning programs was like during this unique time from the leader’s point of view. The aim of this approach was to “accurately describe the phenomenon under study, not to generalize to theories or models” (Krefting, 1991, p. 91). Specifically, the goal of this study was to understand the impact of the pandemic on the leadership of gifted education programs as perceived by the district administrators themselves. A phenomenological approach seemed to be the optimal fit to provide the greatest insight into these perceived experiences. An emergent, inductive thematic analysis was used to guide data analysis of interview responses and interviewer notes. This approach allowed the researchers to derive meaning from the data and create themes without any preconceptions.

**Participants and Sampling**

For the purpose of this study, we were most interested in focusing on administrators who oversee gifted education programs in states that have a mandate for gifted identification and services. Because all gifted is local, and there is no federal mandate for gifted education, each state has its own rules and regulations that govern gifted education services, if any. To gain a deeper understanding of the pandemic experiences of administrators of gifted education programs in different regions across the country, we sought a purposive sample of participants from four geographic areas: southern, northern, western, and eastern states.

Participants were recruited through state and national gifted education organizations. A survey link was shared by the organizations through their list-servs, social media, websites, and electronic newsletters. Survey participants provided consent through completing the survey and shared their contact information if they were interested in being interviewed. Surveys were completed by 65 respondents and 21 indicated an interest in being interviewed. After reviewing survey response data, only
53 out of the 65 were completed by district-level coordinators of gifted education. The remaining 12 surveys were completed by school-building teachers of the gifted who serve as facilitators of gifted services, but do not have administrative duties or oversee programs at a district level. Of the volunteers for an interview, 12 were selected based on criteria to ensure a diverse sample. These factors included geographic location, existence of a state mandate for gifted education, district size, and personal demographics such as gender, age range, years of experience, race, and ethnicity.

The 12 coordinators selected for the semi-structured interviews were sent an introductory email with information about the study and a consent form to sign and return electronically. Individual interviews were scheduled between the end of March 2021 and early May 2021, one year from the onset of the initial pandemic-related school closings. Of the 12 administrators contacted by email, nine immediately returned consent forms and confirmed interview dates. The remaining three administrators were contacted three more times and informed of the purpose of the study, confidentiality of the data, and the significance of the study, but they did not respond. To add more participants, during the remaining nine interviews, participants were asked at the end of the interview if they knew of another district coordinator that we should interview. From these recommendations and snowball sampling, after verifying they worked in a state with a mandate for gifted programs, two additional district gifted education coordinators were successfully recruited for participation.

In total, 11 interviews were held. The sample consisted of 11 coordinators (81.8% female, $n = 9$; 18.1% male, $n = 2$). Years of experience in their current role ranged from two to 17 years ($M = 7.18$, $SD = 4.95$). Participants were predominantly white and non-Hispanic (90.9%, $n = 10$). One participant was Black, and one was of Hispanic ethnicity. Although gifted and talented certification is not required in every state, the majority of participants in this leadership role did hold state certification or an endorsement in gifted education (81.8%, $n = 9$). One participant was currently seeking a graduate certificate in gifted education. Participants were all highly educated with

| Pseudonym | Sex | Age Range | Years in Position |
|-----------|-----|-----------|-------------------|
| Tamra     | F   | 45–54     | 16                |
| Kelly     | F   | 35–44     | 3                 |
| Eric      | M   | 55–64     | 7                 |
| Christy   | F   | 35–44     | 2                 |
| Sydney    | F   | 45–54     | 17                |
| Sharon    | F   | 45–54     | 9                 |
| Tim       | M   | 35–44     | 4                 |
| Mary      | F   | 35–44     | 2                 |
| Yvette    | F   | 45–54     | 8                 |
| Ruby      | F   | 35–44     | 4                 |
| Carrie    | F   | 45–54     | 7                 |
100% holding a master’s degree or higher. Three participants (27%) had obtained a doctoral degree. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality and to help the reader distinguish participants quoted more than once (see Table 2 for interview participant demographic information and Table 3 for school demographics).

Participants represented rural, urban, and suburban districts (9% rural, \(n = 1\); 45.4% suburban, \(n = 5\); and 45.5% urban, \(n = 5\)) that ranged in size from 5,500 to 188,000 students.

### Data Collection and Procedures

**Interview protocol.** An interview protocol was developed based on the information we wanted to collect from the participants. We were interested if and how the pandemic-related school closings and shift to virtual or hybrid instruction had impacted the roles and responsibilities of the coordinators, and how services provided to students identified as gifted were affected. The protocol questions were prepared using a review of extant literature and from the first author’s expert knowledge of the typical roles and responsibilities of district administrators of gifted programs. The protocol was submitted to three recently retired gifted education coordinators from three different states who served as content experts. They were asked to evaluate the appropriateness of the questions concerning alignment with the research question and relevance to the participant group’s roles. Several revisions were made to the protocol based on the experts’ feedback.

The final interview protocol consisted of 13 open-ended questions. Participants were asked about their typical work week prior to the pandemic, during the initial closings in the spring of 2020, and during the current school year at the time of the interviews, 2020–2021. Participants were asked to describe some of the challenges they faced

| Pseudonym | District Type | District Student Enrollment | District Total # Gifted Students | Gifted % of Total School Population |
|-----------|---------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Tamra     | urban         | 130,000                     | 12,000                          | 9.23                              |
| Kelly     | suburban      | 188,000                     | 47,129                          | 25.07                             |
| Eric      | urban         | 80,000                      | 5,500                           | 6.88                              |
| Christy   | rural         | 16,000                      | 1,500                           | 9.38                              |
| Sydney    | suburban      | 50,000                      | 5,842                           | 11.68                             |
| Sharon    | suburban      | 29,000                      | 6,682                           | 23.04                             |
| Tim       | suburban      | 63,000                      | 7,100                           | 11.27                             |
| Mary      | suburban      | 50,000                      | 3,000                           | 6.00                              |
| Yvette    | urban         | 43,000                      | 2,400                           | 5.58                              |
| Ruby      | urban         | 104,000                     | 11,000                          | 10.58                             |
| Carrie    | urban         | 5,500                       | 220                             | 4.00                              |

Note: Student enrollment as per district websites.
regarding typical duties which included professional learning, overseeing a budget, gifted student screening and identification, curriculum writing, distribution of materials, family and caregiver communication, support to teachers of the gifted, support to principals and other content supervisors, and program evaluation. Participants were asked to share innovative ideas or silver linings (unexpected positive outcomes) that may have come from this rapid shift to virtual learning and working environments.

**Semi-structured interviews.** Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Eleven administrators participated individually in a 60-minute interview with the first author. Semi-structured interviews were held using Zoom, using the video and audio record feature after informed consent was obtained. The first author transcribed all recordings verbatim immediately following each interview while the conversation and emotions were fresh in memory. Handwritten notes were taken during the interviews to record emotions, pauses, reflections, and tone. A copy of the transcript with redacted identifiable information for the participant, their school system, and state were sent to the interviewee for member checking. Feedback and edits were made to finalize each transcription before data analysis. Survey responses were stored in a password protected Qualtrics account of which only the first author had access. Video files were labeled with the interview code and stored in password protected folders on the first author’s computer.

**Data Analysis**

**Interview transcripts.** Hycner (1999) suggested five steps in the analysis of interview data in phenomenological research. These include (a) bracketing and phenomenological reduction, (b) delineating units of meaning, (c) clustering units of meaning to form themes, (d) summarizing each interview, and (e) extracting general and unique themes from all interviews and making a composite summary. We followed Hycner’s steps as we analyzed interview transcripts. The first author listened to the audio recordings of each interview multiple times to bracket her personal preconceptions from the stories of the interviewees before transcribing each interview. Verbatim transcripts were made immediately following each interview. Transcripts were between 17 and 36 pages in length ($M = 26.55$, $SD = 5.87$).

After completing the transcriptions and de-identifying participants, data were ready for analysis. Data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis method. This method is defined as “an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in a given data set” (Byrne, 2021, p. 2). Transcripts were read multiple times and multiple meanings were considered as we looked for recurring words, concepts, and ideas to identify emergent codes. Each line of every transcript was coded, and then again by segments and meaningful clusters under each interview question section. Next, categories were combined to eliminate redundancy (Moustakas, 1994) and clusters of categories were identified. Significant topics were revealed, and
main themes were determined from these. After these steps were followed for each interview, we looked for overarching themes common to all interviews as well as unique themes or individual variations. When no new themes emerged, we agreed that major themes had been identified.

**Interview notes.** We reviewed and analyzed handwritten notes taken during the interviews of the 11 participants using an emergent, inductive thematic data analysis. Units of meaning were extracted from each set of data by examining the content from the interview memos with attention to notes of non-verbal cues and the number of times units of meaning were repeated. Next, redundant units of meaning were eliminated (Moustakas, 1994) and clusters of themes were identified. Significant topics were revealed, and main themes were determined from these.

**Trustworthiness and Transferability**

According to Wood (2010), in qualitative inquiry, the researcher “must consistently safeguard the trustworthiness of the study by examining the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings” (p. 270). To establish credibility of findings, the first author kept a reflexive journal to describe her own experiences, reactions to interviews, reflections on the process, and ideas about data collection, as suggested by Thorpe (2004). Bracketing occurred during the interview transcription process. Member checking of transcripts by each participant and the researchers were used to increase trustworthiness of data analysis. We used purposive sampling to elicit experiences of gifted education coordinators from varied backgrounds and geographic areas. To establish transferability, we collected data by in-depth semi-structured interviews and researcher notes to gather a comprehensive view of the experiences of these leaders during the pandemic. The audit trail of this study could easily be followed by another researcher to investigate similar research questions or to understand differences in findings.

**Findings**

In analyzing the data to determine district gifted education coordinators’ perceptions of their experiences during the pandemic, four main themes emerged: professional duties, leadership, challenges, and adaptations. These themes are reflected across the roles and responsibilities of gifted education coordinators and reported in this section according to four main categories: (a) professional responsibilities; (b) instructional leadership; (c) program management; and (d) communication and collaboration. The overarching theme across all interviews was the rapid need to pivot to adapt to constant change during the pandemic.
Professional Responsibilities Before and During the Pandemic

When asked to describe their typical roles and responsibilities prior to the pandemic, participants each reported similar duties with the exception of overseeing a budget and conducting teacher observations. Nine (81.8%) of the participants had the responsibility of managing a budget and two did not oversee their program budget because it was managed by their supervisor, such as a Director of Curriculum and Instruction. The second difference in responsibilities was related to teacher observations. Four participants (36.4%) were not responsible for conducting observations before or during the pandemic. Seven participants (63.6%) conduct informal observations or walk throughs which continued during the pandemic.

Participants were asked to share ways in which their jobs had changed during the pandemic, if at all. All participants stated that their job duties had not changed after initial school closings or at any time during the first year of the pandemic, they just shifted to a virtual format. One exception was a new requirement that they were frequently engaged in—substitute teaching in classrooms due to substitute teacher shortages. These central office administrators were required to cover classes as needed, sometimes outside of gifted education but usually within their other areas of content or grade-level certification. Other common responsibilities both before and during the pandemic include the following: (a) overseeing the gifted screening and identification processes; (b) selecting and distributing curriculum materials; (c) facilitating and or providing professional learning opportunities and staff development; (d) managing...
budgets and grants; (e) communicating with families/caregivers; (f) curating, creating, modifying, or adapting resources for teacher use with students; (g) assisting with teacher selection and staffing; (h) advocating for gifted and advanced learners; (i) evaluating programs; (j) ensuring schools addressed gifted education mandates and policies; (k) attending meetings; and (l) supporting teachers, principals, and other supervisors (Figure 1 provides a model framework of the common leadership roles of district gifted education coordinators).

**Instructional Leadership**

Instructional leadership roles before and during the pandemic were focused on selecting or creating curriculum and materials for teachers in schools, providing leadership and guidance on student identification, and conducting educator professional learning. Many of the traditional instructional leadership tasks continued during the pandemic but shifted to being conducted remotely.

Prior to the pandemic, some district coordinators were able to provide stipends to teachers of the gifted to work during the summer months to write or revise curriculum. With the shift to virtual learning, many budgets were frozen and summer work such as curriculum writing and professional learning were placed on hold. There was concern over the demands placed on teachers during the pandemic, which resulted in much of this curriculum writing work being taken on by the coordinators themselves. Regarding changes to professional learning, only two coordinators reported having used online delivery modes prior to the pandemic such as webinars using Zoom and self-paced modules using their district LMS. The 2020 spring and summer professional learning opportunities were reduced, and the district coordinators used that summer planning for virtual options to take place during the upcoming 2020–2021 school year.

**Adapting Screening and Identification Processes.** One of the major roles of district gifted education coordinators is overseeing the gifted screening and identification process. The pandemic shifted the way that the gifted identification process was implemented in each of these districts. Prior to the pandemic, coordinators had a schedule that involved screening, testing, and placement using specific criteria and assessments. During the initial impact of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, the timeline changed for those that had not already completed their gifted eligibility testing. These district coordinators either revised their testing calendar to postpone screening and testing or used completely different assessments for identification and placement. For instance, instead of the use of cognitive ability tests that would require students sitting to take these assessments virtually or in person, some districts chose to use existing student data such as state achievement tests, or even older ability tests conducted in previous grades.

Fortunately, a majority of the participants (81.8%, \( n = 9 \)) indicated that by the spring of 2020 when the pandemic first hit and schools closed, they had already completed their gifted student screening for the 2019–2020 school year; however, during the following (2020–2021) school year they described this process as more complicated.
One of the biggest issues shared was the concern over validity if a gifted ability test was to be administered online when students were home participating in remote learning. Participant, Eric stated that in meetings with other coordinators in his state, there was much debate on the issue of conducting universal screening virtually and the use of achievement data in place of ability tests. He said,

Everyone kept kicking the can down the road because no one, no one wanted to. Even if you could give the test remotely, we’re concerned about the validity, and you know who’s whispering in the kid’s ear? The thing that was going through all of our minds is ‘Do we come up with a pandemic style identification metric, that had this not been the pandemic you would not be identified but because it’s the pandemic we’re going to identify you?’ Like, for me that would have been, I would have relied exclusively on achievement pieces. (Interview, March 29, 2021)

Eric shared similar sentiments of other study participants and gifted coordinators across his state about concerns over test validity and the possible under identification of gifted students using any other metrics than what they used to before the pandemic.

Tamara was also concerned over the shift to using achievement data in place of ability testing. She shared that her district decided to change its identification criteria during the 2020–2021 school year from use of the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) for universal screening, to achievement data in reading and mathematics as a provisional identification procedure. This was a direct result of test security concerns as she stated, “We were very worried about the integrity of the assessment. To be honest, I’m a little concerned about the achievement integrity as well” (Interview, April 6, 2021). Similar to Tamra’s concerns, Sydney stated, “We did not do virtual testing…we could not trust results that were garnered through remote testing” (Interview, March 30, 2021). Tim shared that in addition to concerns over test confidentiality, reliability, and validity, he also felt that conducting virtual gifted screenings could be an equity issue. He said,

And just something as, even though I don’t view it as high stakes testing, for something that is viewed as that, to have it completed at home in a variety of like home environments --from you know the parent who’s hanging over outside of the camera you know, to a student who might be in a daycare center that’s very loud, you know it was difficult. So universal screeners, regrettably were not conducted this year. We used instead, like, we instructed schools when they were screening for gifted look at data already on the child to bring to the table. (Interview, April 19, 2021)

His district decided to rely on achievement data and forgo universal ability screening altogether in 2020–2021 and intended to catch up the next school year. Mary shared a different perspective from Tim, When it came to identification, we pretty much have done the same thing and we have fewer numbers this year but we’re providing the same assessments. We are providing
virtual assessments. I know some people think that everyone’s going to just cheat and go nuts, with it, but we haven’t really had any problems with it, and you know we’ve been able to find some kiddos that I know we wouldn’t have otherwise, and so it hasn’t, we haven’t had any big red flags or anything. (Interview, April 14, 2021)

Three of the 11 coordinators interviewed said their districts administered gifted ability testing virtually during the pandemic, despite their concerns over test security and validity. A majority of participants stated they observed a decrease in the number of students either referred for testing or identified as a result of the delays, testing backlog due to additional COVID-19 safety protocols required, schedule changes, and new procedures. Tim observed referrals decrease by about half. Sharon said, “We’re definitely going to see the numbers drop so I’m already pushing the assessment team to say that we need to do some catch up in the fall” (Interview, March 30, 2021). The concern over the decrease in students identified as gifted was discussed again in reference to equity issues that arose during the pandemic. To mitigate this situation, coordinators planned to adjust testing calendars to catch up the following fall. Some districts allowed families of students who passed gifted screening eligibility to defer testing for the following school year.

Adapting technology and professional learning. Participants served as sounding boards and instructional coaches to help teachers of the gifted talk through scenarios and problem solve ways to modify environments and instruction for gifted learners. Participants also explained that they provided a lot of technical support and training for teachers who were not as comfortable with a new LMS and digital tools. Many of the participants described facilitating technology professional learning sessions for their gifted and talented teachers to adapt curriculum and instruction. Ruby’s description of how she supported teachers’ technology growth and collaboration echoed the other participants’ sentiments,

Definitely a lot of tech support throughout the whole year. . . . I think that we’ve had some pretty good conversations on how to replace or like how to use some of the tech tools to try to replace some of the in person, like the collaboration, I think, is probably where we’ve spent a lot of time like on one on one conversation is like that’s the one thing they feel like they’re missing is like their kids aren’t able to collaborate, but when we really spend some time and look at it, there are ways to collaborate, it just looks a little different. (Interview, April 15, 2021)

Tamra emphasized that a shift in thinking for teachers of the gifted was how to leverage digital resources as tools for content instruction. She told her teachers of the gifted, “You’re not teaching the technologies to the students, you’re using the technology to teach your curriculum” (Interview, April 6, 2021.) Participants described multiple technology professional learning coaching sessions for their teachers where they provided simple adaptations to virtual learning by introducing a variety of
technology tools (i.e., Google Classroom, Google Docs, Flipgrid, Kahoot, Mentimeter, Note.ly, Padlet, Socrative, VoiceThread, and Zoom), demonstrated how to provide opportunities for student collaboration using these tools, and affirmed the ideas of the gifted teachers about instructional approaches through collaborative brainstorm sessions.

Flexibility and teacher choice in professional learning was another common theme mentioned in participant interviews. Participants Kelly and Tim modified the traditional all day professional development meetings into more frequent virtual meetings for shorter periods of time. Kelly said, “What they needed was more frequent opportunities to touch base, and for shorter bits of time (Interview, March 22, 2021). Eric and Tamra initiated weekly virtual drop-in office hours. Participants Sharon, Tamra, and Tim created learning modules on the district LMS that were short in duration and could be completed asynchronously. Participants Tamra and Christy organized book studies and reported strong attendance at those meetings. Others curated and distributed lists of existing free webinars from universities, textbook publishers, and experts in the field.

Some coordinators said that participation in virtual professional learning decreased, while others said they saw an increased interest from a wider variety of educators, including counselors and administrators. All participants planned to continue offering virtual or hybrid professional learning opportunities post-pandemic. Participants responded to their teachers’ needs for flexibility by providing a variety of options such as those listed above (i.e., shorter and more frequent virtual meetings, choice in sessions to attend, weekly virtual drop-in office hours, LMS self-paced and self-selected modules, book studies, and free webinars) to help their teachers adapt to their contexts and their learners’ disparate levels of access to instruction, technology, and materials.

Program Management

District coordinators had a myriad of responsibilities during the pandemic. From ensuring equity and continuity of student service delivery to distilling mandates and local or state requirements into brief memos for school principals, they played a key role in ensuring student needs were met. During the pandemic, coordinators prioritized needs and focused on supporting teachers of the gifted, principals, other content supervisors, and families of gifted learners. Some pre-pandemic tasks like conducting school site visits and teacher observations were placed on hold. Instead, they shifted their work to thinking about what resources they had available to distribute, what they could quickly adapt for schools (such as converting materials from hard copies to digital versions), and how they could get materials into the hands of teachers of the gifted and families of gifted and advanced learners. The pandemic forced them to focus on immediate and more urgent needs (i.e., ready-to-go lessons for gifted resource teachers and memos with updated policy guidance for principals) compared to the pre-pandemic pace of managing routine program needs.
Ensuring equity. In managing their programs, issues around social justice and equity surfaced. Although not new to gifted education, these issues and gaps were brought to the forefront. Yvette summed it up, “A lot of problems that existed before kind of rose to the surface in gifted services” (Interview, April 15, 2021). Kelly shared that there were students who had challenges with the new technology and lacked access to the high-speed internet that was required to support multiple children in a home all streaming simultaneously. She said, “We had this intensity around the distance learning impacts and the pandemic impacts and everything that’s going on social justice-wise in the world. . . and that has been incredibly intense” (Interview, March 22, 2021). Ruby highlighted family resources as an equity issue. For example, she recounted,

You can provide access but there’s always going to be an equity issue with parent support. I think when you have kids at school for seven and a half hours you’re able to bridge that gap a little bit because all the kids are getting the same level of support, but when kids are working from home, you know there’s a big difference between a kid whose parent is sitting right next to them and a parent who is at work and the kid is taking care of three younger siblings. (Interview, April 15, 2021)

Sharon, likewise, felt there was inequity in access to technology and resources at home. She was worried about the children who did not have additional resources outside of the classroom or who came from families that did not know how to navigate the system and locate them. She said, “I definitely think the gap has grown between the have and have nots and that’s also because of the low level of instruction happening in the classrooms” (Interview, March 30, 2021). She was concerned that talent development was not taking place in classrooms during the first year of the pandemic because teachers were so overwhelmed, and many were still learning how to use the technology. Carrie also cited connectivity as an issue as well as parents and caregivers feeling overwhelmed and overloaded by having to support their student’s organization and learning at home, especially if they were not tech savvy. Eric also discussed the technology divide

Our big thing in our district, as in many urban districts, our kids were under-resourced. They didn’t have laptops at home. If they had laptops, they didn’t have Wi Fi. And so, we had to create something that can be physically shared as well as digitally shared. (Interview, March 29, 2021)

Several other participants discussed problems with lack of gifted services or inconsistent services across schools. Tim shared that teacher shortages and untrained substitutes contributed to this equity issue. Mary reported that the belief in her district that gifted students will do fine on their own, and that “if it’s not something that’s required, or if it’s not part of the core subjects, we don’t have to do it, or we can’t require it” contributed to inconsistent gifted services across schools (Interview, April 14, 2021).
Other equity concerns included lack of access to certified gifted teachers, lack of appropriate services in the middle school grades, different levels of support for those students who returned face-to-face compared to those who opted to remain virtual and decreases in gifted education student referrals for screening in systems that had a two-stage identification process.

The participants described the disparate needs of their districts, schools, and families, and how they triaged ways to address the inequitable distribution of access to resources during the pandemic. Addressing those needs might take the form of providing access to technology and WiFi, access to teachers and instruction, access to materials, or access to mandated services. They tried to address the inequities in a variety of ways based upon triage or rough needs assessment of their contexts. They began the pandemic by realizing that the inequities that had always existed (i.e., inequitable access to technology such as 1:1 devices, lack of access to full-time certified gifted resource teachers in all schools, poor internet connectivity, budget discrepancies from school to school that led to some schools offering more gifted services than others, uneven quantity and quality of gifted education curricular materials from school to school, etc.) were surfacing to a greater degree because of the shutdown and they would be called upon to help teachers, school principals, and superintendents ameliorate the inequities.

Support for administrators and teachers. Other key tasks associated with program management that were prioritized during the pandemic included providing support for principals, content supervisors, and teachers. Principals needed clarification on mandates and policies, what had to be done, and what flexibility they had around policies and practices. They also sought assistance with hiring, scheduling, and obtaining materials for their gifted and advanced learning programs. Participants reported that they primarily supported other department supervisors with alignment of curriculum and coordination of professional learning.

Support for principals with curriculum, policies, and scheduling. Participants supported principals by surveying their needs, providing student service delivery choices, preparing brief memos with case scenarios, creating shared live documents for questions and answers, and assisting with modifications to teachers’ schedules. Christy shared that the shift to virtual instruction highlighted a need for specialized curriculum which resulted in principals reaching out to her office (Interview, March 29, 2021). Breaking information down into short chunks of information was a strategy used by several coordinators to communicate with supervisors and administrators. Sydney shared that she recognized principals needed curated information quickly. She said what they required from her office was “distilling the information from the various external entities and time to boil it down to the essence of here’s what you really need to know” (Interview, March 30, 2021). Instead of forwarding emails from the state and attaching the document, she adapted communication by “going through and saying okay, here’s
the most important three things you need to know about this” (Interview, March 30, 2021).

Several participants felt that what principals needed from them was reassurance that they were doing what they should be doing to ensure consistent services for advanced learners. Tim talked about what principals and other content supervisors needed from his office,

I think for principals it was reassurance and reminders. They didn’t want to drop the ball, but they had too much on their plates that they really valued just the team checking in on them, their well-being, their teachers, and the students. . . . principals were pulled in many different directions trying to combat everything that had to occur for school openings. . . . As far as supervisors, I think it was, they needed quick answers. . . . when the ball started rolling. . . . things just happened very quickly and so they needed immediate answers. If you waited a day, you were behind, and the decision may have already been made. (Interview, April 19, 2021)

One silver lining that was repeated across interviews was that the pandemic led to increased interaction between the district coordinators and their school principals. No one had to spend time driving across the district or work around schedules to set up meetings, they were able to hold office hours virtually and conduct meetings with Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Mary said, “I actually had actually had probably quite a bit more interaction with the principals during that time” (Interview, April 14, 2021). For Ruby, this led to including her in the hiring process of new teachers of the gifted. She said

That was an unexpected benefit! Anytime someone left—being more involved in the direct hiring of the gifted teachers because principals hire in our district, and so some will include me on interviews and things like that but this past year, I think, in some ways, because they didn’t have time and they had so many positions to hire for that I got to be a lot more actively involved in some and that’s been a very good benefit. (Interview, April 15, 2021)

Teacher Support. Teachers of the gifted needed permission to modify instruction and services to best meet the needs of advanced learners in their schools under the changing learning environments and changes to their schedules. Some teachers of the gifted, as resource teachers and not teachers of record, were pulled away from their typical duties and gifted education classes to cover additional duties such as lunch duty and subbing for other general education classrooms due to teacher and substitute shortages. Kelly shared how scheduling and staffing shortages impacted gifted services:

Our teachers were told they can be called on to do whatever is needed and it may have nothing to do with their job. . . . they were told, you’re going to have to cover classes for teaching planning. . . . things like lunch duty. And so, it was definitely up in the air whether our students who were identified for part-time services were still going to get those services. (Interview, March 22, 2021)
Teachers needed assistance from the district coordinator to manage their principals’ requests and still meet the needs of identified gifted learners; they acted as a liaison on behalf of the teachers.

**Communication and Collaboration**

Participants expressed frustration that prior to the pandemic, they did not always have a seat at the table when it came to central office decision-making. They were at times overlooked for their expertise or excluded from meetings where planning and decision-making related to their work took place. Because their departments were seen as support services for other content areas, unless they took initiative to insert themselves into the conversation, they were sometimes forgotten. This varied by location and years in their position to some extent, with those working in well-functioning districts with strong superintendent support having a seemingly easier time collaborating and making progress toward their objectives. Some labeled this part of their job as advocacy and public relations. They believed that part of their role was to educate others in central office, in schools, and in the community about the importance of advanced learning programs and the needs of gifted and advanced learners.

During the pandemic, opportunities to have this seat at the table unfolded. Tim mentioned, “That is something that has also grown. I think that I’m at the table more because at the beginning, I was not...I was an afterthought” (Interview, April 19, 2021). For Christy, creation of a district-wide professional learning calendar provided the opportunity to have her seat at the table. She shared that neither gifted education nor the special education department were included on the calendar previously, and it provided the opportunity for her to advocate and ask for time. She said, “I went to the assistant superintendent and said, if we’re being asked to build the capacity of teachers...we need designated time...It gave me an opportunity to say...gifted education certainly needs to be at that table as well” (Interview, March 29, 2021). Because of their expertise in areas such as differentiation, social-emotional learning, personalized learning, and emphasis on equity, district gifted education coordinators were able to contribute to district and school needs as instruction shifted to remote learning. They collaborated with other content supervisors to address curricular needs, create digital materials, and plan virtual professional learning.

**Virtual support networks.** Another adaptation that arose organically during the pandemic was the creation of support networks by teachers of the gifted and networks of district gifted education coordinators across their states. During initial school closings, there was a sense of urgency with such a rapid pace of change, and a need to quickly adapt to virtual learning environments and translate materials to digital formats. Rather than reinvent the wheel, district coordinators shared how their teachers of the gifted created their own networks using technology tools like Microsoft Teams and Google Classroom to establish cloud sharing folders of lessons, materials, and discussion forums.
They used these tools to share resources, ask questions, seek clarification, and to vent and support each other during this crisis.

Similar to their teachers of the gifted, district-level coordinators increased the frequency with which they collaborated and gathered online. Sydney said that in her state, coordinator-to-coordinator informal meetings increased in frequency and in number of participants. She said that her group went from three members in the central region to 25 coordinators and from quarterly to monthly virtual meetings. Sydney felt that this was an optimal place to exchange ideas and noted, “I think that has been a really neat byproduct is that there’s a lot more coordinator collaboration in our area just saying hey how are you handling this, how are you handling this?” (Interview, March 30, 2021). Similar to Sydney, the participants described that as schools moved to virtual learning and concurrent learning, district coordinators had to solve issues relating to state regulations, mandates, scheduling, teacher shortages, gifted identification practices, and student service delivery.

**Communication with families and caregivers.** Communication with families and caregivers during the pandemic tended to revolve around questions regarding the identification process, timeline, and continuity of gifted services for their children. Much of the communications from families arose due to what they saw through virtual classroom instruction. For example, according to Kelly’s report of parent and caregiver communication in her district:

A lot of them were realizing like “oh I didn’t realize my, my student was, like really, you know good in this,” and so they would talk about that and a lot of them were saying you know I think this. . . so probably an increase . . . I don’t think our referral numbers actually went up a whole lot, but there were a lot of people who, in their referral noted that, seeing that they thought was evidence of why their child needed advanced services. (Interview, March 22, 2021)

Mary mentioned how this transparency, in some cases, created new windows into the lack of challenge some gifted learners were receiving. She said,

I think they were able to see exactly what their kids were doing and see that they were doing the exact same thing as anyone else in the class . . . I think a lot of parents were also kind of concerned, well you know my kid’s completing every single thing they need to do in two hours every day, what else could they be doing with their time? Or why, if it’s so easy for them, why can’t he be doing something a little bit deeper or involve a little more thinking? (Interview, April 14, 2021)

Because of the increased transparency with what was actually taking place inside virtual classrooms, parents and caregivers who observed their gifted children at home reached out about either a lack of differentiation and challenge, or an awareness of possible gifted behaviors when comparing their child’s performance to same age classmates.
On the other hand, several participants said families reported their gifted children were thriving in the self-paced virtual environment, especially students who could compact their learning and pursue personal research projects. Christy expressed how grateful parents and caregivers were of the opportunities that were provided for their children even during the pandemic. She shared,

One mom sent me a text, and she said, I really appreciate all the enrichment opportunities that have been provided for my daughter, and that it was very helpful for her in the midst of her transitioning to high school because she didn’t know any students. And so those little things like keep you going because you always wonder if they’re making a difference. (Interview, March 29, 2021)

In general, caregivers were engaged and interested in school and district communication and resources. District gifted education coordinators were proactive by pushing out frequent and various forms of communication to families during the pandemic.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the leadership experiences of district gifted education coordinators during the first year of the pandemic. An investigation of roles, responsibilities, challenges, and adaptations to changes during this unique period of time were captured through the voices of district leaders. These 11 administrators represented a variety of backgrounds, geographic regions, and district sizes. Participants primarily reported experiences related to their professional responsibilities.

The most important finding from this exploratory study was the delineation of roles and responsibilities of district gifted education coordinators across the nation as leaders who provide instructional leadership, program management, communication, and collaboration to ensure equity in instructional experiences for advanced learners. No other studies have collected data on how district-level gifted education coordinators define their roles, how their positions are titled, or how they perform their roles. The roles and responsibilities of this national sample of district coordinators had several common themes that align with leadership roles from education leadership literature: the gifted education coordinator as the instructional leader, as the program manager, and as the communication and collaboration liaison (DiScala et al., 2019; Honig, 2008; Stosich, 2020; Young et al., 2021). These roles are vital to student learning and achievement outcomes for gifted and academically advanced students. They are also critical for district and state compliance and accountability measures for states where there are legal mandates to provide services for academically talented students. We argue that equity for advanced learners first comes through common language around district coordinators’ responsibilities for administering programs, facilitating identification of gifted and advanced learners, and supporting superintendents, principals, other instructional supervisors, and teachers in providing equitable learning experiences. This study brings the
field one step closer to having a common language around these important roles by providing a conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1.

Further, we argue that the role of the district gifted education coordinator is vital to ensuring equitable access to appropriate instruction for advanced learners, particularly during times of crisis and remote instruction. No prior studies have examined how gifted education coordinators performed their roles during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous research examining the impact of the pandemic on gifted education has illustrated that support services have been negatively impacted (Guilbault & McCormick, 2022; Wolfgang & Snyderman, 2022) and gifted learners have experienced challenges with their social-emotional well-being (Aboud, 2021; Duraku & Hoxha, 2020; Wolfgang & Snyderman, 2022).

Prior to the pandemic, district gifted coordinators in this study were concerned with equity in identification processes and related disproportionality, as well as student access to needed services in all schools in their districts. These challenges did not disappear during the pandemic, and in some cases became more visible. While all students (as well as their teachers and families) have experienced hardships during the pandemic, we argue that some groups of students may be especially at-risk, including those who are gifted or twice exceptional, and in particular, gifted learners who are also culturally, linguistically, or economically diverse. General education continued in different formats during the pandemic; however, specialized education services for students with special education needs, English language learning needs, and advanced learning needs were inconsistent. These services often exist outside of the general education classroom or are facilitated by additional resource teachers. When teachers were needed to cover classes as substitutes during the pandemic, principals pulled resource teachers because their schedules were easier to adjust since they were not teachers of record with their own set of full-time assigned students. This kind of reduction in advanced academic support for gifted students during the pandemic could have exacerbated their sense of isolation in general education classes, which puts them at-risk for adverse social-emotional and academic outcomes (Landis & Reschly, 2013). Thus, gifted education coordinators’ roles were essential for continuity of services for this student population.

This study highlighted a critical first step in establishing equity for gifted and advanced learners by first defining the role of the district-level leader who serves as the main advocate, program administrator, and instructional leader for this diverse group of learners. Without common language around the titles, roles, and responsibilities of these leaders, this important position within districts will be difficult to maintain. Without a district gifted education coordinator, equitable access to instruction for gifted and advanced learners is at-risk, especially those from traditionally underrepresented populations. Thus, the first major outcome of this study was the delineation of the roles and responsibilities of the district gifted education coordinator, which are depicted in the Conceptual Framework of the Leadership Roles of a District Gifted Education Coordinator (see Figure 1). Figure 1 illustrates how each of the gifted education coordinator’s responsibilities related to instructional leadership, program management, and communication and collaboration align with student learning and achievement outcomes and district and state level compliance outcomes.
Another important finding during the early part of the pandemic, was instructional leadership for district coordinators largely took shape by ensuring the continuity of the gifted identification process regardless of school shutdowns. These 11 gifted education coordinators were committed to ensuring equitable access to learning materials and instruction for students who first needed to be identified during the pandemic. One of the primary roles of the district gifted education coordinator was overseeing the screening and identification of students who need advanced academic instruction, which in these cases, was mandated by state law. The instructional leadership expertise possessed by the gifted education coordinator allows them to administer, facilitate, and coordinate this mammoth effort across their districts each year to ensure that students’ diverse learning needs are identified and met. During the pandemic, the district gifted education coordinators did not abdicate their duties in fulfilling their state mandates. Rather, they adapted their practices to identify students either using different metrics or administering the tests using virtual processes or platforms.

While many participants reported that they were concerned about test validity through the virtual platforms, those who had concerns adapted by utilizing existing achievement data, digital portfolios, and other data sources to continue the screening and identification process. The validity concerns of participants did not seem to be manifested in the reality of the virtual administration of the tests of those who utilized them for the screening processes. Overall, however, the participants reported that fewer students were identified than in previous years because COVID-19 safety protocols caused delays, the process required adaptations to identification data sources, testing was deferred for some eligible students, and due to unforeseen changes to testing calendars in their districts. This is a major concern that will have implications moving forward.

Coordinators who had to rely on achievement data in place of ability tests held the perception that these data were not ideal but would at least allow them to move forward rather than miss a year of gifted screening and identification. Some stated that they even went as far back as three school years to include older grade-level state test results, and in some cases were able to identify students who had not qualified in previous years under their traditional identification process. A few coordinators expressed concerns that these students may have different advanced learning needs from those who were identified based on ability test scores or higher achievement, but they planned to keep them in gifted services and shift the focus from identification of students who are gifted, to the identification of students who need gifted and advanced learning services. This aligns with the current equity philosophy of multiple researchers and professionals in the field of gifted education and can be interpreted as a silver lining as it provided an opportunity for districts to make this paradigm shift (Makel, et al., 2017; Peters, et al., 2014; Subotnik, et al., 2011). This finding has implications for future research as well as practice. Future studies could examine the progress and growth of students who were identified for gifted services by alternative means during the pandemic (i.e., achievement test data, review of previous cognitive test results, etc.) and compare their achievement and performance over time to gifted learners identified by their
district’s former, and more traditional means (i.e., cognitive ability tests.) Results could guide the development of more holistic identification practices.

Another important finding arose under the role of program management and communications liaison of the coordinators. To help ensure that schools were following the mandates and laws and avoid noncompliance, the district gifted education coordinators converted new mandates to bulleted one-pagers, simple directive emails, or live case scenarios for principals. This allowed principals and teachers of the gifted to adapt curriculum, policies, schedules, and instruction to comply with state mandates for providing gifted services. Even though they were experiencing a pandemic and fearing for their own safety, they ensured that their districts would meet compliance metrics, which is a major outcome of the role of the gifted education coordinators as noted in Figure 1.

Lastly, through each of these roles, the district gifted education coordinators served as communication and collaboration liaisons between multiple entities, and an increase in communication and collaboration was reported in their roles during the pandemic. For example, prior to the pandemic, participants reported how infrequently they were able to meet with school principals. Through the growing availability and comfort with online conferencing tools like Microsoft Teams and Zoom, logistical and scheduling barriers were removed. In addition, coordinators stated that prior to the pandemic they did not use online collaboration tools like Google Docs as often as they did during the pandemic, in part because of their teachers’ varying proficiency levels and comfort with these technology tools. This changed drastically and for the better as a result of being propelled into the virtual space.

Also noteworthy were the organically formed virtual professional networks between district gifted education coordinators across their states that enhanced the services and instruction for students and families. By sharing information, lesson plans, family resource packets, enrichment lessons, and talking through challenges such as implications for student identification due to changes to testing procedures, coordinators were able to rapidly deliver needed information and materials to their stakeholders without reinventing the wheel.

Caregiver transparency and awareness increased because families were able to observe their child’s online classroom at home, which helped affirm services were being provided during the pandemic. Caregiver communication with district gifted education coordinators helped the coordinators determine areas that needed improvement for advanced learners and identify students who needed additional advanced instruction during virtual learning. With their communication and collaboration liaison roles in place these programmatic equity needs were identified, triaged, and addressed through district-level decision-making processes, principal level communication channels, with the teachers of the gifted, and with caregivers.

**Strengths and Limitations**

There are a few limitations to this qualitative study. Although the administrators who participated in the study represented diverse school systems across several states, only...
11 participated in the interviews. Of note is the high percentage of female (81.8%) participants and the skewness of their reported ethnicities (90.9% white). One participant from an underrepresented minority ethnicity withdrew from the study due to a COVID-19-related family death. The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted ethnic minority communities, and we hypothesized that our participant sample reflected that reality. Also, the themes and results reported were based on our interpretation of the interview data. Member checking was used; however, researcher positionality may have influenced our interpretation of the interviews.

The strengths of this study arise from the rich, detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of the district gifted education coordinators. This paper gives voice to the stories of their leadership roles before the pandemic and how they sustained and adapted that work during the pandemic to ensure that their school districts, principals, and teachers could continue to provide equitable and differentiated instruction to advanced learners. No quantitative study could report this research well due to the nature of the untapped and unexplored community of education leaders who entrusted us with their experiences.

Conclusion and Implications

This study explored the lived experiences of 11 district gifted education coordinators to learn more about their roles and challenges during the pandemic. District coordinators of gifted education programs were key to the continuity of gifted education services. Participants reported intense periods of constant change and that they needed the skill to intuit the needs of teachers of the gifted, school administrators, supervisors, and families. They demonstrated the ability to multi-task and pivot from almost every aspect of their job to a remote environment practically overnight. Participants overcame various barriers to ensure continuity of student services and to support their teachers of the gifted in a remote instruction environment, such as navigating policies, procedures, mandates, teacher shortages, illness, and institutional red tape. Participants reported common challenges across geographic locations including student attendance issues, scheduling, inequities in technology access, technology learning curves for staff and students, virtual environment student screening and testing challenges, and reduced student referrals for gifted screening and identification. District coordinators’ training, experiences, and philosophies of gifted education shaped the way they adapted and led others during this time. A commitment to equity, student access, and empathy for others was evident across all interviews.

In qualitative research, transferability is an aim rather than generalizability. Findings should not be generalized beyond this sample or other district administrators in similar school systems with similar backgrounds and characteristics. Regardless, implications that may be useful to other district leaders can be drawn from the findings of this study:

- Equitable identification practices: Many coordinators recognized the benefits and challenges to using multiple and unconventional forms of identification data to
find gifted students who need advanced and specialized instruction during the pandemic. While this poses a challenge to alignment with specialized services, this equity issue needs to be pursued with practitioners and researchers working hand-in-hand to address the needs of this group of learners.

- Hybrid forms of meetings and professional learning: Flexibility is valuable to teachers and administrators. Continuing to offer hybrid models allows participants to attend in person or virtually. Providing brief, frequent meetings across the district may be advantageous. District gifted coordinators can facilitate virtual, collaborative methods to support teachers by using technology tools and their learning management system.

- Virtual learning and hybrid instruction to provide continuity of differentiated, enriched, and accelerated experiences: During the initial shift to emergency remote teaching, district coordinators had varying levels of digital fluency and found themselves constantly problem solving. They leveraged technology and social media to support teachers, students, and families. By meeting teachers’ instructional technology needs, coordinators can ensure quality remote instruction and continuity of specialized services. District gifted education coordinators noted that technology provided an opportunity for educators to compact curriculum and provide enrichment, acceleration, and collaboration in innovative ways.

- Teacher and substitute teacher shortages and scheduling adaptations: Superintendents and principals must provide additional support, resources, planning time, COVID-19 safety measures, and flexible scheduling to retain and meet the needs of their school-based teachers of the gifted. District gifted education coordinators were cognizant of the critical teacher shortage and pipeline issues. They provided critical staffing and scheduling adaptations support and suggestions to principals to meet equity needs of their contexts. Principals should collaborate with their district gifted education coordinator on this vital human resource challenge.

Finally, future studies are needed to investigate what qualities and traits are associated with highly effective district gifted education coordinators. Research investigating the training and background of successful leaders, their paths to this role, and their leadership traits will be useful to graduate programs in gifted education, hiring teams, and to gifted education coordinators who are new to their positions.

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