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Self-Evaluation of Educational Leadership Practices During COVID-19

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Self-Evaluation of Educational Leadership Practices During COVID-19

Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts, and specifically, superintendents, are under increased pressure to lead. Irregularity and ambiguity are now the mantras of those tasked with leading in our schools. Many current research studies aim to evaluate the possible effects of COVID-19 on the system of education (Azorín, 2020; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020), and advice on how to lead during a crisis (Harris & Jones, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020, Netolicky, 2020). There are no standards or benchmarks to follow that could potentially aid school leaders as they navigate, lead, and make important decisions that affect how quality instruction and student learning continues during these turbulent times. Using tolerance for ambiguity as a framework, this qualitative case study aims to determine precisely how some school leaders have adjusted their leadership, or not, in the throes of this disruptive pandemic. The results of this study determined that many superintendents saw the pandemic as another challenge that needed to be overcome, believed their leadership and organizational skills became sharper, and needed to accede a measure of control in their district to the state.

Keywords

Educational leadership, COVID-19, hybrid learning, distance learning, tolerance for ambiguity, case study, deductive coding, inductive coding, decision making, satisficing, sensemaking, reevaluation.

Author Bio

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Introduction

Teaching in today's educational climate is fraught with anxiety, frustration, and apprehension for many teachers who now find themselves teaching from home, and utilizing online and distance learning techniques that are foreign to them (Bradbury et al., 2020). While much attention is given to teaching and learning during this pandemic, and for good reason, little consideration has been given to how superintendents in P-12 schools have adjusted and adapted their leadership style during this time of uncertainty. Contingency theorists argue that a leader's behavior is a direct result of the general atmosphere of the group and feelings such as trust, loyalty and confidence that the group has for its leader. In order to maintain this loyalty and confidence, educational leaders have needed to reevaluate their leadership behaviors that may have worked previously, and adjust how they lead in an educational environment that can change from week to week. In order to do this successfully, a tremendous amount of tolerance for ambiguous and sometimes confusing situations is required by the educational leader. This research study is motivated by an attempt to discover how educational leadership has adapted to the "new normal."

To examine this further, an in-depth qualitative case study utilizing semi-structured interviews in various schools in Minnesota was conducted. In addition to the interview transcripts, video messages intended to keep the public informed; written announcements and learning plans were also investigated via each district's website. The participants included eight superintendents. Years of experience varied from four to 23 years. The size of the district varied from just over 300 P-12 students to a little more than 2,500 students.

To address any changes in their leadership, all participants were asked to reflect, explain and self-evaluate their leadership behaviors during the pandemic in their respective districts.

Tolerance for Ambiguity (TA) is the ability to perceive uncertainties, contradictory issues that may be difficult to understand, as well as information with vague, contrary or multiple meanings in an impartial way (McLain et al., 2015).

The history of this study can be traced to governmental action in response to COVID-19. As noted by Swaggert et al. (2020),

On March 15, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz issued Executive Order 20-02 directing schools in Minnesota to close due to the Covid-19 Pandemic and the ensuing danger to the health and safety of all Minnesotans. From March 16-27, school personnel were directed to create distance learning plans to allow for continuing the education of all students. On March 30, 2020, schools began to implement their learning plans. With just days to plan, all Minnesota teachers were transforming their curriculum to fit a distance learning model. The effort of school leaders, teachers and all school personnel was deemed heroic as students are now learning from home and most teachers are teaching from home. On April 23, 2020, Governor Walz ordered all schools to remain closed for the remainder of the school year to limit the spread of the coronavirus. (p. 1)

At the time of this writing, all Minnesota schools were operating under Executive Order 20-82 and the Safe Learning Plan (SLP) where all public schools must adhere to parameters determined by the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH). This plan involved implementing or shifting between the three learning models in the 2020-21 school year planning guidance: in-person learning, hybrid learning and distance learning (Exec. Order No. 20-82, 2020). To determine the base learning model, school districts were advised of the bi-weekly case rate (over 14 days) by county of residence. These data are the number of COVID-19 cases by county of residence in Minnesota over 14 days per 10,000 people by date of specimen collection

(Minnesota Department of Education, 2020, p. 6). The Learning Model Parameters are specified in Table 1.

Table 1

Learning Model Parameters

Number of Cases per 10,000 over 14 days, by County of Residence	Learning Model
0-9	In-person Learning for all students
10-19	In-person learning for elementary students: hybrid learning for secondary students
20-29	Hybrid learning for all students
30-49	Hybrid learning for elementary students; distance learning for secondary students
50+	Distance learning for all students

All of the participants in this study had to transition from one learning model to another at some time during the first half of the 2020 school year. Some leadership researchers have noticed the importance of TA and have begun to examine how it would affect leadership, especially in the field of educational leadership (Fernham & Marks, 2013; Kajs & McCollum,

2009, McCollum & Kajs, 2007). Table 2 summarizes the modifications in the delivery model for one of the districts that participated in this study.

Table 2

Change in Delivery Model

Date	Delivery Model Changes
9/10/-10/14/20	Pk-6 In Person
	7-12 Hybrid A-B
10/19-12/3/20	Pk-5 In Person
	6-12 Hybrid A-B
12/8 -12/18/20	Pk-2 In Person
	3-13 Distance Learning
12/21-1/8/21	PK -12 Distance Learning
1/11-1/29/21	Pk-5 In Person M-Th., Friday is Distance Learning
	6-12 Hybrid A-B with synchronous learning M-Th., Friday is
	Distance Learning

It is no wonder that while vetting the interview questions, one superintendent added, “A large component of managing/leading during the pandemic is building and maintaining trust among staff and the community. Every time a change happens which is contrary to a previous decision, it erodes the positive influence leaders have on a district.”

Purpose

While leading their school districts during the unprecedented turmoil COVID-19 has caused, this study explored how superintendents assessed their job satisfaction and leadership performance as they relate to uncertainty, fluctuating stimuli, unfamiliarity, novelty, and delayed selection. Harris (2020) emphasized that leadership, typically found in schools, has changed. She asserts,

Currently, the staff meetings, coffee catch-ups and corridor chats are gone. All those formal and informal moments where relationships are forged and leadership is enacted vanished overnight. Globally, education leaders, at all levels in the system, spend their time influencing and engaging with others through a laptop or phone screen. (p. 321)

Specifically, this case study explored how superintendents are adapting to and coping with the pressure of leading a district during this period of uncertainty. The only certainty was that every fourteen days, the delivery model used in a particular school might be changing due to circumstances beyond their control. Quality teaching and learning need to be at the forefront regardless of the situation.

Context

At a recent Dean's Advisory Council (DAC) meeting in a small Midwestern university, the participants explained how their school districts and teachers have been coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. The members at this meeting were roughly 20 area superintendents. Concerns were expressed about teacher's experience with teaching online, a lack of internet access for some of their students, communication efforts that seemed interminable, and student attendance issues. Towards the end of the meeting, someone asked, "and how are you all doing?" It was curious that none of the participants seemed to have considered this question. It seemed

that all of them were so busy making sure that their teachers and students had the necessities to subsist, that their own welfare did not even cross their minds. This study was undertaken to address not only their mental well-being, but also to see how their leadership practices may have changed since the middle of March 2020.

Shortly after the meeting, I began researching educational leadership practices during a catastrophe and came across Tolerance for Ambiguity. I discovered that recent measures of TA have included multiple contexts in which ambiguity may exist, such as in family or work situations (McLain, 1993, 2009; Furnham, 1994; Durrheim and Foster, 1997; Herman et al., 2010) and has often focused on individual reactions to ambiguity in varied situations or tasks (Endres et al., 2009; Weisbrod, 2009; Herman et al., 2010). Soon thereafter, a series of interview questions were developed that dealt specifically with TA. The questions were then sent out to five members of the DAC to be vetted. IRB permission was obtained in October 2020 and a series of eight interviews were scheduled during the month of January 2021.

Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of the relationship between leadership practices and core self-evaluations amongst superintendents in Minnesota during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was driven by the following research objectives:

1. Describe individual self-evaluation based on leadership characteristics using Tolerance for Ambiguity as a guide.
2. Determine which practices, systems, or procedures established during COVID-19 will continue once the pandemic ends.

Tolerance for Ambiguity

The Superintendency is a difficult job no matter the size or makeup of the district. This study attempted to understand how these school leaders fared when COVID-19 was added to their list of responsibilities. Superintendent four (S4) stated, “Prior to COVID, I had two Cs to manage, contract and construction. In the spring, I added another C to the list...which was challenging.” This study was mainly interested in finding out the direct influences COVID-19 had on the subjects’ work-related appraisals before and during the pandemic. McLain et al., (2015) argued,

Ambiguity hinders choice because desirable alternatives are difficult or impossible to distinguish from undesirable members of the feasible set of options (Hirsh et al., 2012). In an ambiguous situation, behavioral choices cannot be linked to predictable outcomes. Thus, alternative conceptualizations of cognition-behavior-outcome relationships must be developed and examined until predictability can be achieved. (p. 3)

Skaggs (2019) developed a conceptual framework around tolerance for ambiguity that seemed suitable for this research endeavor. His framework contained six attributes summarized below.

Comfortable With Uncertainty. Fields (2011, as cited in Skaggs, 2019) states, “Uncertainty refers to situations involving imperfect, incomplete or unknown information (p. 2). Agor (1986, as cited in Skaggs, 2019) suggests, “Input from facts and experiences, combined and integrated with a well-honed sensitivity and openness to other clues” may assist in the decision-making process (p. 2).

Not Bound by Categorization. Cohen and Lefebvre (2005, as cited in Skaggs, 2019) assert,

Categorization is the method of recognizing similarities and differences in ideas or objects and grouping these based on a criterion for a specific purpose. The purpose of a category is to illustrate a relationship between the ideas or objects in whatever the purpose of the categories may be. (p. 2)

Duncker's comments (1945, as cited in Skaggs, 2019) described this as functional fixedness or "the inability to see the possibilities and usefulness of ideas or objects beyond their accepted grouping" (p. 2). The changes caused by Covid-19 were unique and did not fit into a certain category or group. "Until information is gathered that enables the development of predictive understanding, unfamiliarity is associated with the anxiety of ambiguity" (McLain et al., 2015, p. 3).

Tolerance for Fluctuating Stimuli. Skaggs (2019) suggests,

Stimuli in this case can include; multiple priorities, changing schedules and budgets, and changing product requirements. Tolerance for ambiguity refers to the capacity to withstand the fluctuations and chaos brought on by a problem that cannot be clearly defined or when it is unclear how the pieces of the solution are going to come together because the criteria is changing. (p. 3)

Low Fear Response to the Unfamiliar or Change. Brenner and Darby (2000, as cited in Skaggs, 2019) propose a model for adapting to change that requires four stages:

(1) Status quo is the initial state of the system—comfort, familiarity, established patterns, relationships, and routines prevail. (2) an unfamiliar element enters or arises, and interferes with the status quo, (3) Chaos--once the unfamiliar element is recognized and accepted, the system enters chaos, a time of anxiety, vulnerability, and confusion and (4)

Integration--a transforming idea emerges, and people figure out how to integrate the unfamiliar and change how to work with the new situation. (p. 3)

Skaggs (2019) argues, “If you are not a problem solver, then change is always frustrating. People don’t like the unfamiliar because it brings up problems and people don’t like dealing with problems” (p. 3).

Acceptance of Novelty. Rogers (1961, as cited in Skaggs, 2019) proposes, “The very essence of creativity in ideas, products or services is its originality, it’s different, and hence there is not a standard by which to judge it” (p. 3). This study attempted to analyze how superintendents responded when some measure of control was taken away from them and conversely, how COVID-19 intensified the acceptance of novelty in their professional lives.

Delaying Selection from Multiple Solutions. Sternberg (1999, as cited in Skaggs, 2019) argues, “Some people believe that there is only one right answer and that ambiguity must be avoided whenever possible” (p. 4). Skaggs affirms by stating, “To optimize creative potential you need to be able to tolerate the discomfort of an ambiguous situation long enough so that what you produce is the best, or close to the best, of which you are capable” (p. 3).

Methodology

This study utilized the case study as the chosen method of qualitative research. Stake (2005, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018) stated, “case study research is not a methodology but a choice of what is to be studied (i.e., a case within a bounded system, bounded by time and place)” p. 96. The cases used for this study were a small group of superintendents and their experiences leading their respective districts during the COVID-19 pandemic during the fall of 2020. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that case study research utilizes multiple sources of information. As stated previously, in addition to the interview transcriptions, video messages

intended to keep the public informed; written announcements and learning plans were also investigated via each district's website.

District superintendents were asked via Zoom interviews to reflect upon their leadership approach in relation to uncertainty, fluctuating stimuli, unfamiliarity, novelty, and delayed selection. A total of ten open-ended questions were asked. During the coding process, it was difficult, but not impossible, to separate or ascribe certain behaviors to one attribute or another. For instance, was an individual's ability to cope with a wide range of information (categorize) attributed to their confidence (ability to handle uncertainty)? Was their ability to remain calm (manage unfamiliarity) associated with prior experiences managing new or novel challenges? This constant interplay occurred throughout the entire coding process. Table 3 provides a summary of the eight superintendents who participated in this study.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Experience (Years)	District Size
S1	Man	21	360
S2	Man	10	1300
S3	Woman	7	800
S4	Woman	5	2500
S5	Man	10	900
S6	Woman	5	475
S7	Man	7	1300
S8	Man	5	2500

Paradigm

This qualitative case study is founded in constructivism where the objective is to rely on the subject's assessment of the situation as much as possible. Regarding ontology, Creswell and Poth (2018) argue, "the ontological issue relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics. When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities" (p. 20). Linked to this study, one superintendent's interpretation of leadership may be different from another. These individual meanings are "negotiated socially and historically and are formed through interaction with others" (Creswell & Poth, p. 24).

Epistemologically, "conducting qualitative research means that the researcher tries to get as close to the subject as possible to the participants being studied. Subjective evidence is assembled based on individual views" (Creswell & Poth, p. 21). Marion and Gonzales (2014) suggest, "Epistemology is nothing more than the way in which we perceive and understand our environments" (p. 2). Getting close to the subjects proved to be next to impossible due to the pandemic and as stated previously, all interviews were performed via Zoom. Luckily, copious amounts of information were gleaned by analyzing the various announcements and videos on the district website. All of the superintendents graciously shared any relevant information they distributed to their teachers as well.

Axiologically, "all researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in a study" (Creswell & Poth, p. 21). I spent 23 years in P-12 education prior to moving into higher education. For 12 of those years, I was a high school principal and superintendent. My experience as a building administrator provided me with plenty of situations where difficult decisions needed to be made that affected the school or entire district. Nothing in my experiences rivaled what current superintendents have been enduring for the past ten months.

Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research studies involve a continuous interplay between data collection and data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative analysis is a form of intellectual artistry. There is no single way to accomplish qualitative research, since data analysis is a process of making meaning. It is a creative process, not a mechanical one (Denzin & Lincoln, nd). Similarly, a qualitative study capitalizes on ordinary ways of making sense (Stake, 1995). Stake (1995) reminds qualitative researchers that, “there is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis,” he explained, “essentially means taking something apart” (p. 71), which in this case, not only means understanding the ways superintendents dealt with the COVID-19 crisis, but also identifying and defining the patterns that emerged from that meaning making process. Qualitative data analysis, then, gives meaning to first impressions and final compilations. It is an analysis that tells the story of Minnesota superintendents’ intentions to make (and their results from making) informed decisions that define and guide their leadership decisions in this very difficult time.

Methodologically, Esterberg (2001) suggested, “getting intimate with data” (p. 157) and described the main objective of immersing oneself in interview transcripts to “load up your memory” with the collected data. This research study followed the data analysis and coding procedures suggested by Creswell (2005) and Esterberg (2001). Specifically, Esterberg (2001) suggested that open coding is a process by which “you work intensively with your data, line by line, identifying themes and categories that seem of interest” (p. 158). Additionally, Creswell (2005) mandated the traditional approach in the social sciences that allows the codes to emerge during the data analysis (p. 187). Once the data from this research were examined thoroughly

through the open coding process, the researchers reviewed codes for emerging themes in the data.

This research study followed Creswell's (2012) six steps during the data analysis process, and although these steps are described in linear order, Creswell described "an interactive practice" to analysis; that is, there is a recursive element to following these steps—the process is not simply a static, linear order of analysis.

Step 1: Organize and prepare the data for analysis (Creswell, 2012, p. 185). During this step, the Zoom interview transcripts were reviewed and refashioned into word document transcripts.

Step 2: Read through the data (Creswell, 2012, p. 185). This step also aligns with Esterberg's directive to "get to know your data." This involves finding the overall meaning to gain a general sense of the information and ideas that the participants conveyed.

Step 3: Begin detailed analysis with the coding process (Creswell, 2012, p. 186). The material was organized into segments by taking the text data and segmenting sentences into categories. These categories were then labeled with terms based on the actual language from the participants.

Step 4: Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories for these for analysis (Creswell, 2012, p. 189). This process was used to generate codes for the descriptions, which then led to generalizing a small number of categories or themes. The themes that emerged were organized into a general description for this research study.

Step 5: Advance how the description of the themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative (Creswell, 2005, p. 189). For this step, the emergent themes were woven into narrative passages, so that the findings emerged logically from the participants' responses.

Step 6: Interpret the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2012, p. 189). Creswell recognizes that a researcher's own background plays just as important a part of the meaning making process as a researcher's fidelity to a theoretical lens. During the interpretation process, my experience as former superintendent informed my understanding of the participants' stories. To convey the participants' perceptions of their experiences accurately, emphasis was placed specifically on what the subjects were saying, the conclusions they drew, and their intentions for future practice. The themes that emerged from this study came directly from my awareness of the healthy tension between my own biases and the participants' own meaning-making processes. Creswell (2018) described the essential elements of qualitative data analysis as:

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis; then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes; and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion. (p. 183)

Deductive and Inductive Coding

The self-assessment of leadership practices during COVID-19 were translated into priori codes in one part of the qualitative analysis process. Priori codes are those that are developed before examining the current data. Deductive coding utilized predetermined codes gleaned from examining the open-ended responses through the tolerance for ambiguity framework. This type of coding is a hierarchical method where the researcher brings suggestive observations to the

data, these being uncertainty, categorization and fluctuating stimuli, unfamiliarity, and lastly, novelty and delayed selection. Under the proposition of tolerance for ambiguity, these deductive codes were tracked in the data.

Creswell (2018) counseled, “If a prefigured coding scheme is used in analysis, we typically encourage the researchers to be open to additional codes emerging during the analysis” (p. 193). To complement the deductive coding utilized for this study, inductive coding occurred. Inductive coding involves the development of codes as data are analyzed, and this type of coding allows the data to reveal categories aside from the prefigured (deductive) coding scheme. The utilization of both deductive and inductive coding strengthened the qualitative data analysis.

Results

The results section will be organized in the following manner and will involve two segments. The first segment will focus on research question one and include an analysis of each of the six TA attributes. This segment highlights the deductive coding portion of the research. Each attribute will be presented in the same fashion using a similar format. A brief introduction will be used to reorient the reader to each attribute followed by a table that identifies specific phrases and the themes that were related to each attribute. A deeper analysis using participant responses related to each attribute will then be presented. Uncertainty will be examined first, followed by categorization and fluctuating stimuli, unfamiliarity, and finally, novelty and delayed selection. A summary of the deductive coding will be provided prior to moving on to the second segment. The second segment will focus on research question two and will decipher the inductive coding portion of the research. This segment will focus on which practices, systems, or procedures established during COVID-19 will continue to be used once the pandemic ends.

Research Question One: Describe individual self-evaluation based on leadership characteristics using tolerance for ambiguity as a guide.

Uncertainty “Confidence”

S6 offered an interesting comment in her response to one of the interview questions that spoke to the importance of having experience as a superintendent prior to the pandemic. She stated,

First or second-year folks are really being hit hard by COVID-19. I can't imagine what it would be like to be in my first year as superintendent...just trying to get a handle on all the job entails, and then get slammed by the pandemic. That is a tough scene.

All subjects who participated in this study had at least four years of experience as a superintendent, and for good reason. A wise man once told me that one cannot truly understand anything until you have experienced it for more than three years. Looking back at my experiences in education, I would have to agree. After three years of teaching, I was a much better educator than I was when I started. The same can be said for my first years as an administrator and instructor in higher education. It goes without saying that experience breeds confidence. This confidence is a byproduct of years of knowledge and a familiarity with the system and the people who make the organization function properly. Any change or modification to the modus operandi was weathered by falling back on timeworn procedures and practices that have proven to be effective in the past.

As was previously stated, gone are the days where superintendents can operate within known parameters with clear repetitions and cycles as they pass from one season and one semester to the next. COVID-19 has changed all of this and irregularity and ambiguity are now

the mantras of those who are tasked with leading in our schools. Needless to say, the pandemic has shaken the confidence of even the most seasoned superintendent, some to a greater degree than others. To their credit, almost all of the subjects looked at the pandemic as another challenge to be overcome. To meet this challenge, many subjects relied on their experiences, became accustomed to adverse situations, and took their communication efforts to new levels. Table 4 summarizes the major themes that were revealed during the coding process.

Table 4

Superintendent Responses Related to Uncertainty “Confidence”

Participant	Phrase	Theme
S7	Ability to decipher information	Experience
S4	Even more confident this year	Experience
S1	Use of next level communication	Communication
S2	Radio and use of video platforms	Communication
S3	Stakeholder surveys	Communication
S6	Know what I see not what I know	Adversity
S1	Adversity is part of leadership	Adversity
S2	Improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills	Adversity
S5	Community-based decisions	Transparency
S3	Maintain visibility and approachability	Transparency
S7	Improved trust through vulnerability	Transparency

During the coding process, experience was one of the recurring themes that many of the subjects referred to in their responses. The uniqueness of COVID-19 and the impact it had on

districts across the state was also mentioned numerous times. S1 responded, “I feel pretty confident, but then as you get into the COVID-19 part, things changed and everything that comes up is brand new again.” S8 stated, “We're doing the testing now, like I'm a testing center. For God's sakes...I'm counting saliva kits this morning to make sure we get enough for our test tomorrow.” S7 affirmed the novelty theme but also referred to experience as an equalizer,

I feel pretty comfortable everyday showing up to work knowing that there are challenges that come out of the blue that you can't possibly foresee. For the most part, I've been in those situations before and worked through them with good people.

Another prominent theme related to confidence was the importance of communication. S2 stated, “The devil's in the details yet, you have to work down through all of the information and bring it to a level that meets your school and your community's needs.” He went on to state,

I think our level of communication with our community and our staff has had to increase dramatically because there's a lot of misinformation that comes out. And so, in order to try to be really consistent with the message...you have to over communicate.

I think it is fair to maintain that all superintendents understood the importance of communication, but the frequency and methods used to communicate with stakeholders changed due to COVID-19. S4 asserted, “I have really been intentional to ramp up my presence and my communication with stakeholders and families. I've been on tons of Zooms giving COVID updates and how we are mitigating these things at schools.” S2 explained, “I've been on the radio, now more than ever. I go out to the radio station about every two weeks and I bring information regarding COVID as well as what the school is doing.” S3 mentioned the importance of communication in her answer,

My ability to communicate has been enhanced and has been taken to the next level. I have had more open conversations with families just regarding their concerns as well, listening to their ideas in how to help their children through this time.

The use of technology and the school website was mentioned by many of the superintendents. S5 affirmed,

I give periodic video messages to families using our school's website. We have a big blue colored box and they can go in there and find answers to some of the questions they might have about how things are going. It has made me a better communicator.

Those who have been in a leadership position understands that even under the best circumstances, adversity is something that simply cannot be avoided. For the subjects in this study, their successes managing erstwhile adverse circumstances have given them confidence during COVID-19. S6 simply put, "difficult situations and adversity are part of leadership." The pandemic created many challenges, but most of the subjects focused on how these challenges can be opportunities in disguise. S4 maintained, "where there's challenges, there are also opportunities. You can either get busy worrying about the challenges, or you can get busy working on the opportunities." S3 asserted,

It's all brand new. You're not relying on any of those past specific experiences, but you're relying on all of your different things you've done throughout your life to tackle all of these new challenges. And so, yeah, with COVID, it's just every day there is something new. There's constant challenge that require you to use critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Every day I come to school I need to bring my A game.

The last major theme that emerged from the coding process was transparency. Some of the subjects insisted that COVID-19 has made them more transparent as a leader, and this in turn

has given them more confidence not only during the pandemic, but also in how to handle future matters with their teachers and the community. S2 argued,

I don't think I would have the understanding on how to roll out our strategic planning model if it wasn't for COVID. COVID has forced me and my district advisory team to step out into the community and lay all of our cards on the table. We welcome input from the community and we listen to what they have to say.

S1 stated, "I have become more transparent about the decisions that are being made, listen to the feedback from my teachers and the community, and this has made me a more effective leader."

Finally, S4 stated,

There's nothing that I do with committees or groups that I don't share with everybody that wants it, you know. When we have our cabinet meetings every Monday morning, I have it in a room that needs to be more open because we need to be more spread apart and people can walk through and I don't care anymore...as far as our decision making, it's in the open.

Categorization and Fluctuating Stimuli "Coping"

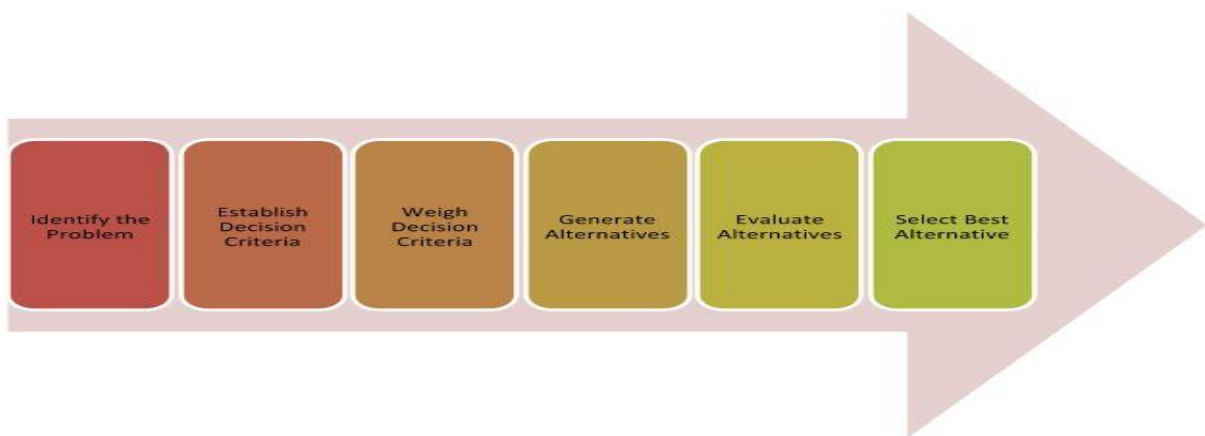
S5 referred to John Dewey's Decision-Making Model in one of his responses during his interview. Regarding Dewey's contributions to education, Williams (2017) asserts,

Dewey's beliefs and philosophy about education and learning have impacted countless educators over the years and are woven throughout many learning theories such as progressive education, constructivism, learner-centered theory, and experiential knowledge, all of which differ from what Dewey describes as a traditional classroom setting. (p. 92)

He had learned about decision making capacity in graduate school and had several opportunities to put what he learned into practice during his tenure as superintendent. He argued, “Decision making during COVID-19 is different because of time restraints. I often find myself making decisions at the spur of the moment and then try to predict the consequences.”

Figure 1

Dewey's Decision-Making Model



Marion and Gonzales (2013) speculate,

Administrators rarely have complete information about a problem; they must deal with numerous conflicting and often illogical forces during the decision making process; they rarely have time to explore alternatives; and they rarely have a good grasp of cause-and-effect relationships (what the outcomes of their decisions will be). (p. 211)

Simon (1957) maintains that sound decision-making requires resources, knowledge, and time. As stated above, time is a resource that is in short supply during COVID-19. Simon’s 1957 work, (as cited in Marion and Gonzales, 2014) offers, “all we need to do is satisfice. This means that we find a solution that will take care of the situation from a set of solutions to which we have

fairly ready access” (p. 211). Although none of the subjects specifically used the word “satisfice,” that is exactly what they needed to do.

Sensemaking is another term that fits within the discussion about self-efficacy. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) define sensemaking as “the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations” (p. 57). Novel, ambiguous, confusing are words that can be used to describe the effects COVID-19 has had on districts throughout the state. Karl Weick (1995) described seven properties of sensemaking. “Sensemaking is understood as a process that is (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of sensible environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues, (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy” (p. 17). For the purposes of this study, only two, social and ongoing (flows and brackets) were explored.

Marion and Gonzales (2014) assert, “sensemaking is a social process, something we do in relationship with one another” (p. 219). Maitlis (2005) describes organizational sensemaking as “a fundamentally social process in which organization members interpret their environment in and through interactions with each other, constructing accounts that allow them to comprehend the world and act collectively” (p. 21). Allport (as cited in Lindzey & Aronson, 1985) posits, “sensemaking is generally regarded as social because even individuals making sense on their own are embedded in a sociomaterial context where their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others” (p. 3). Many superintendents in this study sought to make sense of their new environments through their interactions with each other. If they were already part of a group that met monthly, these meetings started to occur

weekly. If only a handful of superintendents met, the numbers grew dramatically during the pandemic.

Maitlis and Christanson (2014) state, “Sensemaking is triggered by cues—such as issues, events, or situations—for which the meaning is ambiguous and/or outcomes uncertain. Such occurrences, when noticed, interrupt people’s ongoing flow, disrupting their understanding of the world and creating uncertainty about how to act” (p. 70). Marion and Gonzales (2014) liken these cues to brackets. They explain, “The events we bracket and the meaning we ascribe to those brackets become part of our worldview; they help bring order to our world, they help us identify causalities and predict our future” (p. 220). The networking groups not only satisfied the social aspect of sensemaking, it also served as a haven where superintendents could contrast their cues with what other superintendents were experiencing.

During the coding process, specific themes were identified related to categorization and fluctuating stimuli. In order to cope with the many changes caused by COVID-19, most superintendents relied on specific core values, satisfied, and took their networking capacity to new heights. Table 5 summarizes the major themes that were revealed during the coding process.

Table 5

Superintendent Responses Related to Categorization and Fluctuating Stimuli “Coping”

Participant	Phrase	Theme
S7	Mandates create changes in cultural practices	Core Values
S6	Reliance on core values to weather the storm	Core Values
S1	Loss of social relationships or social capital	Satisfice

Participant	Phrase	Theme
S2	New challenges creating new motivations	Satisfice
S1	Limit on time, knowledge, resources	Satisfice
S3	Enhanced flexibility and adaptability	Satisfice
S1	This is a collaborative effort	Sensemaking/Networking
S5	Many levels of support	Sensemaking/Networking
S4	Relationships intensified with colleagues	Sensemaking/Networking

In one of the very first interviews, S7 revealed certain core values that he and his leadership team would abide by during the pandemic. This went beyond merely putting a plan in place that specified grade levels and whether the instructional model would be face-to-face, hybrid, or distance learning (see Learning Model Parameters, Table 1). All of the superintendents were consummate professionals who repeatedly stated that they needed to put their students' interests first. These core values conveyed how they would act in the face of the pandemic and the many changes that it caused to their schools and district. S4 stated, "We need to clarify for our families and students exactly how we are going to proceed for the next 14 days. This needs to be done in a clear and calm manner." S3 put it more succinctly, "If we are freaking out about the situation, then everyone in the district will be freaking out as well." S1 asserted, "We were very clear about what was going to happen. We were going to be in person if we can, and operate as safely as possible. We haven't veered from these criteria." S6 professed,

I need to remember my values and continue to do what's best for kids. If you can stick to those core principles that made you a good leader in the first place, you should be able to cope with most anything that is thrown at you, including this pandemic.

S7 affirmed the merit of establishing core values as guiding principles during the early stages of the pandemic. He stated,

Early in March, I brought all of my building leaders together and we developed a plan for moving forward with distance learning. There were four things that I talked about and my expectation was that all of us needed to role model and portray four things...and these were going to be challenging. These were communication, calmness, confidence, and courage, not necessarily in that order...the four C's.

It came as no surprise that many of the comments referenced what "we" were going to do or how the team would respond to the pandemic. The notion of collaboration and distributed leadership will be examined later in this paper.

The second theme that was identified during the coding process was the notion of satisficing. At the beginning of this segment, satisfice was associated primarily with time. It is understood that these superintendents needed to make timely decisions based on the resources, sometimes limited, that they had at their disposals. S4 stated:

I needed to find seven people, on a holiday, to be on our Incident Command Team, and report back to the Department of Education by the morning. It took me most of the day, but somehow I made it work.

S8 offered,

There are some things, curriculum items for example, that have definitely taken a backseat right now, and that is unfortunate. COVID dominates your

day...communicating with the families, staying fully staffed, and putting out fires. That is our focus right now, unfortunately.

S2 commented,

Everything we do now is brand new...we are almost to the end of the first semester and it seems like something new pops up every week. This week it is vaccine distribution and even though I attended a couple of meetings about it, I am still unclear about some of the specifics.

Another aspect of satisficing is making a decision that seems like the best possible solution at present. If given time to weigh all of the potential alternatives, an appropriate solution is often found. S5 stated, "Decisions that would normally take months to make...we are now making in a day or two." S4 put a positive spin on this new decision-making process.

When an issue or challenge comes up, I meet with my leadership team and we come to a consensus. We don't have time to admire the problem. We need to make a decision based on where we are, and what we have done in the past.

S6 was also encouraged by this progressive decision-making process. She indicated, "Because we have amped up our communications, and are constantly reaching out to the community, we can see the fruits of our labors, or not, a lot sooner now compared to what happened in the past."

S7 made reference to his ability to be flexible and adapt to the ever-changing educational environment. He said,

Flexibility and being able to pivot and change directions on the goal has now become part of my repertoire. I can still fall back on some life experiences to meet these new challenges but every time I think I know the direction we are heading, the goalpost is moved.

Coping with or taking care of a variety of challenges during the pandemic did not always involve time and decision-making. Aside from the obvious changes in teaching methods and students learning from home, most superintendents insisted that school occasions should continue to be celebrated in some manner even during the pandemic. Some superintendents cited the loss of social relationships and social capital several times. Coping with the new normal meant finding alternatives to what has been the norm. S1 stated,

We are doing everything by Zoom and I think that really impacts the social relationship part, even with our staff and our parents. I mean, we don't have our parents coming into the building. We don't have anybody coming in for a music concert or a basketball game. We just did our spelling bee this week and it is not uncommon for us to have 100 people show up for a spelling bee and now they watch it from home.

S6 shared,

So much of what I do now is based on predicting the future which is never good. COVID cases may rise which would affect our delivery method, technology is fraught with complications too numerous to list, and the decisions that I have made have been questioned. I do the best with what I know and feel fortunate to know that I am not in this alone.

This idea of collaboration and camaraderie segues into the last theme related to coping, networking.

From the data, it became clear that day-to-day issues could be managed by satisficing. The larger issues, e.g., budgetary, teacher union, personal protective equipment (PPE), school board, legal, state guidelines and mandates, and student absenteeism, needed to be measured against what was happening in neighboring districts. S1 stated, “we’ve done a really good job of

making sure that people aren't on an island." S7 affirmed, "It is important that people don't feel like they have to deal with all of the issues that come with COVID by themselves...we have a pretty strong network." S3 stated,

I would say that early in July, maybe even June is when we started going to weekly meetings, looking at the restart to school. I would say in March, April and May we were meeting, like every month. And that was more of a...do you have your flak jacket on and how is it going type of thing. It was more of a mental health check on people.

S9 added,

We meet on a weekly basis by zoom for an hour with all the superintendent and executive directors from around the region as well as having different state people from the Minnesota School Board Association, Minnesota Association of School Administrators sometimes personnel from the Department of Ed. They join us because that's the contact point for getting questions answered and getting information out and we average probably 55 people on that weekly zoom meeting. And so, I think that has a lot to do with remaining confident during such a time of constant change and challenge.

S5 indicated,

There are so many unknowns. It is really difficult to give black and white answers all of the time. I needed something to provide me with faith and confidence with my decision-making and these meetings really help. It seems like every other week information comes out from the Department of Education and you need to reevaluate what you are doing. These meetings give all of us a way to decipher what the message says, what is important to communicate, and provide clear and consistent messaging.

S9 revealed,

I was having some issues with some members on the board, not huge issues, but I started to question whether I had communicated the changes to our learning plan well enough. My first call was to (name), a superintendent ten miles down the road, to make sure that what I proposed lined up with the Governor's statement from last week. It was, and she gave me some helpful hints about improving my communications with the school board as well...a win-win.

Unfamiliarity “Calmness”

After the first few interviews, it became necessary to remind the superintendents that my objective was to find out how they were doing during the pandemic. Most of the responses conveyed the needs of the students, teachers, and families rather than a focus on self. It came as no surprise that few ever thought about how they were doing (emotionally) throughout the pandemic. S3 commented, “This is like therapy for me. I get so caught up in the day-to-day, sometimes I forget about my needs.” It was stated earlier in this paper that it is often difficult to divorce one of the six attributes from the others. If subjects considered themselves to have high confidence and coping skills, it makes sense that this would affect their emotional stability in a positive manner. Bottom line, the thick skinned, confident, and optimistic veneer that these superintendents projected on a daily basis was present, front and center, during these interviews as well.

During the coding process, specific themes were identified related to unfamiliarity. In order to remain calm, secure, and show less reactivity to everyday occurrences, most superintendents depended on family and friends, maintained an even keel, and practiced some measures of self-care. Table 6 summarizes the major themes that were revealed during the coding process.

Table 6*Superintendent Responses Related to Unfamiliarity “Calmness”*

Participant	Phrase	Theme
S8	Focus on family	Family/Friends
S5	Talking things through with my wife	Family/Friends
S4	Conversational listening	Even Keel
S5	Keyboard warriors	Even Keel
S3	Keeping my emotions in check	Even Keel
S6	This is like a roller coaster	Even Keel
S4	Sometimes the guidelines are difficult to comprehend	Even Keel
S7	I am meant to be here	Even Keel
S1	I need to stay active as well as actively engaged	Self-Care
S4	Looking forward to a break in the action	Self-Care

When the topic of emotions was discussed, S3’s comments were similar to many of the others. She stated,

I don't try to stay in that emotional world too much because it's not productive. So what I tend to do is try to get that emotional part out of me so if I'm sad or if I'm angry, I focus on what I can do to correct it, and I get back on track and focus on the task at hand.

Some of the superintendents found solace in personal relationships. It was no surprise that many referenced the person who knew them the best, their spouse. S5 made the comment,

My wife noticed that work was taking a toll on me and she gave me some great advice. She reminded me that I can't take what might be said on social media or in the newspaper personally. She told me to focus on my abilities and all the good things that have happened prior to and even during COVID. Make a decision and move on. You know what you are doing. I needed that.

S8 explained how he and a neighboring superintendent could talk openly about the challenges both were facing during the pandemic. He shared,

The day after the Governor spoke, the first thing I did was contact him. We have started to talk almost every day. He has become more of a friend than simply a colleague...he is someone I can be honest with and I know he won't judge me. He is a calming influence, and I think he would say the same about me.

Besides their spouses and close colleagues, some superintendents shared their desire to forget about school and COVID-19 issues and simply discuss mundane topics that had nothing to do with school or leadership. C7 shared,

Even though I'm extremely passionate about education and kids, I can't talk about them all the time. I need to have some type of release, like going over to my neighbor's house and have a few beers with him. He gives me crap about school, but we try not to talk too much about it. I need this because I can't inundate myself with work all of the time.

Managing emotions on a personal level is something that superintendents have been doing for quite some time, pandemic or not. S5 discussed what he called keyboard warriors who were present before and persist during COVID-19. He opined,

People who constantly question every decision and don't do it in a respectful manner, these keyboard warriors, who sit behind a screen and question you. They just don't understand exactly what goes into making a decision at this level.

S4 used the term "armchairs" to describe these constituents. An unseen benefit during COVID-19 was that some of these community members agreed to meet face-to-face. S4 stated, "It was a perfect opportunity for me to do some conversational listening...it helped me see things from their perspective without me talking too much but instead focusing on listening."

Some superintendents described leading during COVID as a roller coaster or waves. S5 asserted,

You have your good days, and you have your bad. Everyone is looking at you to see how you will respond to the latest news from MDE or how I will respond to the latest number of COVID cases. I need to keep an even keel and make those around me think that it doesn't affect me.

Maybe the most profound statement related to emotions was made by S7. He stressed,

You can easily fall into that why me, poor me situation. Why do I have to be leading a school district during COVID? I honestly believe that leaders are put in certain situations for certain reasons. I'm here today leading the district during COVID because I am meant to be here. I have the skill set and the knowledge and the ability to do it. If you don't believe it, that you are here to lead for a reason, then every day you are going to questions yourself thinking that you should have done something different.

Finally, some superintendents chose to focus on some measure of self-care to moderate their emotions during COVID-19. Some spoke about running, weight training, and improving their cardiovascular health. S6 described this as her reserve tank. She stated, “It is never a good idea to come to school with an empty reserve tank.” S4 affirmed,

Filling up your reserve tank and doing things you enjoy outside of school is a way to take care of yourself. It is different for everyone...some spend time with their wife or kids; some go fishing, some workout, some listen or play music. Whatever it is, you need to do it because if you come to school and your reserve is empty, the first negative thing that happens might trigger a negative emotional response.

S1 looked no further than his own preschool for a boost. He argued, “I've said many times that if you're having a bad day all you need to do is go down to preschool and kindergarten and life is good because I'm a big deal in preschool.”

Novelty and Delayed Selection “Control”

Johnson et al. (2008) summarize locus of control as, “the belief in one’s capacity to impact the environment and produce desired effects. An internal locus of control involves beliefs that one’s environment and outcomes are controllable” (p. 393). It was not surprising that many superintendents believed they had a high level of control prior to COVID-19. S1 commented, “I have a high level control over everything, because I'm probably a control freak.” Having a good working relationship with the school board was another statement that was mentioned numerous times during the interviews. S4 stated:

Having a supportive and cohesive school board, especially during this time is huge. And right now, If I didn't have a supportive board that allowed me to do my job, we would be

having a totally different conversation. A positive school board is key to allowing me to control the outcomes that are best for our district.

During the pandemic, the locus of control seemed to diminish for many of the superintendents as they were now dealing with new or novel challenges. These novelties in turn delayed the selection of a plan to move forward. Throughout the coding process, it was discovered that most superintendents focused more on matters that were not in their control rather than what was. S8 asserted, “So many times, I’m making decisions basically on what I need to do or what I have to do not necessarily what I want to do. That took some getting used to.” Although the locus of control eroded, it did not stop many in their pursuit of previously determined projects that continued to garner their attention during the pandemic.

During the coding process, two predictable themes were identified related to novel situations and an overall lack of control. These were those aspects of leadership that were still under their control (dominion) and those that were not (compliant). Table 7 summarizes the themes that were uncovered during the coding process.

Table 7

Superintendent Responses Related to Novelty and Delayed Selection “Control”

Superintendent	Phrase	Theme
S5	Strategic planning	Dominion
S3	Projects moving forward	Dominion
S6	Higher level of social reflexivity	Dominion
S2	Communication needs to be as clear and precise as possible	Compliant

Superintendent	Phrase	Theme
S5	New level in the chain of command	Compliant
S4	Producing the desired effects is delayed	Compliant
S4	State Guidelines	Compliant
S5	Student achievement is a concern	Compliant
S1	Unpredictable and changing messages	Compliant
S2	Not knowing	Compliant

One might think that almost everything that was happening in school districts across the state came to a halt due to COVID-19 but nothing could be further from the truth. Although all of the districts represented in this study did alter many teaching and learning platforms, e.g., from face-to-face to distance or hybrid learning, it became very clear that many of the important projects or policy changes that were indeterminate, but prioritized prior to COVID-19, would continue to garner attention by the superintendents and their school boards during the pandemic. What remains unclear is whether this was done intentionally in order to retain some measure of control during the pandemic. Hindsight is 20/20 and this would be a good follow-up question to ask. Several superintendents mentioned strategic planning as well as novel projects that emerged during the pandemic. S5 commented, “We have not forgotten about our strategic plan and continue to allocate resources to those teachers that were promised materials and supplies.” S4 opined, “I admire my teachers for not only the work they have done during the pandemic, but also their understanding that we have re-prioritized some of our former plans, but they have not been forgotten...just delayed.”

A surprising development that arose from the coding process was the advancement of conspicuously new projects that occurred during the pandemic. S3 stated,

I've always believed that where there's challenges, there's opportunities...you either can get busy worrying about the challenges all the time, or you can find balance by working on the opportunities. We've really worked at moving forward.

S1 asserted,

We just kicked off starting an Education Foundation for the district. We have letters going out today to 900 alumni, friends, and community members. The idea has been kicked around for four or five years and we just decided it's got to go now. I'm fired up about it.

S7 discussed his district's plans to expand on their Career and Technical Education program at his district.

We met last year and talked about some of our elective courses and how we might lose these due to a few retirements. The framework of the program needed to be adjusted but if we could find the right candidate, we could maybe pull it off. We just met with an applicant that was very excited about the possibility and has many great ideas. We could have waited, but we didn't.

Another superintendent shared his ideas about changing the way student teaching is done in his district and his continued work with regional higher education institutions. Finally, another superintendent explained their plans to have a virtual academy up and running by the fall.

One superintendent used the words “social reflexivity” in one of her answers. Quite honestly, I did not comprehend exactly what she meant until she explained it further. She theorized,

At the beginning of the year, I just needed to stop and think about where we were heading. I needed to assess my own beliefs and opinions about how our district was managing the pandemic...I think it is called social reflexivity or something like that. There were some things that were out of my control and they simply needed to be accepted. My leadership team decided to focus more on those aspects that we could control and it was important for me to be a role model in this effort.

It seems as though many superintendents were using this strategy whether they knew it or not.

S4 echoed the sentiment above by stating,

I think I'm in the minority of superintendents when I hear them get so frustrated and want to fight back about some of these things. I don't ever get the feeling to fight back. I think to myself, this is the way it is and I'm going to take the rules or guidelines and put in place a plan to deal with it.

The preceding statement segues nicely into this next section. It makes sense that nothing that has happened during COVID-19 is completely out of the superintendent's control. They cannot control what the Governor, Department of Education, or the Health Department might announce nor do anything about the rise of COVID-19 cases in their county. If new guidelines need to be followed, they need to be implemented with fidelity. Local control was bandied about in many of their comments and some superintendents questioned the timing of some of the announcements from the state. Most of the superintendents expressed discomfort and a bit of anxiety in their new subservient role. To a person, all of the superintendents understood that the

decision-making process and the level of control they enjoyed pre-COVID-19 had changed. This new level or layer atop the decision-making pyramid was mentioned numerous times during the coding process. S2 stated,

Superintendents like getting the direction from the extra layer as it gives protection when decisions are being made. Superintendents also like local control in decision-making. So...what I think has improved is the extra layer giving guidance with the freedom of district leaders to make decisions within the parameters...that is best for their district.

S6 reiterated the comments above but added the element of time by suggesting,

My first impression is that we have always been governed in some way by MDE, MDH, and other agencies. We have always had rules which change from time to time. The difference now is the frequency of such events. Each time a change has occurred it takes a considerable amount of time to understand, plan, and implement. A recent example is teacher evaluation. This created a huge movement involving teachers, administration, and the school board. Trainings were readily available; requirements were articulated and ultimately a plan needed to be agreed on by the teacher union and the school board.

S3 similarly posited,

Local control and doing what is best for our families and communities is an authority and obligation that we take serious. The thought of having to “request” permission to educate students in person, is difficult to accept. However, my experience during this was that the Public health “layer” was supportive and an active participant in the discussion. The regional support team acted as a conduit between the layers.

S1 was a bit more critical in his response,

Some decisions by state government officials, federal government officials, Governor, etc. have had a direct impact on schools on a daily and weekly basis for the first time in my tenure. Masking, social distancing in classrooms and buses, sending students home based on close proximity policy, hiring additional staff to supervise additional bus routes, additional lunch periods, etc. We have state and federal officials making decisions that affect local schools and communities that have no idea about our local communities based on national statistics. It is difficult to communicate the rationale for the decisions to our local community members when in many cases as leaders we fail to support the decisions ourselves.

S8 reaffirmed these sentiments,

Many of these decisions are made without any input from the leaders that have the responsibility to implement the policy and/or mandates. At the state level, in multiple cases we have seen Executive orders come from the Governor's office that have not been seen or discussed with the Minnesota School Board Association or Minnesota Association of School Administrators. It is certainly an interesting time in school leadership.

Summary of Deductive Coding

For simplicity's sake, each of the six attributes were abridged into what can be considered the four Cs. Uncertainty was reduced to confidence, categorization and fluctuating stimuli shortened to coping, unfamiliarity truncated to calmness, and novelty and delayed selection pared to control. Experience breeds confidence and it was revealed in the section

covering uncertainty that it was important to find superintendents who had at least four years of experience in their current position for this study. What was noteworthy in this section was that many of the superintendents believed that the COVID-19 pandemic actually sharpened their skills and made them more confident. Some superintendents explained that they needed to enhance their communication efforts with all stakeholders and their confidence grew as a result. This was partially due to becoming more transparent and seeking feedback from stakeholders more regularly. Some superintendents also mentioned an improvement of their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Decision making during the pandemic needed to be hastened, but most fell into a routine and found solace in being vulnerable. To synopsise, the superintendents who participated in this study perceived a growth in their confidence to manage what was uncertain.

Decision-making dominated the section covering categorization and fluctuating stimuli (coping). Daily or weekly decisions could be managed by satisficing, which for the most part, improved their flexibility and adaptability. More sober decisions needed further examination and clarification. Most superintendents utilized sensemaking for these decisions and were aided by their participation in a network of area superintendents. Many of the superintendents also explained how they coped with the spasmodic nature of the pandemic by relying on specific core values that helped weather the storm. In sum, the ability to categorize and handle fluctuating stimuli of the superintendents in this study was tested and those willing to establish a networking relationship with their colleagues seemed to fare better than those who did not.

In regards to unfamiliarity or (calmness), many superintendents shared that managing their emotions during COVID-19 was essentially no different from how they handled them in the past. On a professional level, many attempted to maintain an even keel no matter the situation.

On a personal level, they were allowed to let their guard down and shared freely with their spouse or close friends. The fact that many mentioned some type of self-care did not mean that COVID-19 was the cause of these diversions. This trait affected those who did not invest in some activity that allowed them time to unwind more than those who did.

Most of the superintendents, prior to COVID-19, found comfort knowing that they had control over many of the day-to-day activities and existing projects in their district. This changed during COVID-19. A measure of this control was consigned to the Governor and his subsequent executive orders. For those superintendents whose county COVID-19 cases remained below the bi-weekly case rate, the level of control was mostly uninterrupted. The superintendents, whose county case rates caused them to adjust their learning plans intermittently experienced lower locus of control. To their credit, most of the superintendents accepted these new guidelines and some came to appreciate the assistance given from the state. Most superintendents accepted and respected, but did not necessarily like the subservient role they were mandated during COVID-19.

Inductive Coding

Research Question Two: Determine which practices, systems, or procedures established during COVID-19 will continue once the pandemic ends.

This next section veers away from tolerance for ambiguity and instead focuses on the practices and procedures that will continue to be utilized when the pandemic ends. It is worth noting that during the examination of research question one, some of these conversions or adaptations were already disclosed. For example, related to confidence, many superintendents explained how they became more transparent and their level of communication was augmented

by the pandemic. Some increased the number of radio spots they did, used videos ad nauseam to communicate with their internal and external publics, and increased the number and frequency in their use of surveys to obtain public opinion. Coping revealed the importance of core values, collaboration on all fronts, and expediency in the decision-making process. The section that examined calmness exposed a need for additional time spent on introspection and self-care. Finally, the section about control uncovered the practice of social reflexivity, the importance of modeling, the discomfort of being in a subordinate role, and perseverance.

The two major themes revealed during the inductive coding process were reevaluation and collaboration. Where the deductive coding sections were focused on each individual superintendent's evaluation of self, the inductive piece is meant to be holistic and the focus shifts from individual to shared practices. Table 8 summarizes the themes that were revealed during the coding process.

Table 8

Inductive Coding Phrases and Themes

Superintendent	Phrase	Themes
S1	Teachers are transforming their thoughts about teaching	Reevaluation
S5	Everyone involved needs to be proactive moving forward. We need to be more timely; our community expects this from us now	Reevaluation
S4	This changes the way we will deliver instruction	Reevaluation
S3	We can't go back to the way we operated before COVID	Reevaluation
S8	We all need to listen to the community better	Reevaluation

Superintendent	Phrase	Themes
S2	Seeing others step up as leaders	Collaboration
S5	Good leaders surround themselves with good people	Collaboration
S3	Work on delegating more and empower those who seek out opportunities to lead	Collaboration
S3	More familiar with MDE and MDH because of COVID and the resources they can provide	Collaboration
S6	We all needed to work together and this effort has created more efficiency	Collaboration

After the coding process was completed, it dawned on me that it might be simpler to identify those things that did not change due to the pandemic. Educators have learned to adjust their teaching to the many outside forces that affect education. What is different at present is the number of and the speed that COVID-19 changes have generated in districts across the state. For those who teach in districts where COVID-19 cases were marginal, they noticed few changes to the way they taught and their students learned. For the vast majority, changes were abundant. During the interviews, S8 stated, “Sometimes it takes something like this to push us into a corner to make us come out and try things differently.” Sometimes, different is good if it turns out to be more effective and efficient.

It is important to note that some of what was done pre-COVID-19 will continue to be performed when the pandemic has subsided. Hiring new staff will return to face-to-face rather than via Zoom or some other video platform for obvious reasons. Teachers will physically walk

around their classrooms during a cooperative group activity providing guidance to each group rather than “pop in” to a breakout room. Students will be bussed to school, eat in the cafeteria, and have PE classes in the gymnasium. COVID-19 has created opportunities for districts to reevaluate past practices and determine if they were performed more effectively during the pandemic. Parent teacher conferences and Open House events were mentioned by quite a few of the superintendents. S4 stated, “We had our parent teacher conferenced virtually using Zoom this year. The thing we noticed was that more parents attended virtually than they had before. This was surprising.” S1 made the following observation, “I think some parents who normally don’t attend appreciated the fact that the teacher would schedule the conference on their time, not the other way around.” After having reevaluated how a past practice was performed during COVID-19, S8 asserted, “Parent teacher conferences will continue to operate as before, but the option of doing them virtually will also be given.”

By far, the most referenced revision had to do with instruction. Many superintendents mentioned that their district previously had 1:1 technology, and most had some type of learning platform, such as Google Classroom or Schoology, in place at the start of the current school year. Some referenced the technology “crash course” that many teachers endured last spring, but it did prepare them for teaching either in person, hybrid, or distance learning contingent on the fluctuating case numbers in their county. S7 asserted, “Some of what we are using is definitely going to stay. Teachers are finding better technology resources and improving their teaching, but too many are still in the substitution mode.” I pressed him to explain this a bit more and he referenced the Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition (SAMR) model. He replied:

The easiest thing to do is substitute and I see a lot of this. If you scan a worksheet and put it on your laptop and share it with students, they are still just doing a worksheet. I would like them to push into augmentation and modification. We'll get there.

Some superintendents discussed that they will encourage teachers to continue to record their lessons. S3 argued,

If you are a math teacher and you've been recording and putting your lessons on the website for students and parents to see, why wouldn't you keep doing this? This would eliminate 'make-up work' and provide a great tutorial for students to use when working at home.

S1 stated that there is no reason for us to have snow days any longer. "If we do, all we need to do is pivot to our distance-learning mode that we've been doing for the past year." Other superintendents explained how they and their teachers now have the option of attending professional development conferences virtually, and if the resources and seminars remain online, it should cut down on travel time as well. S2 stated succinctly, "We will not be transitioning back to the way it was, for sure."

The last topic that will be examined in this section is collaboration. Most superintendents illustrated various examples of collaborative efforts during COVID-19 between administration and teachers, teachers and teachers, school board and community, administration and the state department of education, district to district, to name a few. Most heaped praises on their principals for their leadership, flexibility, and support. The African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child" was in full display during these turbulent times. The most fascinating epiphany was that many superintendents began to reassess their leadership styles. S6 opined,

One of the things that motivates me right now is seeing other people step up and be leaders. We always talk about leaders and how we want to create leaders in our school.

This is actually happening...people are stepping up and taking on challenges, whether it's in food service, custodial, human resources, and our nurses...oh my gosh.

S1 affirmed this sentiment by declaring, "A leader surrounds himself with good people, right? And the hardest thing for some of us is to do is not meddle with them. I've learned to stay out of their way." S8 asserted,

We've done a good job getting the stakeholders and our teacher leaders at the decision-making table. We've established more of a collaborative decision-making process. It can't be only one person's decision. We now have paraprofessionals and custodians on our district advisory committee. I have no idea why I didn't use these people before.

Lastly, S5 summed up his thoughts,

I have good people and I think that's everywhere. We need to empower people to be leaders and take action. That's something I'm going to continue to do. I call this type of leadership informed decision-making. I believe this has helped enhance my ability to do my job.

Summary of Inductive Coding

The two themes exposed by the inductive coding segment were reevaluation and collaboration. Honestly, it was a pleasant change of pace to decipher the responses for themes unrelated to TA. The process of reevaluation occurs in school districts all the time. COVID-19 more or less forced districts to change the way they had performed certain procedures in the past. COVID-19 provided districts with the opportunity to decide if all or certain elements of the "new

normal” should remain as is, augment what was previously used, or abandon it altogether. The results of this segment suggests that nothing will be completely abandoned. Anything that facilitated better-quality teaching and improved student learning will be retained. The last theme, collaboration, was directly related to the superintendent’s leadership style. Almost to a person, the superintendents who did not employ a distributed leadership approach prior to COVID-19 have witnessed, first hand, the benefits of collaboration, empowerment, and shared decision-making.

Discussion

Limitations and Implications

Perhaps the most glaring limitation was that only superintendents with at least four years of experience were included in this study. To the reader, four years may sound arbitrary, but through personal experience and having numerous interactions with administrators for over two decades, four years seemed appropriate. Are there superintendents with one or two years of experience doing a quality job? Absolutely. Personal prerogative trumped any scientific data about this argument. Another limitation was the absence of cross-case analysis. The years of experience superintendents who participated in the study varied from four years to twenty-one years. The total student population ranged from 350 to just over 2500. It should be noted that school size was selected based on my familiarity and experiences in smaller school districts. These differences did not matter as much as the phenomenon (i.e., reflections of the six attributes in the midst of the pandemic) under investigation. Stake (2006) described, “The quintain is something that we want to understand more thoroughly, and we choose to study it through its cases” (p. 42).

The implications for future research could address any of the two limitations acknowledged in the previous paragraph. Aside from those practices acknowledged in the introductory paragraph of the section on Inductive Coding, the implications for future practices brought to light a few pearls that anyone in a leadership position should take into consideration. First, the importance of collaborative leadership. It was not as if none of the superintendents understood or were not practicing some form of collaborative leadership prior to COVID-19. I do question whether the leadership capacity of those NOT in a leadership position would have been ascertained if not for COVID-19. To a person, the superintendents commended certain individuals and appreciated how they tirelessly endeavored to make teaching and student learning succeed during the pandemic. My hope is that these proven leaders are not forsaken after the pandemic has passed. Presently, all educational leaders can simply stop and realize that there is leadership potential in many of those working right under your nose. Identifying, growing, developing, and empowering the leadership potential in these individuals is a crucial piece to realizing true collaborative leadership.

Secondly, I would like to revisit the idea of sensemaking examined previously in the section on Coping. Foldy et al. (2008, as cited in Marion and Gonzales, 2014) describe a *sensemaker* as that “who shapes how people understand themselves, their work, and others engaged in that work” (p. 224). Marion and Gonzales go on to suggest, “Decision making is turned upside down by sensemaking. Sensemaking suggests that the term decision making implies there is a concrete, correct, decision to be discovered” (p. 224). Granted, no one could possibly make sense of the pandemic in the early stages, but in time, most of the superintendents could at least make sense of the situation, and develop an appropriate response. In short, they became *sensegivers*. *Sensegivers* impart insight to others, understand the importance of

providing action plans rather than perfect plans, and value the need for promptness (Marion & Gonzales, p. 225). This concept is directly related to reevaluation; one of the major themes uncovered in the inductive coding segment. It would be prudent for all in a leadership role to apply some sensemaking acumen in order to make the decision-making process a bit less cumbersome.

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