CRISIS LEADERSHIP: THE EXPERIENCES OF SIX TEXAS SUPERINTENDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A Dissertation

by

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This dissertation meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively capture and examine the leadership experiences of six superintendents who have navigated, and continue to lead their school districts during the COVID-19 pandemic as aligned to the lens of the Boin et al. (2017) Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership framework. This phenomenological case study design described how the lived experiences (Clandinin & Connally, 1996) of these school superintendents can inform the emerging scholarly literature on leading in times of crisis. While the Boin et al. (2017) framework had five key components of equal weight, findings in this study illuminated decision-making and coordinating grounded in teamwork, trust, and empathy as overarching all other areas including sense-making, meaning-making, accountability, and learning.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Amid growing worldwide concern surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued an executive order on March 19, 2020, that required all Texas public school systems to temporarily close their local schools for in-person classroom instruction (Office of the Governor, 2020). Abbott's decisive action concerning Texas schools followed the declaration of a national emergency on March 13, 2020, from the President of the United States of America (U.S.A.), Donald Trump, who resolved to combat the national trend of rising COVID-19 cases (Mizumoto & Chowell, 2020). Two days prior, the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared COVID-19 a "global pandemic," and Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus publicly expressed concern and predicted the continued, rapid spread of the disease throughout the world (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). According to Rothan and Byrareddy (2020), Coronavirus is comprised of dominant pathogens that target the human respiratory system, spread by human-to-human transmission via direct, close contact including the inhalation of droplets through coughing or sneezing. Additionally, the age and medical background of an individual exposed to COVID-19 was reported to be of vital importance when evaluating significant symptoms after an initial incubation period of approximately 5.2 days (Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020).

While many world industries were required to cease production and temporarily close during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, governmental agencies —including particularly those located in the State of Texas— were required to continue providing essential services. By that designation public school districts were to remain accessible to ensure the continuity of student instruction, health, and nutrition, with administrators left to balance the degrees of health

risk to staff versus the consequences of educational disruption (Lordan, Fitzgerald, & Grosser, 2020).

Public response to the pandemic was reactive, lacking preparation and planning at the highest levels of government, leaving local public leaders such as school superintendents to immediately re-think all school operations (Dzigbede, Gehl, & Willoughby, 2020). According to Kettl (2020), the federal government provided minimal support at the national level, thus creating intergovernmental friction which rendered each individual state void of a clear, unified vision to combat the vast implications of COVID-19. Haffajee and Mello (2020) claim that COVID-19 exposed major weaknesses in the U.S. federal government's public health system in the earliest days of public awareness concerning the virus, with misinformation and misleading statements released about the gravity of the threat, thus resulting in state governments taking expansive local actions through delegated authority.

According to Kahn (2007), plans of action which typically include approved policies and procedures were lacking information and guidance as they related to schools being required to function during an unexpected pandemic. With various levels of government inundated with vast and varying public concerns, it was difficult to anticipate and prioritize all of the challenges that required demonstration of reliable and decisive leadership. The intent of this study is to provide an understanding of the crucial role public school superintendents played during unprecedented time in history as they worked tirelessly to navigate and interpret rapidly-changing local, state, and national policies during a world-wide crisis while leading their school districts to remain student-focused and service-oriented even in light of growing personal and professional concerns weighing on school staff, parents, and students in their communities.

Academic Rationale Leading in Crisis

According to Northouse (2016), "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 6). Gigliotti (2020) asserts that leadership becomes most critical, visible, and desired during a chaotic series of events that enable the leaders of an organization to make problem-solving decisions for the best interest of all stakeholders. Thus, the leadership of a school superintendent is often vital during a public crisis. Smith and Riley (2012) uphold the importance of leadership in providing certainty, engendering hope, and ensuring open and credible communication.

The emergence of an unprecedented worldwide pandemic, coupled with the responsibility to lead their respective school districts left both newly-hired and experienced superintendents confronted with high-risk, career-impacting scenarios in job positions that average a span of only three to five years (O'Conner, 2018).

Disruptive anomalies can occur during crisis events with potential to negatively impact an organization, and the leader must address challenges that require building relationships and communicating with an entire community to collectively make sense of chaotic matters through reflection and impart organizational change, improvement, and renewal (Gigliotti, 2020).

In the context of crisis leadership, Nicola et al. (2020) assert that the COVID-19 pandemic caused negative impacts for socioeconomic populations struggling with social mobility, hunger, mental health, access to instructional resources, and many other needs that can be attributed to increasing levels of inequity. School leaders had to respond by expanding and strengthening professional support for teaching and learning during the pandemic (Tran, Choi, & Wang, 2020).

The challenges leaders face during the emergence of a crisis include a set of interrelated and extraordinary actions for good governance that influential authors have characterized as the following: (a) detecting crisis early, (b) understanding the situation as experienced by first responders, (c) making decisions to ensure efforts by responders are coordinated, (d) willingly learning from the crisis, (e) being accountable for the actions that were taken during and after the crisis; and (f) communicating with transparency (Boin, Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2017; Crowe, 2013; Kitamura, 2019). Given the situation public schools were facing, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) each played a vital role throughout the pandemic in providing comprehensive recommendations that included data and statistics, safety measures to follow, and steps for reopening to review and implement, as applicable. Having a comprehensive plan that included the safety and well-being of all stakeholders was of paramount importance for school superintendents during the evolving and fluid circumstances that changed from week to week, and at times day to day, throughout the pandemic.

Personal Rationale Leading in Crisis

As the Assistant Superintendent for Business, Finance, and Support Services at Sharyland ISD in South Texas —a district with a student enrollment total of roughly 10,000, and an economically disadvantaged population of approximately 60%— I oversaw operations including Finance, Budget, Payroll, Purchasing, Risk Management, Maintenance, Construction, Transportation, Child Nutrition, and Technology. I spent hours each week with my leadership team, collectively devoted to developing problem-solving solutions for the best interest of students in the district. I also met with teachers, principals, administrators, athletic and fine arts directors, as well as many other key personnel to review campus improvement plans conduct

needs assessments, determine essential needs for curriculum, and resolve new and emerging issues daily. Over the course of my eight-year career in public education, I have been privileged to contribute to the implementation of new organizational systems focused on cost efficient and effective operations. The pandemic experience was unique, and required new methods, practices, and the strategic application of limited resources to address needs never before witnessed in my or my colleagues' lifetimes, nor others who serve in public education.

From dealing with unstable biennial budgets, to higher academic accountability expectations, the educational industry is now faced with the long-term implications of COVID-19 that have required the fundamental transformation and re-design of pedagogical methods. At the same time, educational purpose and resolve remain to ensure all students receive equitable instruction, and the resources necessary to be successful. During the early stages of reporting to work through the COVID-19 pandemic, it was evident that comprehensive and effective action plans for pandemic response did not exist at any level of government. Many of the decisions that were made were either mandated or recommended directly from the Texas Governor Greg Abbott, the CDC, or the TEA. However, many decisions were also based on unique local situations where experience, intuition, reflection, and best judgment clearly played a role. Despite the realization of dealing with an invisible enemy, public expectations to continue operating the school districts, with their multiple departments, campuses, and teams committed to the cause as other companies/organizations ceased operations, influenced how leaders chose to handle the crisis in their respective communities.

Reflecting on my personal experience during pandemic, I can recall that the primary goal for our organization was to ensure the safety and well-being of each student and staff member. Nonetheless, in order to receive necessary funding from our state government so that the

organization could function, we were required to continue providing instruction either physically or remotely. With lack of time to prepare and no available local plan to follow, obstacles were many including the generally predominant lack of technology resources at school and home, and no Internet connection at home for many students/staff. Sharyland ISD is located in an area of Texas that was identified as a "hotspot" for the virus, with daily rising cases and hospitalizations. While experiencing personal heartache as discouraging health reports were regularly received, I was responsible for overseeing the continuation of finalizing and earning approval of an annual district budget amid an overwhelming amount of public uncertainty. Major mitigation purchases were prioritized, including elevating school facility processes to frequently disinfect and sanitize all surfaces, providing daily curbside meals to our students, and staying connected with instructional technology needs for our teachers in order to provide curriculum. The degree of success attainable for school districts also hinged on our ability to stay engaged with all stakeholders at a distance, so communication and interaction via electronic means was vital to operations.

"Insider" Positionality of the Lead Researcher

Despite all the obstacles we faced as public education leaders during these difficult times, I have approached this research with insider knowledge (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007) and authentic experiences as I personally witnessed my superintendent face one of the most arduous and challenging times in district history. This experience enabled me to identify effective strategies that may be highlighted throughout this research project for clarity when compared to similar situations that one may endure in the future.

For this study, I employed a positioned subject approach (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 2001). As a current public school administrator in Sharyland, I have been afforded many

"insider" opportunities to not only observe but also to interact closely and frequently with decision-making parties, often seeking to get "inside the head and hearts" of the leadership within this district (see Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, on the value of insider research). Thus, I acknowledge that my insider observations within the district inform this study. Attentive efforts were made to validate the trustworthiness and credibility of subjects, as well as to ensure researcher bias was mitigated and that the voices of the participants were foregrounded (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Theoretical Framework

"Conducting 'business as usual' is very difficult if the building seems to be on fire. But in an increasingly fast-moving world, waiting for the fire to breakout is a dubious strategy" (cited in Weiss, 2002, p.28). Having the ability to effectively lead an organization is one major attribute superintendents strive to attain as the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of public school systems. In times of crisis, superintendents find themselves working through challenges that impact not only students and staff of the public school system, but the entire community as a whole. Feeling safe during a crisis event is challenging and stressful in the face of ambiguous and varied adversity. According to Jaques (2012), crisis leadership is known as a broader element of crisis management in which 90% of related literature focuses on tactical reactions due to the understanding that crisis will happen unknowingly. This literature maintains a consistency of remaining highly process driven, with major emphasis on how to prepare in advance for a crisis and what steps to take when the event occurs. During the review process, the researcher identified a crisis leadership and management framework that will be foregrounded due to the focus it has on managing socially and politically indecisive environments.

Boin et al. (2017) introduced the Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership (CTSCL) framework defined in terms of the following; (a) sense-making, (b) decision-making and coordinating; (c) meaning-making, (d) accounting; and, (e) learning. The CTSCL framework was developed with the intent of providing public leaders a functional perspective dependent on responding to a crisis phenomenon and the implementation of post-crisis initiatives (Boin et al., 2017).

Sense-making is described as having the ability to detect an emerging crisis in time to take effective measures, thus understanding the complexities it may bring to the organization (Boin et al., 2017). Decision-making and coordinating relies on a leader to coherently make critical decisions through the use of horizontal and vertical collaboration in the midst of a crisis (Boin et al., 2017). Boin et al. (2017) asserts that meaning-making enables a leader to articulate a situation at hand that is defined as a crisis phenomenon by describing what is at stake, what are its causes, and what can be done unitedly to mitigate disruption.

Accounting, which is the fourth strategic task, is having the strength to publicly explain measures that were initiated to prevent and manage the crisis thus including a justification that assures transparency and crisis-induced accountability (Boin et al., 2017). The final strategic crisis leadership task empowers learning to become a vital component of the journey, in which findings are discovered, strengths and weaknesses are outlined, and fostering innovative reforms result in an opportunity to improve public leadership when dealing with a crisis (Boin et al., 2017).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the CTSCL framework is devoted to establishing awareness for the nature and dynamics generated by crisis phenomena, thus

illustrating specific dimensions of crisis leadership that include conflict, power, and legitimacy (Boin et al., 2017).

Overview of the Literature

Pandemic Context

Initial discovery and evaluations of the COVID-19 virus administered through the Chinese public health, clinical, and scientific communities reported a 75% to 80% similarity to the SARS-CoV and multiple bat coronaviruses (Perlman, 2020). On January 20, 2020, the first CDC-confirmed case emerged in the United States when a healthy 35-year-old, nonsmoking male in Snohomish, Washington traveled to Wuhan, China, to visit family and returned having contracted the virus (Holshue et al., 2020).

Similar events had historically occurred with commonly-known viruses in recent decades, but none engendered the level of crisis response experienced due to COVID-19. Educational disruption was grounded in previous post-crisis data. For example, in 2009, the H1N1 pandemic involved over 60 million cases and roughly 12,000 deaths in the United States. Gift et al. (2010) conducted a survey that included responses from 214 households in Pennsylvania after a school closure order was initiated at one school district facing absenteeism problems due to H1N1. This district discovered that 69% of students continued with at least one outdoor activity and minimal household disruption during the five-day school shutdown. Researchers were also able to determine that 79% of adults missed no days of work during the closure. Uda, Okada, Takahashi, Motegi, and Wagatsuma (2011) also completed comparable surveys that focused more on the effectiveness of school closures during the pandemic, thus revealing a slightly positive outcome in preventing human-to-human exposure.

Copeland et al., (2013) conducted a survey with intent to compare data for two groups of families in Dallas, Texas, related to the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. A reduction of self-reported acute respiratory illness was noted in an intervention community which closed all public schools for eight days, versus a nearby community that kept schools open (Copeland et al., 2013). According to Uscher-Pines et al. (2018), during a pandemic which increases pressure on health care systems, social distancing interventions have been identified to slow the spread of exposure to virus transmission not only in communities, but in schools as well which are daily filled with closely-congregated students and staff. Uscher-Pines et al. (2018) identified that distance learning approaches were alternative measures utilized and explored in the event schools were temporarily closed for in-person instruction due to a pandemic. When it comes to social distancing initiatives, common practices utilized include rearranging classrooms such as removing desks for more personal space and postponing extra-curricular activities.

Leadership Context

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology became the center of attention due to the mission of continuing to provide instruction to students through distance learning methods. Educators were encouraged to adapt new pedagogies that included a selection process for determining and employing high-yield practices for students in grades K-12 via technology. Additional resources became a major priority for all school districts due to a lack of technology devices and Internet connection at home for students. Heightened safety measures would also need to be in place when students were able to return back to an on-campus, in-person learning environment.

In the context of school finance and the metrics that are utilized to generate revenues for school-districts in Texas, Tajalli (2018) describes one mechanism within the formula called

"recapture", which is defined as the recovery of excess revenues from high property wealth school-districts. A school district is eligible for recapture if their wealth per student in weighted average daily attendance exceeds the state's mandated "equalized wealth level" (Tajalli, 2018). Tajalli (2018) asserts that the recapture process for rich school districts does not result in lower academic achievement. An academic gap is not evident with the current financial formulation (Tajalli, 2018). However school leaders share concern regarding the potentially negative, long-term financial impacts due to COVID-19. According to Cooper et al. (2020), reopening schools amid a pandemic increases ethical concerns which include safety, privacy, health disparities, and financial costs that will be holistically associated. Bergman (2013) asserts that political culture will play a role during crisis situations that directly impact funding access and allocation.

As such, leaders have the opportunity during a crisis to be recognized and perceived as the heroes who possess unique qualities that help them accomplish extraordinary achievements against all odds. In other words, and based on the observations made by Hoffman, Woehr, Youngjohn, and Lyons (2011), leaders are positioned to rise above the challenges of unexpected situations and provide direction to others in order to overcome difficult experiences.

Economic and Equity Context

A sense of urgency for declining economic conditions became the center of attention for all private and non-private school systems in Texas during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the uncertainty of possible legislative budget cuts. According to Marchand and Weber (2019), local economic conditions play a pivotal role as they relate to student achievement and teacher turnover. From 2001 to 2014, Texas witnessed a 20% wage increase in the private sector due to the shale oil and gas demand (Marchand & Weber, 2019). Based on perceptions identified in a qualitative study that involved 29 legislative affiliates that advocate for education, the need for

school reform was evident based on challenges that arise when it comes to student achievement gaps and equalization across the state (Bergman, 2013). Will that reform need to take place in light of COVID-19 at the next legislative session? The superintendent of schools has no control or influence on the factors that come into play globally, nationally, or state-wide in terms of economic conditions and decisions made by legislative bodies to create a state budget. Due to this reality, it is important to ensure the efficient and effective use of funding and sound processes within their organizations (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

In the context of crisis leadership during a pandemic, the term "crisis" is defined as an unpredictable, intrusive event or problematic experience that negatively impacts an organization's normality impinging on the dynamic nature and day-to-day activities thus creating a high degree of ambiguity where cause and effects are unclear (Smith & Riley, 2012; Gigliotti, 2020). For the purpose of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic is considered a natural disaster which Sakurai and Chughtai (2020) asserted can affect businesses and society, severely disrupting the everyday lives of people to a degree similar to hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, and tsunamis. From continuing academic instruction to ensuring a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning, superintendents were put to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic that required leadership in a time of crisis. It became evident that school systems were vital to the environment and economy on a macro level, while school superintendents and their administrative teams on a micro level needed to be focused on the priority of providing a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning in their respective school districts. Additionally, other concerns such as equity, lost instructional time, a lack of technology resources, and the impact on academic gaps have been simultaneously foregrounded.

While the World Health Organization (WHO), the Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations related to preventive measures that could be utilized in a school setting, school superintendents are charged with executing problem-solving resolutions and action plans for *all* aspects of school-related operations in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively capture and examine the leadership experiences of six superintendents who have navigated, and continue to navigate, leading their school districts during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of the Boin et al. (2017) Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership framework centered on sense-making, decision-making and coordinating, meaning-making, accounting, and learning. This phenomenological case study design demonstrates how lived experiences (Clandinin & Connally, 1996) may inform the emerging scholarly literature on leading in times of crisis.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to glean superintendent perceptions of leading their schools through the COVID-19 pandemic. The intent was to identify major themes that are inter-connected from the conducted interviews as they relate to the CTSCL framework, leadership approach, equity, and the impact of these school superintendents on virtually all aspects of providing significantly resilient leadership for students, staff, and the community.

Research Questions

1. What innate characteristics do public school superintendents exhibit during times of crisis when it comes to decision-making and coordinating in the context of having an equity-oriented mind-set?

2. How does school superintendent sense-making while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to school district operations, instruction, technology, child-nutrition, community perception, and other areas?
3. How does school superintendent meaning-making while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to instructional continuity, teaching, learning, and technology?
4. How does school superintendent accountability while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to maintaining transparency, continued focus on student achievement, and building a positive culture?
5. How does school superintendent learning while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to lessons learned, closing the achievement gap, and ongoing conflict resolution in navigating this unprecedented event?

Research Methods

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilized as the research methodology which is mainly concerned with a thorough exploration of lived experiences, thus making sense of that particular experience through the utilization of asking broad questions that are descriptive and reflective for the study (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). According to Patton (2015), phenomenological analysis is designed to obtain the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a person or group. Patton (2015) also illustrates that the author must rely primarily on personal judgment and sense-making since statistical testing is irrelevant in this type of study. The objective for these interviews was to attempt a sense-making approach of lived experiences through an analytical process called the hermeneutics circle which is designed to enhance overall understanding of the phenomenon through interpretation (Patton, 2015).

Marshall and Rossman (2016) define interpretation as bringing meaning and coherence to the themes, patterns, and categories, thus developing connections to raw data.

According to Emery and Anderman (2020), IPA has the capability to provide awareness through lived experiences from marginalized and sometimes underrepresented populations needing equity-oriented attention. The purpose of this study and research method was to generalize the lived experiences of each superintendent during the pandemic (Emery & Anderman, 2020). The key was to identify related themes, patterns, and categories from the conducted interviews that will reveal leadership experiences focused on providing a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning during a public health crisis. The author selected six participants who were employed in a K-12 public school system as a superintendent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual interviews were requested from each superintendent which took approximately an hour to complete. Google Hangout meeting software will be the tool utilized to conduct the interviews. The interview protocol will be comprised of a series of questions focused on their lived experience related to COVID-19. Interview participants were encouraged to reflect similarly to Friere's (2000) guidance whereby a sense of critical consciousness can enable one to quickly identify the deficiencies and barriers that need reframing through two described dimensions which are reflection and action, where both must sequentially interact while transformation is emerging, thus creating "praxis."

This study was submitted and reviewed through the Institutional Review Board (IRB), who oversee and ensures human subjects research is ethically conducted in compliance with 45 CFR part 46, the "Common Rule" (Henrikson et al., 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2018), the "Common Rule" provides federal polices and standards for the protection of human subjects involved in social and behavioral research.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) connote that the validity of a research inquiry falls on the establishment of trustworthiness. The researcher utilized Lincoln and Guba (1985) trustworthiness strategies throughout the study which include; (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. In essence, a series of techniques are proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for each strategy's effectiveness towards evaluating trustworthiness. Peer debriefing, member checks, and journaling are outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for establishing credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize the importance of the thick description technique which reveals relevance for further studies when it comes to transferability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that evaluating the findings and ensuring support based on data through the utilization of an inquiry audit technique creates dependability for the study. For the purposes of confirmability, the use of triangulation of sources and journaling are two techniques Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest which were utilized in conducting the study.

Amankwaa (2016) asserts that the development of a protocol that is focused on the establishment of trustworthiness posits a revelation of rigorous components within the research process. In essence, a naturalistic inquiry design was utilized seeking "a deep understanding and explication of social phenomena as they are observed in their own contexts" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 16). Therefore, the research questions are designed to elicit rich data about the experiences these six superintendents had professionally encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter Summary

Leadership during times of a crisis can make or break an organization. Crisis events are known to be socially constructed, often subjective, and a communicative phenomenon (Gigliotti, 2020). The study was designed to examine the intricacies of leadership experiences during such

an abnormal time. Leadership behaviors by a superintendent impact all stakeholders which means a lot of the pressure lies on the superintendent's intuition. The impact this study will have depends on the unique leadership experiences perceived. Leaders in the same industry will be able to captivate the strengths and weaknesses described herein. The important factor in the study is to identify the key action-based approaches that were taken to ensure a well-rounded education system focused on providing a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning. The experiences shared will enable others to learn from both successes and mistakes which will enhance better results in future crisis such as a pandemic.

Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the literature and the context in which to situate the study. Chapter 3 will provide an overview detailing the research design implementation, role of the researcher, data collection process, and data analysis process as well as efforts to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

As established from the preceding chapter, the aim of this study is to investigate the lived leadership experiences of multiple superintendents from diverse contexts during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. As stated in the introduction, this study is contextualized by the Boin et al. (2017) CTSCL framework embedded in the crisis leadership context. Emergent themes may serve to reshape the conceptual framework and contribute to the extant research literature on crisis leadership. In addition, research on leadership approaches may contribute to the literature focused on emerging practices that may be effective in the context a crisis phenomenon.

This chapter provides a critical examination of the extant literature with regard to understanding the complexities that school superintendents experience during these times of crisis, when the necessity of being an equity-oriented leader is imperative to decisions affecting various stakeholders. The literature review will integrate different sources and publications that are most relevant and significant to the current topic being researched. These will include books, journal articles, dissertations, government reports and any other appropriate resource that would help contribute to the current research.

Crisis Leadership and Management

Superintendent Leadership

As noted in the introduction, the superintendent is most commonly known as the CEO of a public school-district that serves grades K-12 (Björk, Kowalski & Browne, 2014). Przybylski, Chen and Hu (2018), note that superintendents are responsible in overseeing the day-to-day operations as well as long-term planning of the district, thus undertaking the important role of supervising and hiring school administrators such as campus principals who also play a vital role

in leading the organization. Additionally, superintendents are hired for their knowledge and expertise in educational pedagogy and are answerable to an elected board of trustees and other different stakeholders within their specific community. Nonetheless, they are commonly held accountable for whatever goes on in the different schools that they represent, especially in times of crisis. According to Henriksen and Aas (2016), an effective superintendent must be guided by a clear vision while clearly stating the desired goals and objectives for the school-district. In addition, a good superintendent must demonstrate strong leadership skills, which include among others the knowledge regarding best practices that would eventually maximize student achievement. They should also possess the skills and abilities to support the teaching and non-teaching staff as well as work collaboratively with all the other relevant stakeholders within the particular school district (Kowalski, 2013). This requires the superintendent to possess great communication skills, which include among others the ability to listen to diverse views and opinions from different stakeholders (Björk, Kowalski & Browne, 2014). This is especially important in the midst of a crisis where diversity of ideas, knowledge and skills are necessary to overcome underlying leadership challenges seen with COVID-19 (Przybylski, Chen & Hu, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2020).

The rising cost in education, academic accountability expectations, and the competition with private school institutions has led to a major demand when it comes to educational leadership as it relates to the position of a superintendent of schools (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2019). Superintendent leadership at the district level is fundamental for the effectiveness of educational delivery for students, which is why perceptions of this position result in organizational cultures with mixed viewpoints within educational institutions and, in some cases, a level of distrust. (Balch & Adamson, 2018).

Superintendent turnover is a major concern nation-wide, and has motivated researchers to explore positional variables in order to cultivate more quality candidates for the roughly 2,000 vacancies that exist nationally (O'Conner, 2018). According to Roberts and Hernandez (2012), it is imperative that educational programs designed to prepare educational leaders reshape current programs offered to focus on the improvement and transformation of educational institutions to greater levels of achievement while still providing effective leadership for the overall organization. The success and/or failure of the superintendent can be influenced by many factors, which can include the following: (a) political interference, (b) finance and facilities, (c) the longevity of superintendent tenure, (d) superintendent turnover, and (e) leadership behaviors (Grissom & Anderson, 2012).

Superintendents in the United States generally assume major roles in education, governance and management, notwithstanding various challenges. They are thus in a suitable position to either impact school districts positively or negatively, depending on circumstances or prevailing contributory factors. Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, and Slate (2008) assert that the size of the school has no implication when it comes to the requirements the TEA has in place as it relates to accountability. When compared to rural area school districts, it is evident that school districts located in suburban areas can have more administrative staff face daily challenges and provide effective leadership as compared to smaller districts where superintendents must lead with dual responsibilities (Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, & Slate, 2008).

According to a meta-analysis research study conducted on 4,434 superintendents in the U.S. by Waters and Marzano (2006), these school leaders play a pivotal role in influencing student achievement. Nonetheless, a positive association between student accomplishment and good superintendent leadership at the district level was discovered in this quantitative study. The

authors asserted that a superintendent is required in order to provide effective service to students, teachers, parents, administrative personnel, and the community. Waters and Marzano (2006) also emphasized several major activities that make a superintendent an effective leader such as: (a) ensuring a collaborative goal-setting process, (b) aligning school board and district goals, (c) continually monitoring district progress focused on student achievement, and, (d) ensuring that resources are allocated for the overall success of the organization.

Transformational leadership is a vital factor in the successful achievement of student excellence, regardless of district size or superintendent experience (Fenn & Mixon, 2011). The authors concluded that there is no significant association between transformational leadership implementation and the size of the school district or the number of superintendent years in the district. Communication skills are also essential tools needed in order to initiate and facilitate culture change (Kowalski, 2005).

The impact of a superintendent is often measured by a number of aspects, one of which is the leadership style they utilize (e.g., transformative, transformational, servant leadership, trait, situational, etc.), and the leadership behaviors as well. In light of the latter notion, a cross-sectional research study by Canales, Tejeda-Delgado, and Slate (2008) revealed that superintendents must possess the following primary leadership behaviors in order to be effective and successful; (a) the ability to speak and act, i.e., action-driven leadership, or what is widely known as "walking the talk;" (b) effective superintendents must be tolerant of others' freedom demands, which means they must take the initiative to support their subordinates' need to learn, engage, and participate in free and fair decision-making and action-taking; and (c) regardless of whether you are superior or subordinate to others, you must be considerate of others.

Meier (2003) suggested that student achievement is also affected greatly by the leadership model exercised by the superintendent. A survey was conducted across the state of Texas to test the efficacy of an eight-item integrative framework model developed for leaders. According to the results of this study, students' performance will improve based on the superintendent's ability to foster community support, and thus his/her ability to actively promote change in the organization as a whole.

Central offices are also known to have a major implication on the success of a school district, thus moving away from occasional training for principals to enabling them to focus on the instructional leadership aspect of operating a school (Honig, 2012). Honig (2012) shares an example of two school districts which have transformed a central office focus towards a customer service supportive unit assisting in the development of providing a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning.

According to a mixed methods descriptive study conducted by Jones (2012), both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in order to explore whether new superintendents stepped into the role with a formal plan of action and if that plan guided them toward success. Most of the participants during the qualitative phase of this study had experience as a teacher or principal prior to becoming a superintendent. The development of trust and cooperation with the school community, learning on the job through experience, and setting goals and expectations were three major themes Jones (2012) was able to identify expressing that professional development for the overall leader is needed due to the additional efforts that play a vital role such as politics, human resources, finance, operations, and building relationships throughout the schools and community.

Most times, superintendents are replaced for incompetency or other factors circumstantial or necessary. Whichever the reason, filling this vital role must be performed with little haste, as the fitting, qualified candidate must be selected. Therefore, school districts will occasionally employ an interim superintendent. The role of the interim superintendent must be examined in comparison to the role of the superintendent. In a qualitative, single case study in a small west Texas district, Bigham & Nix (2011) investigated the role of the school superintendent. The findings revealed that the time period in the position would determine the scope of duties performed by the interim superintendent and, consequently, the impact he/she has on the school district. The researcher analyzes the role of the interim superintendent as being the CEO and instructional leader for the student body in that school district, similar to the superintendent. Although, according to Bigham & Nix (2011), the interim superintendent usually lays the groundwork to position the new incoming superintendent for success.

A study conducted by Epstein, Galindo, and Sheldon (2011) designed to examine key constructs of sociocultural and organizational learning theories focused on a relationship between a school district and its community confirmed that data should be the driver of all discussions, debates, and decisions which will lead to program improvements and a shared vision for student achievement.

According to Boin et al. (2017), “Effective leaders embody the hopes and fears of the society under threat; they must offer a message that takes away uncertainty, points to a way forward out of the rubble, and inspires a sense of optimism that in the end things will be better” (p. 87).

Leadership Approaches

As it relates to crisis leadership and management in the midst of a pandemic, it is imperative for school superintendents to have expert leadership skills and strategies which can help improve situations to ensure a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning. There are some leadership approaches that can be essential in improving the situation for optimum leadership and management of navigating through a crisis. Hackman and Johnson (2013) cite various approaches to leadership, such as trait, situational, relationship, and transformational.

The trait approach to leadership assumes that individuals inherit particular qualities that make them most suited to leadership. According to Hackman and Johnson (2013), the significance of the traits approach has been challenged and is no longer inclusive of the notion of a born leader, but continues to include the idea that traits shape performance and the perceptions of leadership effectiveness. Trait models of leadership are based on the behavior of leaders who are either successful or not, and the resulting list of traits such as having cognitive abilities or problem-solving skills enables other leaders to assess their likelihood of success or failure in particular tasks (Hackman & Johnson, 2013). According to Northouse (2016), intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability are major leadership traits discovered to have the greatest impact for those who want to be perceived by others as leaders.

However, in applying the traits approach, there is the possibility of subjective judgment regarding the choice of good traits in leadership. Hackman and Johnson (2013) discuss the importance of analyzing a situation, identifying and solving problems, and applying relevant experience and knowledge to any particular situation. In relation to the guidance school leaders may express in the midst of a crisis, the use of traits in leadership would be applicable since

certain leadership traits would influence the decision made on how to mitigate or respond to any given situation. Additionally, leadership traits would be essential in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the educational leaders in handling the situation (Nawaz & Khan, 2016).

The situational approach of leadership focuses on the idea of leaders choosing the best course of action depending on the circumstantial variables at play (Northouse, 2016). Northouse (2016) asserts that the situational approach requires the leader to demonstrate a high degree of flexibility, adapting their style accordingly, with each situation reviewed uniquely and prescriptively. Chance (2013) notes that there is no single leadership style that is most effective and applicable in all situations; rather, the prevailing conditions will dictate the appropriate leadership approach to be applied. This means that a particular leadership style may be most effective in one specific situation, yet be less effective or fail in another set of circumstances. It is thus imperative to assess and change leadership styles based on underlying factors in situations, understanding that the qualities of a leader do not take precedence in demonstrating effective leadership (Chance, 2013).

Leaders must have the capability to analyze and take stock of a situation and adjust their behaviors accordingly. It is partially for this reason that a situational leadership approach may be successful due to the method of assessment and applied balance between the characteristics of a prevailing situation, including the traits of one's subordinates, as well as individual leadership abilities (Vidal et al., 2017). Based on the observations made by Vidal et al., (2017), success and effective leadership is largely dependent on the relationships between a leader and the followers of that leader. Goals, objectives, and procedures must also be clearly outlined and the particular leader must demonstrate disposition qualities (Abba, Yahaya, & Suleiman, 2018).

The relationship approach of leadership focuses on the relationship between leaders and their followers. Leaders successful with this approach motivate and inspire others, and enable them to visualize the relevance and reality of particular issues. The leader is focused on the performance of the members in the organization, and desires to see the fulfillment of individual members based on their unique abilities (Landis, Hill & Harvey, 2014). This style of leadership requires leaders to demonstrate acceptable ethical and moral standards in their interactions with followers (Sethuraman & Suresh, 2014).

According to Hackman and Johnson (2013), the relationship approach focuses on vertical dyadic relationships and the notion of leader-member exchange. Northouse (2016) describes relationship behaviors as assisting followers to feel comfortable with themselves, with each other, and with the situation at-hand.

A transformational leadership approach is described as one by which charisma and vision set the tone for a leader to have the ability to create connections with followers, holistically raising the level of both motivation and morality (Northouse, 2016). Lambrecht et al. (2020) asserts that a transformational leadership approach in education exhibits collaborative structures, thus building social relations internally and empowering followers to act in such a way that leads toward positive change. According to Northouse (2020), transformational leaders "attempt to raise the consciousness in individuals and get them to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of others" (p. 175).

Meeting Disruptions and Challenge of Digital Divide

It is imperative that every leader work to ensure that the followers remain motivated regardless of the prevailing situation (Schwartz & Castelli, 2014). According to Shelton (2012), this is especially common among transformational and democratic leaders. For instance,

transformational leaders always seek to encourage and motivate their subordinate staff toward achieving a common organizational goal. On the other hand, democratic leaders espouse a participative working environment where diversity of ideas, views and opinions is largely encouraged. These leaders always seek to rise above any challenging situation by ensuring that employees are largely involved in coming up with creative ideas and their views are given equal importance in the decision-making process. In the current context, COVID-19 disrupted most aspects of everyday life; therefore, embracing change was the ultimate pathway to success. This did not negate those people involved in school leadership, including the superintendents. For instance based on the observations made by Harris and Jones (2020), the standard in-person meetings with different education stakeholders (such as between superintendents and different school administrators or principals) were fully disrupted. Physical meetings are important venues through which people are able to establish social relationships and networks. Leadership has the opportunity to thrive through these interactions. The pandemic response required the shift away from the standard meeting platforms to new methods of engagement, essentially a "new normal," requiring school leaders, teachers, parents, and students to come up with alternative arrangements to ensure the stability and continuity of learning activities. For instance, superintendents would turn to various online platforms to facilitate their meetings with stakeholders who were working or engaging remotely. This included interactions with school administrators, principals, teaching staff, parents, and learners when necessary.

Superintendents had to conduct important discussions and communicate decisions through digital platforms such as Google Hangouts, Zoom, and Skype, as well as integrated chat applications in different social media networks like Facebook and Twitter to facilitate their

meetings (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). Unfortunately, this new normal has not been without some challenges that have impacted and negatively influenced the entire leadership experience.

For example, a case scenario can be drawn from the issue of the digital divide. Although Internet connectivity and access in the U.S. is readily available to many, not all parents have access to such services. Due to this reality, online meetings would not always be successful and not all stakeholders would have access to deliberate and weigh in on important issues that influenced education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, different parents, school administrators, and other stakeholders balanced tight schedules as they tried to meet basic needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizing real-time meetings when all attendees are available has thus been a major challenge in some instances. Unfortunately, it is the overall responsibility of superintendents to ensure the success of these meetings in order to validate that all schools within their particular school districts are functioning smoothly (Björk, Kowalski & Browne, 2014). Also, online meetings can be disrupted by power outages. For instance if a person is actively involved in a real-time online meeting and there is a power-outage, it follows that the particular individual will be disconnected from the meeting, especially if he or she is relying on a desktop computer without any backup generator. Besides the disruptive and at times unsuccessful nature of online virtual meetings, it is clear that different superintendents had to grapple with the issue of weakened social ties and interactions with their constituents, primarily school administrators, principals, parents, and learners.

A Strategic Crisis Leadership Framework (CTSCL)

According to Christensen, Laegreid, and Rykkja (2016), a crisis management system needs both governance capacity and governance legitimacy when facing unique crisis phenomena that have high levels of uncertainty. Governance capacity is defined as an ambiguous

concept that denotes which structures and resources are available to deal with the crisis and how they are utilized in practice (Christensen, Laegreid, & Rykkja, 2016). Lodge and Wegrich (2014) conceptualize governance capacity four different ways: (a) coordination of bringing organizations together, (b) the analyzation of information, (c) having the ability to control, provide surveillance, and oversee through regulation, and (d) delivering a safe and effective way of handling a crisis. Christensen, Laegreid, and Rykkja (2016) describe governance legitimacy as an environment's perception of a governmental system during a crisis affecting how people act toward leadership. To this end, Boin et al. (2017) developed the CTSCL framework for the intent of implementing five critical tasks of strategic leadership when faced with a disruptive crisis. Boin et al. (2017) describes crisis as a "rude surprise" destroying the legitimacy of public organizations. According to Boin et al. (2017), crisis management becomes effective when task collaboration is initiated in the midst of a crisis where a sense of shock and vulnerability can produce major criticism if tasks are not performed correctly. The five critical tasks areas include sense-making, decision-making and coordinating, meaning making, accounting, and learning (Boin et al., 2017). Boin et al. (2017) asserts that the difference between victory and tragedy as it relates to crisis response hinges on the ability to produce, share, and, when necessary, revise accurate analyzations of highly unusual, ambiguous, and dynamic situations.

Sense-Making

Boin et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of two components, detecting and understanding an unfolding crisis, related to sense-making. Boin et al. (2017) also highlight how the identification of details after a crisis can provide answers that may solve the problem at hand, or in the future if it ever happens again. However, many studies have demonstrated inadequate results. Brown, Colville, and Pye (2015) assert the realization of the term "sense-making" having

several different definitions such as not only interpretation and meaning production, but the active engagement within situations where one is able to construct realities as well as make sense of their perceptions altogether.

A qualitative study conducted by Hemmer and Elliff (2019) which was focused on attaining an understanding of lived experiences from seven Texas superintendents before, during, and after Hurricane Harvey, the use of sense-making, originally introduced by Weick (1988, 1995), was utilized concurrently with Heifetz's (1994) technical-adaptive framework. Hemmer and Elliff (2019) identified 20 critical issues that played a vital role in the midst of the crisis that were dependent on superintendents' sense-making approaches as defined by the interplay of action and interpretation. Furthermore, Hemmer and Elliff (2019) discovered that a continuous immediate response from all aspects of the organization in the midst of simultaneous chaos was required by these superintendents' sense-making abilities as they navigated toward resolutions not only for the district, but the entire community as a whole.

Decision-Making and Coordinating

In the context of a pandemic, having the ability to illustrate a classic notion of making a critical decision can be pivotal for public leaders such as superintendents who generally expected to mobilize the whole community associated with the school district they lead (Boin et al., 2017). The coordination of response networks is an effective approach Boin et al. (2017), highlight in conjunction with decision-making, emphasizing the importance of cohesion among those who are involved in the implementation process.

Based on a study conducted by Kaschner (2017) where common approaches to crisis decision-making were reviewed and analyzed, a stakeholder-driven scheme called multi-stakeholder approach (MSA) was developed that focused on preserving communicative

relationships, trust, and the improvement of quality decisions. The intent for this approach is to follow a cyclical process that begins with: (a) getting an understanding of the environment internally and externally by identifying goals, stakeholders, and relations, (b) creating a plan based on anticipation of how things may develop, (c) decision making and the transparent articulation to all stakeholders, and (d) monitoring the effects of the decisions. According to Kaschner (2017), a transformative leadership approach in the midst of having to make a fast-thinking, snap decision when time is of the essence can improve the quality of outcomes.

Nonetheless, Boin et al. (2017) assert that top leaders such as superintendents who are dealing with a highly dynamic and technical, complex crisis situations are sometimes better off relying on and supporting local authorities and expert agencies rather than taking charge themselves. As stated in this study, many decisions that superintendents had to make during the COVID-19 pandemic were either mandated or recommended from local, state, and national agencies.

Meaning-making

According to Boin et al. (2017), meaning-making is described as the attempt to diminish public and political uncertainty inspiring self-confidence in crisis leaders such as superintendents by formulating and establishing a persuasive narrative. For effective crisis leadership to occur, leaders must focus on managing the meaning-making process which consist of two process indicators: (a) leaders must craft a persuasive message (a narrative) that explains what happened and why, the ramifications, how it can be handled, who can be trusted, and what lessons can be learned; and (b) leaders must deliver their message ensuring the use of symbolic details such as words, pictures, gestures, timing, and performance matters that influence the views and sentiments of the environment (Boin et al., 2017). Boin et al. (2017) assert that meaning-making

is the creation of a story as it relates to a crisis phenomenon in which the leader plays a vital role of making meaning, building trust, and gaining permissive consensus from stakeholders.

Due to the realization of crisis situations differing in context, Jong (2017) highlights that meaning-making is vital to crisis management when it is expected of public leaders to display effective communication in the public arena. Based on an empirical and exploratory study conducted by Jong (2017) which included 36 Dutch mayor interviews that dealt with crisis phenomena, four roles were identified that depend on the collective and emotional impact of a given situation as well as the potential for political turmoil:

- Mourner in Chief: the expectation of showing sympathy and care is the central characteristic of this role;
- Orchestrator: one is able to give collective meaning to a community, however simultaneously understands the influences politics play based on their impressions;
- Buddy: having the ability to listen to those impacted by a crisis expressing sympathy when it comes to specific groups or individuals; and
- Advocate: a public leader utilizes his meaning-making to speak on behalf of the community as a whole (p. 1033).

Christensen and Laegreid (2020) conducted a qualitative empirical study focused on COVID-19 crisis leadership in Norway, identifying that the government's responsive abilities were successfully displayed through the utilization of a suppression strategy which focused on collaborative decision-making, meaning-making, and communication with society at all levels during the pandemic. In order to flatten the curve, it was vital to carry out suppression measures such as the implementation of regulations and restrictions that were believed to be necessary

based on readily available information during this unprecedented phenomenon (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020).

Accounting

As schools continue to provide instruction virtually or in-person, superintendents are required to ensure that each school in their specific school district comply with the national, state, and local guidelines. Although it is the responsibility of each individual school to ensure that all these protocols, measures, practices, and guidelines are followed, superintendents bear the obligation of ensuring district-wide compliance. As aforementioned, school superintendents are accountable to the board of trustees and community at large regarding everything that transpires within the schools they represent (Przybylski, Chen & Hu, 2018). Before a school can resume learning activities, it must comply with all national, state, and local guidelines. For instance, social distancing must be exercised among learners, proper sanitization must be performed, and learners must wear recommended face masks (WHO, 2020). It is thus the responsibility of every individual superintendent to work under extreme pressure to ensure that each of the schools that they represent comply with various guidelines. Superintendents will also be burdened with any emergent issues that arise from school communities that violate these protocols. They must thus work collaboratively with principals and school administrators to ensure these COVID-19 containment measures are not disregarded or inadequately exercised. The empowerment of local responders can play a significant role in increasing resiliency throughout the nation as communities develop skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary to be prepared to respond and recover from any crisis or disaster (Harris et al., 2018).

Learning

Superintendents are ultimately responsible for the hiring and training of all staff (Kowalski, 2012). According to Krasnov, Karpenko and Simons (2014), the teaching staff as well as school leaders and administrators are taught how to effectively cope with different types of emergencies during their pre-service staff development. In other words, they are trained in crisis management. Some of these crisis scenarios include how to manage response due to floods, earthquakes, and the sudden death of a staff or student, among other issues. Unfortunately, most teachers are not trained on how to respond to unprecedented diseases such as the current pandemic, which disrupted the entire school curriculum. Superintendents, alongside other school leaders, have thus been forced to create new strategies and budget for the additional training of teachers to effectively cope with the new normal. This is primarily because they have to prioritize the safety and well-being of learners, teaching staff, and other employees working in their respective school districts. The creation of comprehensive plans that provide stakeholders an outline of new expectations is one method school systems are utilizing to be transparent and forthcoming with information in their respective communities.

Emergence of COVID-19 and Its Impacts on Education

According to Nicola et al., (2020), COVID-19 has had far-reaching negative implications at all levels of the educational system throughout the United States. It is fair to mention that every school leader working during these challenging times has had to create, attain, or develop strategies in order to maneuver these demanding and chaotic moments. As noted by Nicola et al., (2020), COVID-19 is a major pandemic that is completely different from what the U.S. and other countries have faced over the last century. It follows that the public school superintendents have been forced to work under unique circumstances and extreme pressure (Harris and Jones, 2020).

Kaul, Shah and El-Serag (2020) support these findings, noting that school leaders, including public school superintendents, have worked relentlessly with limited options and in an environment characterized by sleepless nights.

Nonetheless, most of the private and public schools across the U.S. were forced to temporarily close as one of the measures aimed at curbing the continued spread of the virus (Chavez & Moshtaghian, 2020; Holcombe, 2020). According to Chavez (2020), this had changed during the months of August and September of 2020, when most of the U.S. states started re-opening the schools using a hybrid learning model, but with new arrangements that included the implementation of CDC recommendations such as social distancing and the use of face masks. TEA and the Texas Department of State Health Services were also required to provide a weekly release of COVID-19 positive case trends among students in the public schools (Platoff, 2020). The same trend has been experienced among school employees who have been deemed essential and required to return to work physically such as teachers, auxiliary staff, etc. This is a major, concerning issue and was a unique situation for superintendents who have the responsibility of ensuring the safety of students as well as teachers and non-teaching staff (Kowalski, 2012). They must comply with the new directives being released by different federal, local, and state agencies and officials, but at the same time work to ensure the safety and well-being of all students and staff.

Before the continued, gradual re-opening of public schools, specifically in Texas, it is also important to restate the fact that some of the states closed their schools indefinitely for the 2019-2020 academic year (which ended for most in late May, early June of 2020). An example case scenario is in Texas, where all end-of-course and STAAR exams for the 2019-2020 academic year were cancelled. These changes demonstrate the far-reaching, negative

implications that the emergence of COVID-19 had on public education in the U.S. It is also a clear demonstration of the unique challenges that school leaders, including public school superintendents, were challenged to address and overcome (Holcombe, 2020).

Decision Making in the Midst of COVID-19 Pandemic

Although there is a paucity of research on the different experiences of school leadership and superintendents during the COVID-19 pandemic, few insights have emerged with regard to how the pandemic has been influencing leadership within the educational and operational context (Harris & Jones, 2020). For instance, and based on the observations made by Rubin (2020), the most successful school leaders in 2020 were those who were most flexible and adaptive. Unlike previous times before the emergence of COVID-19, when the superintendents most frequently engaged with teachers and school administrators or agencies, it has become imperative for them to integrate the important role played by public health authorities. Also, and according to Harris and Jones (2020), superintendents had unilateral control to make critical decisions that influenced their school districts before COVID-19. Unfortunately, the pandemic shifted their circumstances to the degree that they found themselves in various unfavorable and unwanted positions, having to rely on a myriad of authorities and agencies in the decision-making process when circumstances were chaotic and information being released from those officials was often difficult to discern with full clarity and confidence. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents in the U.S. have had to lean on guidance being provided by the health officials and authorities from TEA, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the CDC, and the WHO in order to help contain and minimize the spread of the virus (Harris & Jones, 2020). The CDC and WHO provided protocols and fluid guidance to follow for each country to mitigate the continued spread of COVID-19.

Superintendents had to follow guidelines, protocols, measures, and COVID-19 directives from above, or rather from senior public healthcare officials. This equates to the integration of a new component in the standard decision-making process within the school district. According to Sahu (2020), these directives, processes, guidelines, and protocols have been highly volatile, implying that they can change overnight based on the progressive nature of the pandemic. This meant that school superintendents were working in an ever-changing, long-lasting, crisis-driven environment where schools could be ordered to close temporarily or indefinitely thus affecting staff and students as well as adversely affecting instructional continuity. Also, the progressive opening of schools is being administered in phases, and it is clear for stakeholders that those schools can be closed again if the virus is not well contained. Health official guidelines also require new school setups such as desk spacing, a limited number of students per given classroom, and changes to staffing requirements (Chavez, 2020). With all this volatility, superintendents are faced with a new challenge where they are largely dependent on instructions and orders from senior healthcare officials before they could eventually make a conclusive decision regarding the school district operations (Harris & Jones, 2020). Boin et al. (2017) connotes the reality superintendent's face when it comes to a crisis situation in which everybody is seeking their direction. Such calls are not easy to make due to the consequences that may arise after a decision is made, and the uncertainties about the nature of the phenomenon (Boin et al., 2017).

Focusing on the Basic Needs First and Working under Unclear Circumstances

According to Abshier, Harris, and Hopson (2011), having an effective financial management plan and an experienced superintendent who understands school finance, law, and operations play a major role for the district and throughout the individual's tenure. In the midst

of a crisis, the key focus for leaders is to make effective decisions and encourage efficiency for every need district-wide.

According to Harris and Jones (2020), it is the responsibility of every leader to act swiftly, intervene, and apply the best-suited leadership during a crisis. However, this should be performed in a strategic and thoughtful manner, where the particular leader puts into consideration the available alternatives as well as the potential implications of adopted decisions (Harris & Jones, 2020). It is also important to underscore the fact that it becomes challenging at times to predict potential outcomes, especially in a situation whereby no existing precedents provide guidance in the leadership of a school as exhibited in the midst of a crisis. In the current context, and as mentioned previously, COVID-19 is a unique and far-reaching pandemic with implications that the world has not experienced to a similar degree over the last century (Nicola et al., 2020). During this span, there have been different changes that have taken place in the educational sector. New leaders and school administrators, principals, and superintendents have emerged and assumed leadership roles. Without any prior precedents, it has thus been the responsibility of these leaders at different levels to devise the best interventions and strategies to overcome the pandemic experience.

Furthermore, superintendents have been motivated and expected to consistently place the interest and well-being of students at the forefront before any other purpose or intended outcome as it relates to school operations. For instance, - superintendents have been required to ensure all the basic needs such as well-being, safety, food, and health of children is given first priority. It is partially on this basis that more schools continued to close and terminate their learning activities as soon as COVID-19 cases were reported in the U.S. (DiazVicario, 2017)

Superintendents faced the sad reality that COVID-19 is highly contagious, prompting them to make extreme decisions including the reform of instructional delivery methods for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year. The situation was further exacerbated by the fact that the WHO could not provide a definitive time frame as to when the pandemic was expected to end. Instead, the organization warned that each individual country should put in place measures that would facilitate "co-living" with the disease (WHO, 2020). With the emergence of these new trends, and an unclear path forward with no indication of when the pandemic might cease to disrupt operations, it follows that the school superintendents had to prioritize health and safety. This is especially important considering the fact that they are accountable and responsible for individual activities that take place in every school within their specific school districts. Managing school systems during the COVID-19 pandemic presented an inimitable experience, where school superintendents, in collaboration with school administrators, principals, parents, and the wider community, as well as any other relevant stakeholders had to put into consideration the issue of COVID-19 in their strategic planning decisions. Although the safety of learners took precedence, the superintendents had to ensure that they remained focused on ensuring that proper measures were in place for the best learning outcomes. Unfortunately, and according to Johnson and Weiner (2020), this was a major challenge considering that it was unclear until schools would re-open for in-person instruction in a fashion similar to pre-pandemic operations. Without a clear timeframe, and while working under unpredictable conditions, school superintendents were grappling with a major challenge to continuously make meaning of the ever-changing circumstances coupled with uncertainty that rose as a result of the worldwide pandemic.

Equity in Education

The COVID-19 pandemic raised concern for the upgrade of facilities as related to implementing health and safety measures such as the installation of plexi-glass barriers in high traffic areas, touchless hand-sanitizers and touchless water fountain stations. According to Rivera and Lopez (2019), the state of Texas provides only nine percent of the costs that are associated with facilities, which results in school districts having to cover the majority of what it takes to maintain and upkeep the district facilities during a pandemic. Although school districts do have opportunities to raise the debt service tax rate through the selling of bonds which require a public election to determine whether a district has community approval for funding, Senate Bill 351 established a 50-cent threshold in 1991 that cannot be surpassed (Rivera & Lopez, 2019). In the midst of the pandemic, school district superintendents found themselves re-evaluating budget allocations in order to identify sufficient funding with existing dollars for safety and health upgrades.

According to Gil and Kim (2018), academic accountability has placed test scores at the forefront of measuring student achievement, highlighting the lack of educational resources such as technology infrastructure, skills, and hardware with which under-funded schools struggle. The implementation of online courses in post-secondary institutions has improved enrollment in general, broadening geographical reach and enabling students to refocus their learning mindset from a traditional to innovative experience that provides easy access to educational resources and enhances communication between students and lecturers (Amro, Maxwell, & Kupczynski, 2013).

According to Madrigano, Chandra, Costigan, and Acosta (2017), a resilience-oriented workforce has the ability to unite a community during a crisis event focused on creating a safe and healthy environment by setting examples of effective leadership, transparency, training, and

the development of integrated organizational structures. Groups with resilience-oriented approaches are described as having identity, purpose, values, trust, active problem solving, and skill building which all play vital roles in facilitating a crisis response (Madrigano, Chandra, Costigan, & Acosta, 2017). Maxwell, Locke, and Scheurich (2014) explored the importance of resilience among rural superintendents and found that strategies such as trusting their own judgement, solving problems one at a time, and valuing the diversity of perspectives, as well as finding their rudder and relying on their spiritual core, helped those rural superintendents to persist and remain resilient in the face of adversity.

Academic Disruption

In the midst of the pandemic, several indisputable variables were exhibited in the academic realm. TEA guidelines held school districts accountable for abiding by transition plans focused on opening campuses for on-site instruction in order to continue receiving state funding. Schools continued to face the challenge of teacher turnover rates increasing due to fear factors related to COVID-19 and other factors. . According to Peist, McMahon, David, and Keys (2020), academic performance, teacher salaries, class sizes, administrative support, and school violence have significant influences on the extent to which teachers consider leaving the profession, transfer from one school to another, or retire. Additionally, more than two billion dollars per year is expended in the United States due to approximately 500,000 turnover cases nation-wide.

According to Onyema et al. (2020), the continued closure of schools following the emergence of COVID-19 has had a major interruption on learning. Murphy (2020) supports these findings, acknowledging the fact that COVID-19 immensely disrupted the academic calendar of K-12 education. This posed a unique challenge, considering that the school superintendents are engaged in the day--to-day running of school districts including decisions on

the vision and programs (Kowalski, 2012). This is primarily because the superintendents, as the leaders of different school principals and administrators, had to develop new strategies through which students could continue with their learning activities despite the physical closure of learning institutions. Based on the observations made by Ali (2020), different schools were forced to adopt at-home online learning methods following new policy initiatives by governments aimed at containing the continued spread of COVID-19. In other words, schools from all over the world were forced to harness and utilize different online based learning programs in order to ensure continued learning of their students (Adnan and Anwar, 2020).

Considering that the emergence of COVID-19 was unprecedented, and was an emergency contiguous disease, it was thus a major challenge for the superintendents in collaboration with school principals and administrators to devise a new vision, goals, and objectives based on the "new normal." This was even more challenging for different school leaders considering that even the healthcare experts, including the Texas Department of State Health Services, could not give a definite time when the virus could be fully contained (Maxouris, 2020). It meant that superintendents had to develop tentative goals and objectives, which would frequently change based on the prevailing trends and outcomes of the global pandemic through time.

It is also imperative to mention that online-based learning is not exempt from a diverse range of challenges when compared to the physical classroom model of learning. For instance, children have to be trained on the utilization of new devices (Arkorful and Abaidoo, 2014). Further, online-based learning is most effective in technologically advanced countries where Internet connectivity and access is on relatively high levels (Adnan and Anwar, 2014). Just like many other countries, there are some neighborhoods in the U.S. and specifically in Texas that are underdeveloped and inequitable. Some areas also have low speed for Internet broadband (Chen,

2013). This means that a number of the students do not have access to stable Internet connectivity. It follows that getting all students to participate in online based learning was a major challenge for some of the schools (Chen, 2013).

Financial and Operational Disruption

The world of school finance was shaken when the pandemic emerged. House Bill 3, which was passed by the Texas Legislature in 2019, was designed to overcome limited resources for school systems that resulted from the growing population and increasing academic expectations from state and federal governments. The superintendent of schools is ultimately responsible for safeguarding the organization's financial portfolio, regardless of experience in money management or budgeting (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011). These responsibilities include the preparation of an annual budget, managing day-to-day operations, keeping the school board informed on financial matters, and staying in compliance with state and federal statutes and regulations (Abshier, Harris, & Hopson, 2011).

Besides disrupting the school calendar, COVID-19 has also greatly disrupted the financial status of different learning institutions (García & Weiss, 2020). As demonstrated in the preceding sections, COVID-19 widened the equity gap in the sense that some of the students and parents had better access to online and digital platforms than others. Similar to the case of a student or family experiencing a substantial lack of technology resources, it should be noted that some students and families are more fortunate in terms of socio-economic status. The same socio-economic disparity is prevalent among the teachers and non-teaching staff members working in different school districts. The adoption of e-learning requires continued support of the students by the teaching staff. During the use of the hybrid instructional approach, teachers were required to provide guidance to their students through different online platforms. Most of the

schools have been grappling with the idea of paying these teachers when the schools are already closed. It is thus the responsibility of the superintendents alongside other school leaders to ensure that socially and economically disadvantaged teachers are provided with some financial support.

It is imperative to mention that schools are not solely for learning, but also places where students eat. As the schools continue to function at some level as is the case in Texas, leaders and administrators are forced to ensure proper diets for the learners (Lee, 2020). According to Lee (2020), the National School Lunch Program helps provide subsidies to public schools with the aim of ensuring that all students have access to affordable school meals. Amidst a pandemic, all K-12 public schools throughout the country were offered the opportunity through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to provide daily curbside breakfast and lunch meals at no cost to the children (Dunn, Kenney, Fleischhacker, & Bleich, 2020). For instance, it has been reported that more than 30 million learners across the U.S are receiving free and reduced price lunch (García & Weiss, 2020). It is imperative to underscore the fact that many parents are not able to afford nutritious food to provide a balanced diet for their children. As such, they look to the schools to provide such meals. It is the responsibility of the school administrators, led by superintendents, to ensure that students' well-being and health is given first priority. School leaders are thus finding themselves in a major predicament of ensuring student well-being with limited financial resources (García & Weiss, 2020). Superintendents alongside school principals and administrators have made special arrangements to secure financial support and sponsorships from different stakeholders in order to close this unique financial gap.

Finally, having the input of school board members, administrators, teachers, staff members, parents, and community members in the management of district finances and operations was a critical finding identified within a case study conducted by Abshier, Harris, and

Hopson (2011), where seven participative superintendents in south Texas elaborated on the key elements each faction contributes when it comes to ensuring and providing a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning.

Research Gap

COVID-19 is a relatively new highly contagious virus. Although different measures and policy initiatives have been put in place to contain its spread, the virus continues to show signs of volatile and devastating results. In essence, there is a paucity of research that has been carried out to demonstrate its devastating effects. In fact, there exist only a few journal articles that cover COVID-19 as new trends continue to emerge every other day. There is also limited information from different superintendents on how this virus has influenced them in their respective school districts. This presents a unique research gap, considering that some of the schools have not fully re-opened their physical classrooms. This study will glean direct insights from the six selected superintendents regarding their views about the experiences they had during the COVID-19 pandemic and especially within the Texas.

Chapter Summary

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, various indisputable variables were exhibited in the academic realm. The literature review integrates data from different sources such as books, journal articles, and reports from different organizations regarding the problem being investigated. It is evident that COVID-19 has had far-reaching negative implications on the overall educational field. Some of the schools were temporarily closed while still providing virtual instruction. The chapter has analyzed different leadership approaches, which guide the current study with regard to the experiences of superintendents during the COVID-19 time period to date. Superintendents have the responsibility of ensuring the smooth running of

day-to-day activities in the different schools that they represent. Current literature demonstrates that decision-making, modes of learning, and the financial performances of schools have largely been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there still exists a research gap considering the limited extant information regarding COVID-19 and its implications. Also, limited studies have been carried out regarding the virus itself.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is a developing method in which researchers can contribute and report their unique perspectives on a certain topic. Saldana (2015) illustrates how thinking qualitatively is made up of patterns and mental operations that strive to be consolidated through the use of observation and recollection, as well as evaluation and creativity. Marshall and Rossman (2016) address the need of identifying the theoretical or conceptual framework that demands a reason or rationale for the study topic before completing a qualitative research proposal. Furthermore, design and techniques consider the feasibility of the investigation as well as the selection of specific procedures that will be used throughout the process to ensure that the study is comprehensively trustworthy. It's important to note that the researcher is identified as an instrument of the study which plays a fundamental part to the methodology (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The objective for this study was to explore and comprehend situated insights, key factors, and the conceptualization of lived experiences of Texas superintendents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A one-point-in-time approach was utilized as the method of data collection which will involve one interview per participant (Patton, 2015). During the design phase of this study, critical trade-offs were made as necessary, not only when it came to the selection of each question that will be asked, but also the number of questions, the selection process of the individuals, and even the location of the interview. Patton (2015) describes the trade-offs in design as a vital component of each study where prioritization is a key element to practice during the framing of research or evaluation. Patton (2015) also emphasizes that ultimately the product of research is a social construction designed to ascertain a collection of different perspectives through the use of open-ended interview questions.

Research Design Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilized as the research methodology for this study, which is mainly concerned with a thorough exploration of lived experiences, thus making sense of that particular experience through the utilization of asking broad questions that are descriptive and reflective (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). According to Patton (2015), phenomenological analysis is designed to obtain the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a person or group. Further, the researcher must rely primarily on personal judgment and sense-making since statistical testing is irrelevant in this type of study. The objective for these interviews is to attempt a sense-making approach of lived experiences through an analytical process called the hermeneutics circle which is designed to enhance overall understanding of the phenomenon through interpretation (Patton, 2015). According to Emery and Anderman (2020), IPA has the capability to provide awareness through lived experiences from marginalized and sometimes underrepresented populations needing equity-oriented attention.

IPA is a newer methodological approach that many researchers utilize in the health and psychology industries; however since the first paper describing IPA was published by Smith (1996), use of the methodology has increased in cognate areas such as education (Smith & Shineborne, 2012). Smith and Shinebourne (2012) assert that IPA contains three theoretical elements concerned with not only lived experiences, but also the meaning and recognition of capturing rich details through the process of engagement and interpretation.

The first element is phenomenology which is mainly focused on human lived experiences. According to Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006), the intent of utilizing IPA should be to forensically explore, understand, and communicate the experiences shared by the participants by implementing two aims: 1) the attempt to understand and describe the

participants' world focusing on the specific event or phenomena, and, 2) provide a critical and conceptual analysis based on the participants' sense-making response. The second element is hermeneutics which depends on all layers of interpretation such as the researcher trying to make sense of the participant who is also trying to make sense of their own lived experience (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Hodge, Mavin, and Kearns (2020) describe hermeneutics as a deep dive into understanding and interpreting the complex dynamics of not only what is presented in texts or historical artefacts, but of ourselves and the world. The third element is the idiographic approach which focuses on examining the exclusivity of the individuals' experience striving to generalize patterns that retain their sole roles and nuance of what it being studied (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

The goal and intention of this study and research method was to ascertain the essence of the lived experiences of each school leader who has endured a crisis phenomenon during their tenure (Emery & Anderman, 2020). The key was to identify related themes from the conducted interviews to reveal common leadership actions that were taken to providing a safe and conducive environment for learning.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What innate characteristics do public school superintendents exhibit during times of crisis when it comes to decision-making and coordinating in the context of having an equity-oriented mind-set?
2. How does school superintendent sense-making while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to school district operations, instruction, technology, child-nutrition, community perception, and other areas?

3. How does school superintendent meaning-making while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to instructional continuity, teaching, learning, and technology?
4. How does school superintendent accountability while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to maintaining transparency, continued focus on student achievement, and building a positive culture?
5. How does school superintendent learning while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to lessons learned, closing the achievement gap, and ongoing conflict resolution in navigating this unprecedented event?

Patton's Twelve Core Strategies as Methodological Framework

The objective for this study was to explore and comprehend situated insights, key factors, and the conceptualization of lived experiences in the midst of a crisis phenomenon. In order to strategically produce a well-informed qualitative inquiry, Patton (2015) suggests the following twelve core strategies outlined independently here as the methodological lens and framework contextualizing the study: (a) holistic perspective, (b) context sensitivity, (c) naturalistic inquiry, (d) emergent design flexibility, (e) qualitative data, (f) personal experience engagement, (g) reflexivity: perspective and voice, (h) purposeful sampling, (i) unique case orientation, (j) inductive analysis and create synthesis, (k) empathetic neutrality and mindfulness, and (l) dynamic systems perspective. Key processes of the conduct of this study are embedded in this comprehensive methodological framework to foreground the theoretical methodology undergirding the procedural aspects of conducting the study.

Holistic Perspective

An endeavor to combine qualitative data as a whole rationalizes a holistic approach when seeking a comprehensive and complete picture of a complex system developing *gestalt* that interconnects all variables involved (Patton, 2015). Due to the loss of inquiry independence, this type of perspective becomes extremely dangerous in terms of identifying a central unifying consensus (Patton, 2015). When examining the data, Marshall and Rossman (2016) emphasize the importance of immersion during the process and the potential repercussions of continuing to cut and compress for the sake of streamlining. Rather than minimizing the data, Saldana (2015) summarizes the thought process by *condensing* the data while keeping the crucial variables that bring value to the final product.

Marshall and Rossman (2016) also claim that stating the research study's purpose is important when deciding on techniques, such as whether to *explore, explain,* or *describe* a phenomenon and to what extent. When contemplating a holistic approach to a study, a researcher may consider thinking assertionally, ready to create summative claims backed up by evidence and embracing key linkages of connection within the qualitative inquiry.

Context Sensitivity

As a researcher with a sense of context sensitivity, it is critical to comprehend every component of the study while also developing intense degrees of reflection in light of the ultimate product's practical and utilitarian usefulness (Saldana, 2015). Thinking interpretively, according to Saldana (2015), promotes the researcher to inherit a high level of understanding in order to assure compassion and context. Patton (2015) also integrates naturalistic inquiry approaches that emphasize context in the findings, concentrating on best-case designs and methods to carefully fit unique concerns and demands.

A study should be designed to be reasonable in size and complex (Marshall and Rossman, 2016). Marshall and Rossman (2016) warn the novice not to establish criteria that can have a negative impact on the outcome in order to complete the study quickly. Saldana (2015) explains how our brains are wired to perform efficiently in order to achieve accuracy throughout the qualitative process. Complex thinking offers a researcher the impression that there are no clear answers and that the phenomenon is complex.

The researcher offered each participant the opportunity to select the interview site and also offered a virtual platform that could be utilized as well. It was important to the researcher that the participants felt comfortable in the environment where they were interviewed so that they would express their ideas and share great depth and detail. Patton (2015) suggests the following as a foundation to set the stage for high quality interviewing: 1) ask open-ended questions, 2) be clear, 3), listen, 4), probe as appropriate, 5) observe, 6) be both empathic and neutral, 7) make transitions, 8) distinguish types of questions, 9) be prepared for the unexpected, and, 10) be present throughout (p. 428). The researcher began each interview with a mindset of not only striving to establish rapport with the participants, but also eliminating the thought of being judgmental (Patton, 2015).

Naturalistic Inquiry

Saldana (2015) emphasizes the importance of reflection, which helps one to reflect on the ongoing emergence of phenomena, hence enhancing personal understanding when it comes to meaning or making sense. These types of observations, according to Patton (2015), occur in real-world contexts such as a basic discovery procedure or an open-ended interview environment. This form of study is one that observes the real world as it happens without meddling (Patton, 2015).

Understanding the framework around each methodology approach is critical for a researcher going through the qualitative process during the initial research design framework (Saldana, 2015). This form of open-ended interviewing style is commonly used in investigations, allowing an investigator to ask open-ended questions only for a response rather than back-and-forth conversation.

Emergent Design Flexibility

The open-ended nature of naturalistic inquiry yielding comprehensive discoveries gave rise to emergent design flexibility (Patton, 2015). According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), qualitative research genres are critical in the study of social phenomena that often occur in the natural world, drawing on a variety of approaches that respect the humanity of all study participants. In essence, the researcher is guided towards interpreting complex findings holistically and systematically (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). It was imperative throughout the research phases that action, reaction, and interaction took place for observation and analysis purposes (Saldana, 2015). By utilizing these interconnected processes every time qualitative inquiry is conducted, one is able to stay consistent around each social condition that influences and affects daily lives (Saldana, 2015).

Due to the constant change that those in public education face daily, emergent design flexibility is an approach that is beneficial in the academic research framework. Annually, students advance to the next grade level with progressing world-views, evolving stages of maturity development, and higher expectations forthcoming. Patton (2015) paints a clear picture of pointing out the finalization of one's research once data is analyzed and re-directed theoretically.

Qualitative Data

Research developed through a naturalistic inquiry design, where interpretive perceptions are evaluated, make up the foundations of what qualitative data means (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) provides examples of where qualitative data can be collected, such as in quotations, observations, and excerpts from documents. In addition, when conducting a study with participants involved, Patton (2015) specifies how data can be acquired if random selections are made and the story gives insight into the nature of a naturalistic inquiry. Marshall and Rossman (2016) describe the phenomenological approach that makes an impact on qualitative data in which it seeks to explore and analyze the meaning of individually-lived experience. According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), it is imperative that experiences are analyzed as unique expressions and then compared during the evaluation process.

Saldana (2015) asserts how thinking subjectively is a model that must be understood to enable a researcher to be cognizant of instances in which personal feelings and values have an influence on the inquiry and data that comes from it. Thinking critically is one method that Saldana (2015) describes to allow the researcher to take sides on the social or moral issue and examine the status quo from various lenses. In summation, qualitative data is designed to "tell a story" for those who are interested on the inquiry (Patton, 2015).

Personal Experience and Engagement

According to Patton (2015), one method of qualitative research that allows researchers to get close to their subjects or feel the impact of the study personally is by going into the field directly and experiencing the inquiry. In doing so, one is able to feel the effects in a tangible way which also generates certain mind profiles such as thinking emotionally, empathetically, darkly, and spiritually. Having an awareness of participants' feelings and how those feelings stimulate

action enables the researcher to gain the ability of having emotions during the study or analyzation of data phase (Saldana, 2015).

When it comes to educational leadership, (Saldana, 2015) stresses how impactful emotions are for students and staff who need to feel safe and secure in their environment before experiences can occur. During an interview, it is important to understand that the questions asked will have an emotional impact of the interviewee (Saldana, 2015). The researcher will begin each interview with a two-way observation mindset not only striving to establish rapport, but also eliminating the thought of being judgmental (Patton, 2015).

Having self-awareness is something that plays a vital role when a researcher is having personal experiences or engagement with their qualitative inquiry. According to Saldana (2015), thinking empathetically allows the researcher to put himself in someone else's shoes connecting deeply with their situations and seeing life through someone else's eyes.

In order to gain credibility and validity for the research being conducted, Marshall and Rossman (2016) discuss the need for the qualitative researcher to be g in the setting for a long period of time either through personal experience or direct contact with multiple sources.

Reflexivity Perspective and Voice

Reflection is a practice which enables one to simply take a step back and think critically on the situation at hand. According to Patton (2015), reflexivity is an approach of taking that reflection and intensifying the process in the in-depth, interpersonal nature of a study. Reflexivity allows for the ability to think deeper about how we think as researchers critically self-explore.

Saldana (2015) posits that data analysis will be enhanced through the higher levels of awareness and clarity brought through reflexivity. In addition, implementing a refraction

perspective which focuses on critical thinking and problem solving skills will also captivate interpretations diverging them into independent inquires to potentially revisit for clarity.

In an attempt to tell a story once qualitative data analysis is complete, Marshall and Rossman (2016) share alternative understanding mechanisms that can illuminate a researcher's data and provide for deeper evaluation. In the real world, the researcher has found himself in situations where personal decisions create a domino effect for those within the organization. In essence, qualitative research is vital to any situation that can be solved with proper observation, data analysis, and reflexivity to ensure clarity and dependability.

Purposeful Sampling

Marshall and Rossman (2016) clearly state how vital well-developed sampling is for the soundness of any study, which is the process that must be completed after the site, population, and phenomenon is selected. According to Patton (2015), selections of sampling can sometimes be intentional or purposeful due to inquiry interest and the degree of in-depth examination desired.

The researcher conducted six separate interviews focused on identifying common themes. The type of inquiry utilized revolves around comprehensive accounts from each participant's experience, both past and present. A phenomenological interviewing approach was used to elicit a personal description of lived experiences (Patton, 2015). From the onset, the researcher focused on documenting the "who, when, where, and what" of social life as described by Saldana (2015) when it came to the discovery process.

The use of purposeful sampling focused on identifying six Texas superintendents who were employed as a superintendent since March 1, 2020. The participants selected also still employed as a superintendent of schools when the interviews were conducted in order to yield

rich insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The strategic approach employed in conjunction with purposeful sampling was "criterion-based sampling" in which Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) assert that this approach works well when all the participants studied represent people who have experienced the same phenomenon.

The snowball sampling technique was implemented in order to aid trustworthiness and credibility across the study in which the researcher depended on networking to find participants willing to interview (Ghaljaie, Naderifar, & Goli, 2017). According to Etikan, Alkassim, and Abubakar (2016), this type of non-probability sampling method generates a chain of referrals due to the social connections an initial respondent has in the population. Marshall and Rossman (2016) shared three interrelated concerns that a research should weigh when considering writing a proposal for a research study: 1) do-ability, 2) should-do ability, and 3) want-to-do ability. These three considerations allow a researcher to answer basic questions or the realistic contributions that will come from the final report after completion. The "do-ability" specifically considers feasibility such as resources, access, and knowledge in order to pursue a research study which incorporates purposeful sampling strategies emphasized on identifying participants for a study or selecting a precise location to conduct the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Personal Experience and Engagement

According to Patton (2015), one method of qualitative research that allows a researcher to get close to their subjects or feel the impact of the study personally includes direct exploration in the field and experiencing the inquiry. In doing so, one feels the effects in a tangible way which also generates certain methods of mind profiles such as thinking emotionally, empathetically, darkly, and spiritually. Having an awareness of participants' feelings and how those feelings stimulate action enables the researcher to gain the ability of having emotions during the study or

analyzation of data phase (Saldana, 2016) When it comes to educational leadership, Saldana further stresses how impactful emotions are for students and staff who need to feel safe and secure in their environment before experiences can occur.

During an interview, it was important to understand that the questions asked would have an emotional impact on the interviewee (Saldana, 2016). During the study I completed where school administrators were asked to give their perceptions on the impact a superintendent has in schools, I was careful to develop questions with consideration for the level of comfort I wanted them to experience during the process.

Unique Case Orientation

When conducting an interview, researchers have the advantage of taking control and being creative not only with the questions, but also diving in depth with a deep discussion and capturing high quality details about the topic of interest (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). According to Patton (2015), each case is individually vital and unique in respect to specific qualitative analysis which requires a sense of holistic responsibility from the researcher focused on interpreting effectively. Using an ethnographic interview approach (Marshall and Rossman, 2016) is helpful to allow the researcher to learn and focus on the participants' explicit worldviews regarding the study at-hand by individualizing their perspectives and firsthand encounters. In addition, Marshall and Rossman (2016) openness and trust must be exercised during a narrative inquiry that seeks to understand sociological questions on participants' unique lived experiences.

Saldana (2015) encourages the researcher to think narratively when dealing with a storied account, representation, and knowledge of lived experiences. The researcher is more than likely going to generate several different storylines, depict through monologues from the interview

review process, and document dialogues and themes that are unique to the social experience under examination.

Inductive Analysis and Creative Synthesis

According to Patton (2015), a researcher must determine the variables that play a vital role based on initial observation of the phenomenon and from there project anticipated outcome measurements. In essence, utilizing an inductive approach for a mixed-methods study is common for further analyzation and unmeasured or unanticipated factors that emerge (Patton, 2015). Having an exploratory thought process and thinking conceptually enables the researcher to be open for investigation (Saldana, 2015). Saldana (2015) asserts the value that reference points for comparison offer during the exploratory and discovery process making more and inductively more sense as the researcher continues to study the inquiry.

In public education, accountability expectations have continued to emerge due to the ongoing growth and advancements that the world experiences. Marshall and Rossman (2016) describe the importance of developing the conceptual framework that drives the focus and purpose towards uncovering what is relevant and problematic, providing evidence that potential significance for exploration is necessary. As related to accountability expectations, many variables such demographics, the economy, and resource management spark an interest to continue exploring for stronger results.

Empathetic Neutrality and Mindfulness

Saldana (2015) argues that thinking empathetically enables a researcher to dive deeper into the qualitative realm of research. When conducting a qualitative research study, it is imperative to understand the middle ground that must be found when it comes to personal involvement, judgments, and observations (Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015),

empathetic neutrality is designed to enable the researcher in understanding the situation at hand without any form of judgment. Marshall and Rossman (2016) assert that the success of qualitative inquiry relies specifically on the interpersonal skills of the researcher such as building trust, good relations, and rapport and the like. Conducting a qualitative study would be substandard if a researcher attempted to complete the task without having an empathetic understanding of and profound respect for the perspectives of others (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Saldana (2015) affirms that empathy is having a cognitive perception and emotional reflection of someone else's feelings. The discipline that one has as a researcher which comes from their own personal adolescence, background, and experience plays a vital role during a qualitative study that requires an inclusive connection (Saldana, 2015). Thinking phenomenologically also allows a researcher to explore the research from someone else's point of view eliminating your own value system and worldview (Saldana, 2015).

Cognition becomes a vital component of being neutral throughout a qualitative study which leads to the creation of *verstehen* which means *understanding at a deep level* (Patton, 2015). In addition, Marshall and Rossman (2016) share the impact that "reciprocity" has during or after a study is complete. On top of providing a safe and conducive environment for those who are going to be interviewed, it is important to show acts of kindness as tokens of appreciation which can include having snacks available for them or anything that shows your mindfulness and true generosity.

Dynamic Systems Perspective

Patton (2015) describes a qualitative study as being like a film that provides many dynamics throughout, versus a photograph that captures one moment in time. The world is full of

dynamics which allows a researcher to have so many opportunities for inquiry. Every moment in life is full of decisions and changes that play a major role in society's trajectory. Knowing that change is a natural and inevitable part of humanity, Saldana (2015) encourages us as researchers to think analytically to learn something new about life with the intention to share discoveries found. Problem solving is one major goal that most researchers seek during a specific study which forms an induction approach, broadening the possibilities that occur within a dynamic system (Saldana, 2016). Saldana (2015) also argues that thinking conceptually allows a researcher to frame an idea rather than an object due to the ever-changing social phenomenon. When you are dealing with lived experiences and humanity, it is imperative to understand that everyone thinks differently and has something going on in their unique lives which play a vital role in their answers during an interview, reactions in a situation, or approach toward you as a researcher. Marshall and Rossman (2016) illustrate how dilemma analysis produces thematic coherence where the participant is within a deep thought process sharing different sorts of dynamic data for research purposes. In addition, the real-life, respondent-generated dilemma can have a viable impact which enables respondents to open up about their lives as openly as possible, thus generating responses in a more naturalistic fashion (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Throughout the research phase of this project, the researcher utilized a four-triangulation process which focuses on combining multiple data sources in order to reach a level of agreement on the qualitative analysis at hand (Patton, 2015). Trustworthiness and credibility were key variables that the researcher kept in mind throughout the entire project.

Six interviews were conducted with current school district superintendents which all work for a public-school system. A series of questions was asked to each participant driven about

their respective perceptions on the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on public education. It was imperative that the researcher establish trust with each participant such as sharing with them that real names would not be used on this project.

The researcher utilized the Erlandson et al. (1993) naturalistic inquiry methodology. This strategy will be focused on enabling the participants to contrast the reality they experienced in the midst of the pandemic so that the interpretation of the perceived reality is extensively rich (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Establishing credibility through identifying the compatibility of the constructed realities from the participants generated opportunities for peer debriefing and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1993). A strategic approach to collect sufficient detailed data from the respondents and interpret with precision was be prioritized by the researcher in order to establish transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of dependability strategies also instilled trustworthiness and credibility for the inquiry assuring the reader that confirmability strategies such as an audit was conducted and the study was validated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson et al., 1993).

Data Collection Process

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher shared the criteria of the study which would be shared publicly after completion. The data collection process included audio recording to log the entire conversation. The researcher did his best to make each interviewee feel safe and ensure that the environment was conducive to encouraging the informant to talk. Patton (2015) notes that, “As a good hammer is essential to fine carpentry, a good recorder is indispensable to fine fieldwork” (p. 472).

According to Patton (2015), the moment after every interview is critical to the rigor and validity of qualitative inquiry due to guaranteeing the quality of the data. In essence, the

researcher ensured that the recorder worked properly and asked each participant if they had anything to add once the recorder was turned off (Patton, 2015).

Each interview was transcribed word for word. The researcher created an Excel spreadsheet and sought common themes that all participants alluded to during their respective interviews. It was imperative the patterns and themes were identified in order to ensure a strong foundation for analysis (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) emphasizes that getting organized for analysis begins with an inventory of what the researcher obtained. Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) connote the importance of the findings which must be focused on data rather than the researcher's own preconceptions, in which reflexivity is required. The researchers process aligned with Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), who defined reflexivity as "a deep awareness on the part of researchers of their own preconceptions and assumptions and reflection on their roles and emerging understandings while engaged in the research process" (p. 153).

Vogt, Vogt, Gardner and Haeffele (2014) assert that a code is a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or translates data attributing interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, assertion, or proposition development, theory building, and other analytic processes (p. 13).

First and second cycle coding as described by Saldana (2016) was implemented throughout the coding process. Attribute coding played a vital role during the coding process in which Saldana (2016) asserts the logging of essential information is prioritized based on the contexts for analysis and interpretation. Structural coding which is known as question-based coding was also applied with the expectation of identifying large segments of in-depth analysis from the interviews (Saldana, 2016). The application of value coding that Saldana (2016) shares was also be implemented throughout the first cycle process where data reflecting the

participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs of the study provided the researcher with effective data. A narrative coding approach was also embedded into the coding process whereas storytelling becomes the key factor in exploring intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences and actions that participants reveal during the interview process (Saldana, 2016).

Nonetheless, all themes were analyzed for similarities in the second cycle (Saldana, 2016). "The primary goal during the second cycle coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of first cycle codes" (Saldana, 2016, p.234). The use of pattern coding was processed with the goal of identifying emergent themes, summarizing large amounts of data into smaller numbers of analytical data seeking relationships from all the conducted interviews (Saldana, 2016).

Data Analysis

Patton (2015) discusses how qualitative inductive analysis generates new concepts, explanations, and results which are designed to link together to discover themes within the data gathered. Each interview the researcher conducts was transcribed verbatim following a coding method created in a Microsoft excel spreadsheet. Patton (2015) stresses the importance of classification due to the chaos that may be created without it. The researcher will seek to discern common themes based on each interview individually as well as collectively across interviews. Common themes will be identified from each interview and all interviews will be coded in several rounds until the point of saturation is evident. Saldana (2016) suggests that throughout the coding process, theming may stem from a single word to a full sentence or multi-word phrase. Additionally, all themes will be analyzed for similarities as it related to the second cycle of coding (Saldana, 2016). Specific coding strategies relative to Saldana (2016) will be articulated as they emerge.

Summary of Methodology

The objective for this study was to identify key themed experiences superintendents had during the COVID-19 pandemic. A one-point-in-time approach was utilized as the method of data collection which involved one interview per participant (Patton, 2015). During the design phase of this study, critical trade-offs were made not only when it came to the selection of each question that would be asked, but also the number of questions, the selection process of the individuals, and even the location of the interview. Patton (2015) describes the trade-offs in design as a vital component of each study where prioritization is a key element to practice during the framing of research or evaluation. Patton (2015) also places emphasis on social construction for evaluation. In this study, this is accomplished through the collection of different perspectives one might have by utilizing open-ended interview questions and then completing an examination of each participant's perception.

Researchers must establish competence explicitly and implicitly if they are truly seeking validity and reliability from the qualitative study considered (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), it is imperative to articulate a soundly-designed project which leads to trustworthiness overall. Saldana (2015) asserts that thinking connectively enhances the potential for relativity with the world through your research which is originally designed to build relational, emotional, or unified connections with between the variables involved.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

It's probably the most integral part of the success or failure of any system to be able to communicate clearly when people can't even think clearly, the ability to bring calm and ease when everything is in chaos, the ability to have clarity when you're blurred, and the ability to see the future when the present is unpredictable.

Dr. Mendez, pseudonym

Some of the most striking words from one of this study's participants is shared above as a means of providing context and a reality check as the researcher shares the voices of six superintendents' lived experiences of leading during the COVID-19 pandemic in this chapter. Knowledge of these six participants' experiences were explored via Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which sought to provide a thorough exploration of their lived experiences through the utilization of asking broad questions that were descriptive yet required reflection to address the focus of the study (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). The meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of these courageous school leaders worked to shape this phenomenological analysis (Patton, 2015). By using his own insider knowledge, the researcher was able to connect with the participants on common ground having served a school district during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well. Use of personal judgment and sense-making of these participants' lived experiences through a hermeneutic approach enhanced overall understanding of their experiences, (i.e., the phenomenon under study) through interpretation (Patton, 2015). Using semi-structured research questions for the study, aligned to the Boin et al. (2017) framework, as a starting point for data analysis afforded awareness of the lived experiences of these six Hispanic superintendents, all of serving predominantly marginalized populations.

In beginning the interview process, the researcher sought first to gain an understanding of each superintendent's perspective, educational background and context for what shaped them as leaders. The summary table below is followed by a brief narrative profile of each superintendent seeking to provide a sense of their humanity as evidenced in their own words and experiences leading through this pandemic.

Table I. District/Superintendent Descriptive Information

District	Enrollment	Superintendent	Gender	Ethnicity	Total Years' Superintendent	Total Years' Education
Prime ISD	10,250	Dr. Casey Ricardo	F	Hispanic	8	37
Rocky ISD	18,150	Dr. Diana Chavez	F	Hispanic	8	34
Desert ISD	2,152	Dr. Ellen Rios	F	Hispanic	2	31
Spurs ISD	4,551	Dr. Flora Serna	F	Hispanic	9	29
Eagle ISD	55,129	Dr. Gabriel Mendez	M	Hispanic	8	26
Port ISD	3,115	Dr. Henry Rodriguez	M	Hispanic	7	25

Participant Profiles

As noted in Table I, all of the participants were Hispanic superintendents. Four were female and two were male. These leaders were currently employed geographically throughout all of Texas. These profiles share only some of the additional background on each participant; however, more significantly, these words of the participants will long resonate with the researcher, contributing wisdom and insight to the researcher's own future leadership roles.

Dr. Casey Ricardo

Dr. Ricardo expressed her devotion to public education by sharing that she has 37 years of experience, from beginning as an elementary teacher to then becoming an elementary principal, junior high principal, coordinator for curriculum and instruction, director for curriculum and instruction, assistant superintendent and now, superintendent. Dr. Ricardo has been the superintendent for 3 years at Prime ISD, located in a suburban area in south Texas with

95% of the student population being Hispanic and 65% being economically disadvantaged. On a personal level, Dr. Ricardo shared that she is a mother, grandmother and wife who loves to spend time with her family. Dr. Ricardo recognized that her experience as a long-time educator and leader was a key factor to informing her sense-making and decision-making abilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> *I think you have to do steady as we go, I think you have to hold your composure. This is where everything you know about yourself, everything that you have inside you as a leader, every characteristic, this is where it all comes to the forefront, it comes to fruition and it comes to play altogether at one time.*

Dr. Diana Chavez

Dr. Chavez has served public education for 34 years in various positions working with all types of populations within a school. From starting her career as a classroom teacher, Dr. Chavez then became a diagnostician, special education director, federal programs director, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. Dr. Chavez has been the superintendent for four years at Rocky ISD, located in a suburban area in east Texas, with 52% of the student population White, 30% Hispanic and 24% economically disadvantaged. Aside from working in education, she shared her love for her family and spoke about her children and husband who she believes keeps her motivated to do what she does on a daily basis.

> *I lead a school-district that believes in diversity, equity, and inclusion, and I will tell you that I think equity has to play in every decision that you make if you're really going to be for all kids.*

Dr. Ellen Rios

Dr. Rios has served education for 31 years. Her passion for education has been one of many experiences that have shaped her to become a superintendent of schools in 2019. The idea of having to navigate through a pandemic was not something that Dr. Rios anticipated; however, she shared that she was confident as a veteran educator and that her experiences had helped her navigate through the crisis phenomenon. Dr. Rios has been the superintendent for two years at Desert ISD, located in a rural area in west Texas with 99% of the student population being Hispanic and 90% being economically disadvantaged. Dr. Rios is a mother, grandmother, and wife who enjoys spending time with her family. It is important to note that Dr. Rios illustrated her leadership approach as one being focused on ensuring that equity is at the forefront of each decision.

> *Equity plays a huge role in the decisions that we make because we constantly ask ourselves that question. We always base our decisions on, is this equitable?*

Dr. Flora Serna

Dr. Serna has been a superintendent for the last nine years of her 29-year experience at Spurs ISD. During the interview, Dr. Serna shared that she has had the opportunity to serve throughout the entire state of Texas as a teacher, principal, director, and assistant superintendent prior to becoming a superintendent. In addition, she recalled working in rural, urban, and suburban districts in which several were faced with high poverty challenges. At Spurs ISD, a suburban area in central Texas, she shared that 78% of the population comes from an economically disadvantaged household and 70% of the student population are Hispanic. She is a mother and wife, and she shared that those roles and her family are her number one support

system for her life when it comes to leading a school district. They serve to help ground her ability to navigate through crisis events, especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

> *Certainly, as we were trying to navigate how to return to school, you've got to navigate a lot of different emotions and you can't waiver on decisions that you know are in the best interest of the kids and families and your community. And I think you've got to be able to have that level of confidence.*

Dr. Gabriel Mendez

Dr. Mendez has served in education for 26 years. At the beginning of the interview, he shared the passion he has always had in educating and preparing future generations for adulthood. The first 18 years of his career were spent as a teacher, assistant principal, and executive director at a large school district with approximately 55,000 students enrolled. Dr. Mendez has been the superintendent for four years at Eagle ISD, located in a suburban area in north Texas which serves a student population that is 51% Hispanic and 25% White, with approximately 65% of those students being economically disadvantaged. Dr. Mendez is a husband and father who expressed his gratitude towards the support he has received from his family over the years. Sense-making and decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic was something that Dr. Mendez reflected on during the interview, during which he expressed how hard decision-making was when employees from his own school district were losing their lives to this horrific disease.

> *The fear of contracting the illness and the uncertainty of how it affects you once you contracted it is real. I talked to principals and they tell me about breakdowns that they have to deal with from their teachers on a daily basis. Even the teacher's personal fear of*

the COVID virus to a loved one passing away to actually having people within our system pass away from COVID, it's devastating.

Dr. Henry Rodriguez

Dr. Rodriguez has worked in public education for 25 years. He started his career as a bilingual teacher, then becoming a school principal, director of curriculum and instruction, assistant superintendent and superintendent. During the interview, Dr. Rodriguez shared that his primary mission is to turnaround schools that are failing academically. Dr. Rodriguez has been the superintendent for 3 years at Port ISD, located in a rural area in south Texas serving a student population that is 97% Hispanic and 90% economically disadvantaged. He is a father and husband who also shared how fortunate he was to have such a supportive family in his corner during these hard times. The concerns he highlighted when it comes to leading during the COVID-19 pandemic were driven by "not taking a step back" and taking advantage of the opportunities to improve the education system holistically.

I *think the most important characteristic of a school superintendent during any time of crisis is that you got to be able to show your audience, which in this case are your customers or the stakeholders that you have a "level of control" when making an important decision that has an impact on our organization.*

In the next section, the Boin et al. (2017) CTSCL framework is examined in terms of informing themes across the participant data, seeking alignment where it occurred, and noting emergent data and the accompanying themes as well.

Boin Crisis Leadership Framework Themes

Boin et al. (2017) developed the CTSCL framework with the intent of sharing a process and/or informing leaders of approaches for implementing five critical tasks of strategic

leadership when faced with a disruptive crisis. Participant data was analyzed, inasmuch as possible, using this framework and the articulated research questions as a guide, yet leaving space for emergent data and themes from all the information gathered. The five critical crisis leadership task areas proffered by Boin et al. (2017) include sense-making, decision-making and coordinating, meaning-making, accounting, and learning (Boin et al., 2017). Ultimately, five research questions for the study were intentionally aligned, inasmuch as possible, to this CTSCL framework in order to have a starting point to not only guide the research process, but to inform initial data analysis efforts. To this end, the researcher was able to gather, digest, categorize, and theme the highly dynamic and sometimes ambiguous participant data accordingly as displayed in the chart below. Figure 1 represents the researcher's framework based on the CTSCL framework as well as research question alignment, in order to depict a topical thematic organization of the data. The four overarching areas include: (a) decision-making in the context of innate leadership; (b) sense-making in the context of support services; (c) meaning-making in the context of instructional continuity; (d) accounting in the context of equity-oriented; and, (d) learning in the context of vision for future education. For ease, the researcher has re-inserted descriptions of the components of the Boin et al. (2017) framework here prior to the sharing of the themes across the participant data.

First, decision-making and coordinating is comprised of making the critical assessments when it matters most. The researcher emphasizes innate leadership skills that tie into areas of teamwork, trust, and empathy within an organization. According to Boin et al. (2017), the impact that decision-making and coordinating has in an organization is pivotal to the future outcomes that are emerged.

Second, sense-making stands alone as one key analysis area particularly regarding how to address the basic needs of students through support services including child nutrition, health and safety, school funding, and maintaining the intended culture of the school district while ultimately completely altering "business as usual" due to the pandemic.

Third, within the construct of meaning-making, Boin et al. (2017) asserts that meaning-making enables a leader to articulate a situation at-hand that is defined as a crisis phenomenon, describing what is at stake, what are its causes, and what can be done to mitigate disruption. In the case of this crisis impacting instruction as the critical focus of schools, this component is driven by the assurance of instructional continuity across a school district. With the primary responsibility of schools being to educate students, administrators making meaning of how to mitigate disruption to instruction was foremost. Schools ultimately determined they must offer both in-person and virtual setting opportunities following temporary school closures, accelerated learning due to learning loss, and technology advancements that were essential contributing factors to ensure instructional continuity.

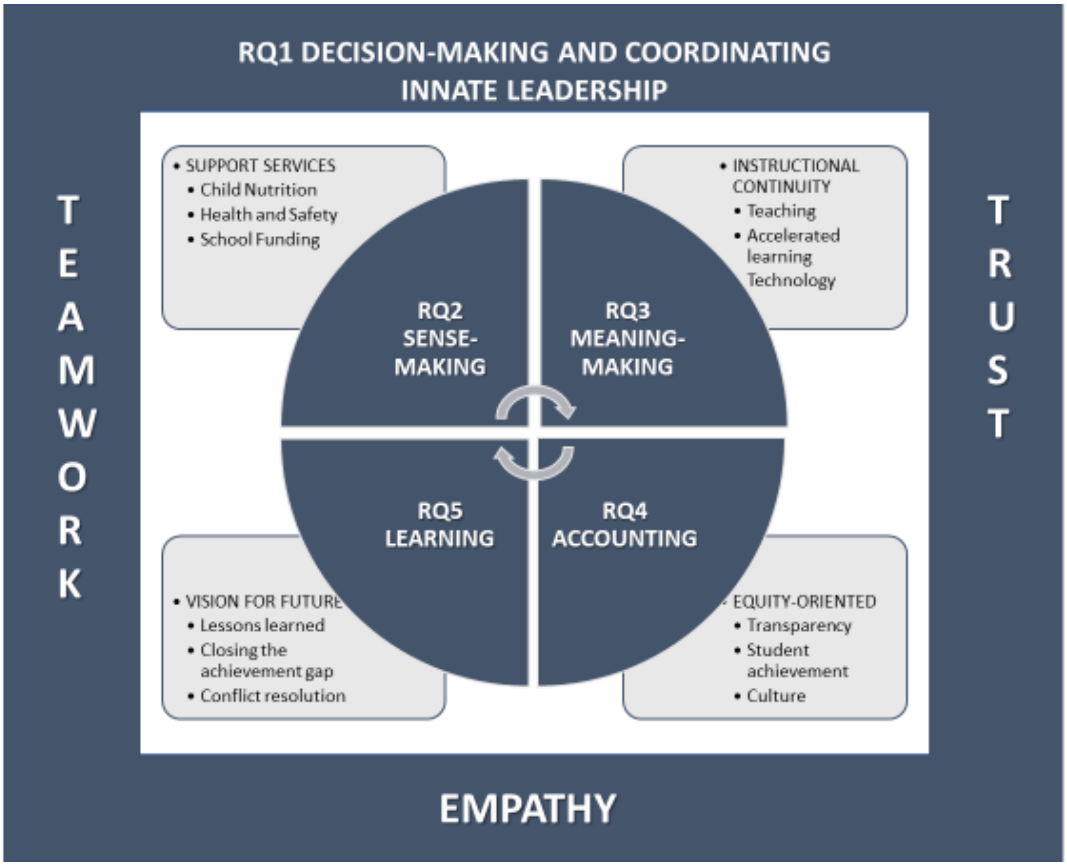
Fourth, accounting is an essential element for any organization when implementing a transparent narrative of what is transpiring and a leader implementing an equity-oriented approach across an organization. Having the presence of mind to publicly explain measures that were initiated to prevent and manage the crisis, thus including a justification that assures transparency and crisis-induced accountability (Boin et al., 2017). In essence, answering to the public about what happened, what worked, and what did not work, was essential. Nonetheless, student achievement accountability was also vital in ensuring that academic standards were met and maintaining a positive culture was also instrumental to continued student success.

The fifth and final component, learning is valuable for every circumstance, especially during a crisis. Understanding that everything that transpires leads to lessons learned is something that must be inherited by a leader. In addition to lessons learned, the researcher's analysis adheres to closing the achievement gap and mitigating inherent conflict in the context of setting a vision for the future.

Each overarching area that is described above was examined based on the research questions and the CTSCL framework which are displayed in Figure 1 as five emergent themes. First and second cycle coding (Saldana, 2016) as described in Chapter 3, played an integral part in the process when it came to analyzing the data, coding the data, developing categories, and then discovering that each emergent theme produced a plethora of similarities to the CTSCL framework. Sub-themes were established under each emergent theme which materialized through attribute, structural, value, and narrative coding which are also highlighted in Chapter 3 under the data collection process section.

The findings of this study are presented in a narrative form based on each emergent theme and sub-themes highlighting their strong-willed leadership experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. These themes generally aligned to the research questions for the study with a plethora of data informing that decision-making and coordinating emerged as an overarching theme within which the other themes were situated. The nature of the pandemic crisis evidenced in the leadership responses that the constant barrage of decision-making required strong leadership grounded in teamwork, trust, and empathy. Figure 1 is provided on the following page as a visual display of the key themes and emergent sub-themes.

Figure 1. Emergent Themes



Decision-Making and Coordinating: Innate Leadership

The excerpted component of the Boin et al. (2017) framework on decision-making and coordinating was a common thread in each of the conversations with these participants. To elaborate specifically, Boin et al. (2017) said of decision-making and coordinating that leaders are in a position of having to make hard calls which cause them to weigh policy, political, organizational, ethical, and sometimes personal ramifications, tradeoffs, risks, and opportunities. While Boin et al. (2017) did not prioritize the component of decision-making and coordinating above sense-making in his crisis framework, for the researcher, decision-making and coordinating ultimately was an overarching theme across the other components of the data. As

the leader of a school district which is the one place children should feel safe, superintendents were expected to make the most difficult decisions from the onset of this pandemic; thus, it was imperative for each of these superintendents to lead their communities with resilience advocating for teamwork, trust, and empathy for all aspects of navigating through the COVID-19 pandemic. These innate leadership attributes are highlighted as emergent sub-themes that were exhibited throughout all the participant interviews. In essence, the ability to express innate leadership skills was imperative for each superintendent who was interviewed for the sake of their organizational circumstances, especially when needing to be the person who is responsible for making school-related decisions. Each participant highlighted vital leadership factors of illustrating decision-making and coordinating efforts amidst a crisis. Dr. Chavez spoke highly about being calm during the storm and not overacting when difficulties are publicly revealed, especially when you are the one public official that the community is depending on for school-related problems which require resolution, noting that

> *In a crisis, you have to have a leader who leads. You have to have somebody who can be calm and can assess what has to happen next, and then have the support of the people. A leader is not leading if they look back and nobody's following.*

In addtion, Dr. Rios also spoke about the notion of "leading by example" across the organizaiton so that the community as a whole is inspired to follow decision-making and coordinting efforts.

> *Everyone needs to know that there is a leader in charge, and they're going to be drawn to that leader for comfort, for information, and for direction.*

Every decision that was made in schools was inevitably going to impact the community; thus it would be essential that teamwork, trust, and empathy ground these decisions.

Teamwork

> *A 'team' is when you can put efforts together and accomplish a specific goal, but then you truly see who's really up to the challenge or who's willing to work towards and face the challenge together.*
>
> *Dr. Rodriguez*

Amid the pandemic, it was highlighted throughout each interview that the outcomes that would come out of the decisions made by the school district were dependent on not only the superintendent, but the extended leadership team who is entrusted with providing a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning. The TEA was a resource to lean on during these unprecedented times when it came to the best practices to consider during the crisis. In essence, the development of a task force was encouraged by TEA which could have included teachers, students, parents, administrators, board members, and any other key stakeholders. Dr. Serna exhibited the realization of needing her team's best interest when making sense of every situation and making decisions for the best interest of the district.

> *I will say, I'm proud of the way that we've handled this crisis. And I will say, it hasn't been a one-man job. It has been a leadership team that has really made this experience doable. So, I'm grateful for my leadership team, especially.*

Teamwork is a well-known component of coming together as a group of people to accomplish goals. Dr. Ricardo exhibited the importance of building relationships with her team for positive outcomes. During a conversation that symbolized teamwork, she emphasized how important it was for her community to see a plan of action that was in place, something that she felt gave relief to those with high levels of fear and concern.

We had developed strong relationships from within, which allowed us to trust one another, so when this pandemic hit, I knew that my team was ready to go in all those areas and come out with effective outcomes.

Trust

As the effects of the pandemic swept across Texas schools in March 2020, every superintendent interviewed expressed how vital not only previously established "trust" became, but also how important it was to ensure stakeholders felt reciprocity of trust when navigating through this crisis. In addition to community trust, the school board, elected by the community as a governing body for the school district, needed to immediately trust superintendents to make the necessary decisions without having to be micromanaged as the crisis continued. In turn though, despite the challenges that were in front of these superintendents, school boards had to also play an uncharted role of guiding their selected leader through community concerns swirling around the pandemic. Furthermore, it was also commonly discussed how comfortable it was when micromanaging by the governing board was eliminated from any situation that was on their hands. For Dr. Serna, this trust was critical as she noted

From March to [I want to say maybe it was] September, the board of trustees trusted me enough to be able to give me that authority without having to come to them for permission or approval on matters that would normally go through the board. So that helped to keep the ball rolling. We just had momentum and we were able to keep it going because of that.

Similarly, Dr. Ricardo expressed how being proactive in building trust allowed her to make informed decisions for the entire school district. As previously noted in Chapter 1, all schools in Texas were required to temporarily close due to the uncertainty this disease presented.

Despite the closures that occurred throughout the state, decision-making and coordinating (Boin et al. (2017) were critical processes that still required the attention of all superintendents. Dr. Ricardo said

> *We didn't know a pandemic was hitting, but we'd been preparing for whatever crisis we would have to face. Executive cabinet meetings that we were doing on Mondays, was creating that. We trusted one another. All of that was without knowing we had been preparing for the battle.*

Leading in the midst of a crisis for all the superintendents allowed the researcher to understand that trust not only needed to come from the top-down, but instead come from all different factions within the community as well. Leaders realized that the community and elected governing body was compelled to act as one voice in order to set a tone for positive outcomes. This realization aligned directly to a key point Boin et al. (2017) noted in that, when it came to learning the expectations of the community as a whole, this was imperative. For example, Dr. Chavez said

> *The community perception really, honestly, was I think from the beginning that we were there to meet the needs and navigate and try to help and not be another distractor. I love the word "transparency" because we have to be transparent to keep the faith, to gain it and to keep it.*

With trust having a major impact for decision-making and coordinating efforts for these superintendents, having a sense of empathy for all stakeholders was also expressed and highlighted as a common indicator that played a vital role in the experiences endured by each of these superintendents.

Empathy

In the context of decision-making and coordinating as described by Boin et al. (2017), empathy was an attribute that continued to make its way through each interview. The idea of putting yourself in someone else's shoes was evident for each of the superintendents who were expected to lead their organizations in the midst of a pandemic. The ability to unveil every situation and understanding the complexities that surrounded each of them was a quality each leader exhibited; thus, the researcher observed a transformative leadership style throughout every conversation in each interview. These qualities enabled them to make effective decisions that they believed were for the best interest of their organization. Dr. Rios said

> *I think that it's really important for superintendent sense-making to exist in the planning efforts. And so, I think that for a lot of that, what I asked my team to do is to put their empathy hats on. And so, let's think like a student, let's think like a parent, let's think of every aspect as it relates to your department and let's come up with a plan.*

Several of the superintendents also shared their approach of exhibiting a sense of calmness throughout the crisis in order to pivot to a school-wide focus on student achievement. Their efforts to lead were to ensure that teachers had the tools they needed to teach and students had the tools they needed to learn. It was evident that empathy was at the forefront of expressing their leadership styles in the midst of chaos around the world. Dr. Chavez and Dr. Serna both expressed their belief of being calm in every situation as they exhibited empathy towards everyone involved. Dr. Chavez suggested that, "You have to have a leader who can be calm and can assess what has to happen next, and then have the support of the people." Similarly, Dr. Serna said

I think a degree of calm, maintaining a sense of calm in the midst of crisis, recognizing and showing a degree of understanding for the concern and the fear, but also presenting some degree of reassurance that we can get through this.

The researcher also learned that every participant had children of their own which is highlighted in their profiles above. They expressed the thought processes they had when making decisions were from the lens of being a parent of their own which enabled them to be good listeners and make sense of every situation. This innate leadership ability also signified accountability each superintendent represented for themselves. Dr. Ricardo said

And then being transparent to the parents, when they're calling and mad and upset or whatever, just listening and understanding that they're not in a good place either.

With an understanding that decision-making grounded in teamwork, trust, and empathy was crucial, the following section responds to the need for sense-making superintendents shared in moving forward with support services for the district.

Sense-Making: Support Services

According to Boin et al. (2017), the core challenge of leading in the midst of a crisis is effectively making sense of an unveiling or unfolding phenomenon. Unfortunately, the emerging threat of a global pandemic was beyond the control of school superintendents to a certain extent. Their role alongside chaos and panic across the world was to ensure that students and staff were safe and protected across every aspect of leading an educational institution. The detection of this very disease within their campuses was one important factor that Boin et al. (2017) emphasized when illustrating the effectiveness sense-making can have prior to a terrible situation emerging.

A strong sense-making approach was a necessity for each superintendent throughout this crisis phenomenon which is why it was vital to implement effective organizational systems

and efficient operations as a critical piece of support services. Viewpoints from each superintendent interviewed were exhibited in the sense of making sure students and staff were provided with a safe environment for teaching and learning, protective health measures such as encouraging the use of face masks, daily nutritious meals, enough funding for supplemental resources, and provision of support for families with social-emotional concerns.

Furthermore, each superintendent shared their appreciation for the personal protective equipment (PPE) that was provided by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and additional funding that had been designated for mitigating educational damages within school systems. It was imperative for these school leaders to have the resources necessary to provide every type of support service that was essential throughout their schools so that education was given the ultimate focus and it was evident that the federal and state governments were supportive in this manner. While interviewing each superintendent about sense-making, Dr. Rodriguez spent several moments throughout the interview highlighting how he made sense of realizing the critical role that support services and technology advancements would play as he experienced the COVID-19 pandemic.

> *I'm going to talk about the operation component. In order for us to be able to properly look at the operations and know we were providing support where we needed to, we had to have the right technology and Wi-Fi capability. And I'm talking before we brought all our kids back, we needed to ensure that we were still providing all the support services such as child nutrition, transportation, technology, and just overall support to both our staff and students.*

Sense-making for Dr. Chavez led him to the refinement and creation of school district policies and procedures that aligned with new expectations that emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are many things that we've had to change as far as our district operations, whether it was routing students to safely separate them on a bus, whether it's operations as a whole. Also having additional custodial staff, and ways in which we trained people, and machinery that we had to buy for cleaning and what-not.

Dr. Serna spoke about the importance of strategizing with her senior leadership cabinet when it came to making sense of the situation.

I was able to take all the information I was gathering from federal, local, and state officials during region meetings and other conferences, then from there meet with our cabinet just to talk about strategy, the way we're going to rollout our protocols for district operations and support services.

In the context of sense-making, Boin et al. (2017) emphasized that, "timely recognition hinges on the capacity of organizations to collect, share, and interpret information" (p. 25). Dr. Ricardo was one to share how imperative it was to communicate with all stakeholders at the forefront of sense-making.

We're going to do what we can. We're going to listen to our parents, encourage parental involvement. All of that, the whole district operations, the instruction, and making sense of it all came into play as one, and how we execute it is focused on keeping kids at the forefront during our decision-making efforts.

The researcher noted the emergence of three sub-themes (child nutrition, health and safety, and school funding) within the context of sense-making, specifically in the area of support services. The uncertainty of providing child nutrition for students was a reality for all schools that were temporarily closed at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, when schools were allowed to re-open for students who had an option to return to face-to-face

instruction, the challenge was having to figure out how to provide nutritional meals to students that were both in-person and at home. Furthermore, health and safety initiatives were imperative to refine, create, and promote for the best interest of the school district. The TEA entrusted school systems to implement protocols that were recommended by the CDC. Finally, school funding was the one constant that schools were not sure they had when closures were implemented at the state level due to the fact that state funding is based on average daily attendance which was not taking place at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic due to temporary closures.

Child Nutrition

Every superintendent interviewed expressed how they prioritized child nutrition in their districts from the onset of dealing with this crisis phenomenon and making sense of the complexities that emerged. Many students rely on the school's child nutrition program for daily meals due to hardships at home, so the sense of urgency was high to ensure that meal distribution was still taking place, regardless of the circumstances. The assurance that all students within their community had a nutritious meal on a daily basis was at the core of their service as an organization.

> *I don't care if they're free and reduced or if they were not. We were going to feed every kid and family that comes and we were going to figure the rest out later. (Dr. Chavez)*

It was common to hear about curbside meal distribution programs that each of these superintendents took advantage of mentioning the Texas Department of Agriculture's (TDA) initiative of enabling local school districts to serve their student populations through a curbside approach where parents and students were able to drive up to the school and pick up daily meals without having to get out of their vehicles.

I think just making sure food was available to our students, that's weighed heavily on us for families that come from poverty. When you're 80% free or reduced lunch, but 50% of your kids are at home learning remotely, the way that they can access food is if their parents get in their car because COVID limited us in terms of what our ability was to get food out to kids so we did everything necessary to ensure kids had a meal on a daily basis. (Dr. Serna)

Health and Safety

Like nutrition, the implementation of a health and safety program was vital for these school leaders who had to refine their health and safety approaches in the midst of this pandemic ensuring that fever checks were conducted for staff and students that came to campus sites when they were allowed, rapid testing was conducted if they needed to examine for the COVID-19 disease, and preventative cleaning measures were completed periodically.

It was discussed within several of the interviews that the TEA provided all school districts with PPE such as face masks, face shields, and cleaning supplies. In addition, all school districts were sent rapid coronavirus test kits for students and staff who showed signs of symptoms and needed a test completed. Dr. Rios shared her appreciation by saying, "I appreciate the PPE and the ability to rapid test for the COVID-19 disease, all of that was important."

It is imperative to also point out the disconnection that school leaders experienced when it came to parents and staff understanding the approaches that were being implemented across their schools to ensure everyone felt safe in their environment. Boin et al. (2017) addresses how many organizations have a lack of urgency to seek information that assumes the worst and prepare for it; however, the article emphasizes that organizations should attempt to take this approach for future decision-making and coordinating. As the researcher conversed with Dr.

Mendez, it was noted that there were times of struggle when it came to enforcing health and safety protocols.

> *We've got parents that are not concerned about the safety protocols. We've got teachers following them, teachers not following them. All of those things contribute to stress. They polarize the environment because sometimes it gets drawn into political viewpoints that don't necessarily align. And the pandemic has exposed a lot of that in our system.*

School Funding

School finance also faced an unanticipated obstacle after recently implementing revised state legislation approved in 2019 prior to the thought of a pandemic striking our world. School districts were either forced to utilize savings accounts to make ends meet initially or depend on federal relief funding that was practically non-existent throughout the first six months of the pandemic. The superintendents that were interviewed spoke about their unique approaches and thoughts to ensure that they continued providing a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning. They spoke about having to make sense of their financial situation quickly in order to expedite necessary goods and services that were essential for instructional continuity. Dr. Serna shared an example during the interview stating, “We've had to use fund balance to fill a gap”.

Dr. Mendez shared the concern she had on waiting for allocations that were granted through federal stimulus packages at the federal government level when she noted that, “It was unfortunate on how slow the state has been to give us our relief funds from the federal government.”

A concern that had emerged regarding federal funding was in connection to the first federal stimulus package that was passed at the federal level called the “CARES Act.” Each state was

allotted funding to be distributed to each school district within each state in the U.S.; however, the TEA decided to supplant the federal dollars through the foundation school program to offset financial loss at the governmental level. This in turn took time to make sense of for many school leaders since school districts were not actually going to receive new additional dollars. Dr. Serna shared her frustration in saying that, "the first set of COVID-19 relief funds coming through for the state to supplant those versus providing that resource to the school districts, it's been very frustrating I would say."

The discussion of learning loss was a prevailing topic which Dr. Rodriguez highlighted by sharing the impact school funding has. Therefore, recognizing that the lack of financial support hinders the education system.

> *Well, funding has a huge impact as far as when we acknowledge what are the resources that are needed to catch up our kids, knowing that there has been a great bit of loss of learning or "Learning Loss." Knowing already though that we have preexisting 'Achievement Gaps' within all areas, I would say that, federal state and local funding have a huge impact on the types of initiatives that we can launch with our students.*

Making sense of the crisis phenomenon is what these superintendents illustrated in their interviews by unfolding the situation at-hand and making sense of it, thus making critical decisions and coordinating their organizations henceforth. It was evident that these two emergent themes were interpreted in the conversations the researcher had about these leaders' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Boin et al. (2017) presents the next critical task called meaning-making, which is defined as offering an authoritative explanation and narrative of the situation compressing the public and political uncertainty that may be occurring.

Meaning-Making: Instructional Continuity

The apprehension of not being able to educate our students during these unprecedented times was an absolute fear factor for these superintendents who have devoted the majority of their lives to education. It was vital to each of them that the continuation of instruction was a non-negotiable item across the state, especially in their own organizations. Despite the phenomenon that was underway, the option of continuing to provide instruction was eventually assigned to these school leaders by state officials, in which each of them administered wholeheartedly. Making meaning of every situation as described by Boin et al. (2017) was the primary focus on a daily basis for each of these superintendents focused on advocating for instructional continuity. According to Boin et al. (2017), meaning-making is an attempt to reduce public and political uncertainty, inspiring confidence across an organization through articulating a vision and mission. The superintendents interviewed expressed how their values and beliefs were tested during the pandemic and that the provision of equity was the most important component for progressive results and making meaning of every scenario. Dr. Rodriguez stated

> *My vision for moving forward in educating our students is 'not to take a step back.' And what I mean by that is that we've gained a lot of knowledge on how to educate, let's capitalize on that.*

The art of teaching was foregrounded as an imperative component that was essential to instructional continuity which the researcher underscores as critical to meaning-making. In essence, accelerated learning was also emphasized throughout each interview as an important aspect for superintendents and their teams to interpret in the midst of the pandemic. The technology component was also an essential theme that was echoed in every interview. The use of technology was immediately reformed and enhanced across all schools throughout the state

due to closures that were taking place. The only outlet for communication was the necessity of providing an electronic device to connect with instructors, peers, etc.

Teaching

The greatest challenge that the education system faced was the disruption teachers endured having to transform their teaching skills to a virtual setting, given that the Governor required schools to close their buildings at the onset of the pandemic. Superintendents were given an ambiguous mission to figure out how their schools could continue providing academic instruction without students having the ability to come face-to-face. During the interviews, the researcher noticed that every superintendent reflected for a period of time before discussing the memories they had when it came to instructional continuity. As discussed in this chapter, technology was almost the only answer to many of these problems that were at the forefront. It was evident in every interview that each superintendent realized how important technology was to survival during the pandemic like it never had been before, prior to COVID-19. Resistance among educators towards use of technology became a "do or die" situation. Some educators did ultimately decide that they could not continue as teachers or principals after the multiple challenges that 2020 and the pandemic placed on their professional responsibilities. Dr. Chavez described her experience in making-meaning of the crisis phenomenon by saying

> *We were truly out from March until whenever we went back in August, and a lot happened during that time, right? We had to learn how to do things differently. We as adults had to kind of rewire our own brains to a way of thinking that we could do what we did before, but maybe even better, never diminishing what we were providing.*

In addition to school districts who were able to provide an electronic device to their students for communication purposes, it was noted that some students already had a personal device at home

that was available for their learning participation. As Dr. Serna reflected on the teaching logistics of her school district, she referred this period of time as “the great experiment.”

> *I hope we've learned something from this experience or what I call, the great experiment, but I think we've learned a lot about the role that technology can play in supporting education. I don't think it replaces education, but I think it certainly can be a support.*

Dr. Ricardo was able to speak about the limiting and contributing factors that played a vital role during the pandemic, in which teachers and students were to be prioritized at the forefront. As a leader, her objective was to dive deep into the campus improvement plans to refine them for transformational instruction.

> *So, I think the main contributing factors to student achievement were parental involvement and teacher buy-in. And then the last thing would be just how kids learn. And if teachers are trying to figure out a tool, we made sure to look at it from the student perspective. Another factor that I think led to the student achievement as well, is teachers trying to figure this out, trying to use the tools effectively, and to be relaxed in the way they use the tools, because if the teacher was relaxed and the teacher can do what the teacher does best and that's teach, the students were also relaxed and were able to obtain the lessons they were being taught each day.*

Accelerated Learning

All of the superintendents emphasized the necessity of providing accelerated learning during the pandemic for students who were struggling with the pedagogical adjustments. In addition, the researcher discovered from their responses throughout the interviews that this unique situation somewhat enforced instructional acceleration, including students having to learn remotely with the resources they had or were given by the school district such an electronic

device and hotspot. The goal for all of them was to open their instructional settings as quickly as possible so that students could come and learn in a safe and conducive environment. In essence, Dr. Rios stated

> *My vision is to bring students back into the classroom where they have a sense of belonging, a sense of safety, and to do whatever we can to engage them in learning, that will result in decreasing any of the gaps that have been created by COVID, and by honoring their need for social and emotional healing.*

TEA was instrumental in providing all school districts with recommended guidance that was designed to align with state and federal academic accountability, despite the circumstances. Some of the initial stages that were encouraged and available on the TEA website included: (a) conducting an inventory of device availability, (b) the creation of instructional platform options, (c) determining which instructional model to use (asynchronous or synchronous), and (d) monitoring and supporting student progress.

Throughout the interview conversations, it was noted by every superintendent how critical meaning-making was when it came to presenting and providing an instructional model for students who were within a special population group such as at-risk of dropping out, students with disabilities, bilingual, etc. The direction each leader went in was based on their own unique circumstances when it came to their student population. Nonetheless, chaos that included a high global fatality rate, economic deficiencies, political controversy, and uncertainty surrounded the sense-making, decision-making, coordinating, and meaning-making efforts every school district leader endured. Dr. Ricardo emphasized about the responsibility educators had during these unprecedented times.

As an educator, we still have the responsibility to reflect, analyze, not remain complacent to do our part, to refine in the places that we can, to achieve more than what we were achieving.

Dr. Chavez shared how working remotely with a device was not the savior of instruction. She went on to deepen the approach from the lens of considering the effectiveness holistically.

It can't just be the device. It has to be what teachers learn, whether it's through a learning management system. Nonetheless, you have to ask yourself as an educator, what are you doing with that device? How are you making learning better? How are you connecting with students? How are you ensuring that if they need tier levels, one, two, three, response to intervention, if they need a specialized service of dual language, or they're my ELL learners, or they're my special education students, or they're my gifted and talented students. What more are we doing to make sure that at any level we are meeting and exceeding what they need?

The declaration of this natural disaster enabled the U.S. federal government to provide education with relief funding in order to mitigate damages caused by the pandemic such as providing both personal protective equipment and electronic devices for each student and ensuring that students and teachers had what they needed to continue academic instruction regardless of what was happening around the world. For every superintendent interviewed, this government initiative was vital to the direction schools went in during these unprecedented times and this enabled them to feel confidence when making meaning of the situation. TEA also offered programs such as “operation connectivity” which was designed to provide every student in the state of Texas an electronic device for learning and access to the internet. In essence, the funding was also designed to provide professional development training to teachers that needed

additional support on how to teach during these difficult times. Dr. Rodriguez was very thrilled to see how technology was going to advance in so many ways sharing

> *The enhanced utilization of technology is going to continue on the professional development that we're gearing our teachers with. So, the acceptance of tech, the acceptance of professional development geared towards tech to support our kids in instruction is crucial for accelerating learning. I think that's a positive.*

Every accelerated learning model that was discussed throughout each interview included supplemental services that primarily revolved around before and after school tutoring. The expansion of a learning gap throughout the state was one that was of concern due to the crisis phenomena. The ability to provide supplemental services was a vital factor for each superintendent and their school district which was driven by taking advantage of federal and state relief funding which was allocated to all school districts in Texas due to the global pandemic. Dr. Serna described her thoughts on this topic stating

> *The Federal COVID-19 relief funds were really the necessity for schools to be able to utilize additional dollars for high degree of tutoring and student support, which were traditionally provided through before and after school programs. These are proven initiatives that we know that can support kids in accelerating their learning after being separated from their teachers for a period of time.*

Aside from providing accelerated instruction and supplemental services, Dr. Ricardo pointed out the disruption of extra-curricular activities that were also affected. Extra-curricular activities can include athletics, fine arts, cheerleading, etc. These activities are sometimes the reason students are personally driven to attend classes and pass. With uncertainty of continuing to provide extra-curricular activities, leaders throughout the state were doing their best to come

up with a plan of action that gave all students equal opportunities such as allowing for those who want to participate and continue their aspirations. Dr. Ricard offered that

> *We're going to side-by-side support anything and everything, the academics, the extracurricular, the co-curricular, and the UIL. We're going to support that with our acceleration model as much as we can. Our students deserve that from us.*

Technology

The lack of technology was a concern for every superintendent who was interviewed. However, the education of how to use technology was more of an unanticipated challenge on top of not having tangible resources for teachers and students. Dr. Chavez was one participant that spoke about the role that technology played in her community when it came to ensuring that every family had the ability to connect remotely with the school system.

> *Technology, we'll never look at it the same. One-to-one, like most districts, you can now park it in front of my schools and we have the Park and Learns, 24/7, anyone from the community can come and park in front of a school and get 24/7 internet connectivity. I have hotspots to give to probably every homeless person.*

On the other hand, Dr. Rios, who leads a school district that has a 90% economically disadvantaged population and Dr Ricardo who leads in a similar area shared their leadership struggles with communication.

> *The only ability that we had to communicate with them was through the phone, if they would receive their lessons on the phone. We did not start as a one-to-one initiative. We didn't have technology for everyone. So, we had to ask parents to come drive up to the school and get their packets in paper packets, and started the COVID pandemic that way as far as instruction goes.*

Dr. Ricardo shared

> *And we take that to the area of technology, and the same thing happened. Where our tech guys were going to parents' home and parking on the street to be able to troubleshoot with their computer. All of that became that motivation because our families were in need.*

Dr. Rodriguez spoke about the enforcement that his organization felt when technology was in a sense the only choice for instructional continuity.

> *So, I think the infusion of technology forced public education to head in a futuristic direction and I'm seeing a lot of growth with our teachers too because it was a learning experience for them, but it was a forced experience. So, it made everyone gain a much quicker transition in this paradigm of how we provide instruction to children.*

As a leader utilizes sense-making to unfold a crisis phenomenon, make decisions and coordinate ways forward, all the while striving to make meaning of the situation at-hand, it is imperative to introduce the next critical task from the Boin et al. (2017) framework called "accounting." Boin et al. (2017) describes this task as the process of accountability. In the midst of a pandemic, the superintendents interviewed expressed an understanding of being held accountable for decisions that were being made and the outcomes that would transpire from each accord. In essence, strategic and collaborative approaches were described to the researcher for many of the scenarios they endured as leaders.

Accounting: Equity-Oriented

After the initial stages of the pandemic came to pass in June and July of 2020, school-districts around the state of Texas were given an option to open their schools to students who wanted to attend in-person instruction for the upcoming 2020-2021 school year which

commenced in August 2020. This governmental decision gave superintendents around the state an abundant amount of accountability for leading every aspect of their respected organizations during a historical global pandemic. Every school district was unique in the percentage of students who chose to come to an on-campus instructional setting. Nevertheless, the expectations and accountability that was unintentionally bestowed on these leaders was conspicuous. According to Boin et al. (2017), there is a high chance that a crisis phenomenon inadvertently creates accountability pressures for leaders, thus enabling an opportunity for improvement and equilibrium within the organization as a whole when entering into post-crisis.

Having an equity-oriented mind-set was crucial for these superintendents in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic not only because it was evident that this was affecting all student populations differently, but also realizing that the community and state government would also hold them accountable for actions that were taken. In addition, three emergent sub-themes are presented which were detected as overarching factors within the participant interviews in relation to accountability as described by Boin et al. (2017). They are listed and elaborated in the next following sections as transparency, student achievement, and culture.

Transparency

When school-districts were required to close their campuses in March 2020 due to the pandemic, parents of students who were attending school were anxiously engaged in decisions that were being made by their local education agencies. Working parents were forced to find babysitters or other day-care facilities that were open because of the closure which created a sense of urgency for transparency at the local level. The superintendents interviewed shared in their own individual way that they quickly realized school was the one constant these parents and students had in their lives prior to the pandemic, which enabled each of them as leaders to

rapidly improve their communication in every aspect of leading a school district. Dr. Rodriguez shared his experience by saying

> *Parents were looking at us for guidance when everything started to spiral down. They didn't have a place to take their kids and we couldn't do anything about it for some time. My team did their best to communicate daily on anything that was impacting our schools.*

Social media and other marketing tools were pivotal for many organizations that underwent closures such as school districts. If these educational institutions were not already utilizing social media platforms prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were most likely joining the outlets for maximum communication. It was noteworthy for several of the superintendents that they stayed abreast of all the information they received from the TEA, CDC, and any other related resource. In the midst of the pandemic, reports were known to be changing within hours in a day from one thing to the next due to the uncertainty that this pandemic presented. Dr. Ricardo spoke highly of her public relations department who she claimed worked diligently to communicate through every social media, news, and marketing outlet possible stating

> *I would like to recognize my public relations department for staying on top of providing information about any changes on all the social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter. They are doing a great job of sharing any news that we need to [impart to] the community about the pandemic and how it is affecting our school system.*

Transparency was noted as a key factor Dr. Rios felt gave comfort to all stakeholders as they pulled together to overcome all adversities.

> *We wanted to be as transparent as we could. And so, everything that came to us as a team, I guess we had to go through that by making sense of our situation first.*

Dr. Serna also elaborated on what transparency signified for her leadership approaches throughout the pandemic. Having resilience was her foundation of leading and transpiring the vision and mission of her organization on a constant basis.

> *Our theme for this year was resilience, we're stronger together, and so that's just been our message all year to our families, to our staff as we continued to push forward and communicate with all of them constantly.*

Student Achievement

In the context of accounting as described by Boin et al. (2017), it was noted that each superintendent expressed a sense of feeling responsible for the direction of the district and also understanding accountability for all aspects of leading, especially when it came to student achievement. Dr. Ricardo was firm in her interview on addressing the needs all students individually had and finding joy for educating the next generation. She stated in the interview

> *Everything centers around the joy of teaching kids, for learning. And without that, it was very hard for us as educators. And now I am asking myself if I am making the right decisions for the kids that I'm serving. Will they reach their full academic potential amid this crisis?*

For several of the superintendents, the COVID-19 pandemic alluded to higher levels of inequity in all aspects of leading a school district, thus enabling them to assure support for all stakeholders to the best of their ability. When it came to the instructional component of education, conversations led to the fact that not every student had the resources they needed at home prior to the pandemic such as an electronic device, internet access, nutrition, or just someone to look over them throughout the day. Conversations also sparked regarding students

who come from an economically disadvantaged background or students who have special needs. Dr. Chavez noted

> *First of all, we have families that have children at home because they may have children with compromised health issues or they may have family members with compromised health issues.*

TEA was also a contributing partner as it relates to the digital divide that was known throughout the country, nonetheless in the state of Texas. In essence, the Commissioner of Education, Mike Morath, launched an "Operation Connectivity" campaign advocating that all school districts ensure that every student be provided with an electronic device and access to the internet, especially for rural area schools and school districts with high levels of economically disadvantaged families. Dr. Serna shared her thoughts on this matter by stating

> *You talk about the equity lens, the digital divide just shows itself in communities like this, especially districts with higher concentrations of poverty. It's just one added dimension to the equity challenge.*

Dr. Mendez highlighted an approach his team took by recommending a resolution under his leadership for his community, ratifying their vision for equity for all children, regardless of their background.

> *As a matter of fact, we did an equity resolution in June proclaiming that we're even going to go deeper and explore more options to ensure our minority students are performing at the levels of our non-minority students.*

The TEA made decisions throughout the pandemic for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years that state standard examinations would not count against a school district or student due to the COVID-19 pandemic outcomes. Nonetheless, each of the superintendents who were

interviewed spoke about internal examinations that were administered at the local level throughout the school years that were designed to quantify where each student was academically and what they needed to address henceforth.

Culture

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, each interview demonstrated that the organizational and community culture changed dramatically based on every superintendent's discussion when it came to observing mixed viewpoints. Dr. Rios shared

> *It was my duty to communicate hope to all of our stakeholders, to put the data out there, and to stay transparent with stakeholders.*

Even with all the challenges that this pandemic created, Dr. Ricardo shared how critical parental involvement was in their schools. Their involvement would set the tone for the success of their students.

> *So, I made sure to inform as much as I could that it really doesn't have anything to do with economic status or educational level of the parent. I think the number one factor would have to be the parental support, right? How much your parents are having to work, and knowing your parents are stressed. If they're not working, if they had money, now there's no money because of this pandemic. So, all of that for struggling families and then trying to keep kids in line and logging on and whether I'm going to send them to school or not was instrumental to our success.*

As it relates to culture, Dr. Chavez wanted to express the stress factor that many faced during these times.

I always want to look at the positives, but I'll be honest, it has been hard. It has pulled us together like none other, but it has also been a stress factor. People were fearful of coming to school, not being on a priority for vaccination lists as well.

Despite the challenges that were in front of these leaders, the manifestation of new ways of learning also emerged where opportunities for growth in education were feasible,

Well, I'm going to say, 'I always like to look at the glass half full versus empty,' and I'm going to say that the impact that it's had on the culture of school is that, "It's really launched this more into a 'I hate to use this cliché to say it this way, but towards 21st century learning. And what I mean by that is that it's really forced our hand to use technology more. (Dr. Chavez)

Another major aspect of accountability that all six superintendents endured were the expectations of keeping their facilities clean and sanitized on a daily basis when people were allowed back on the premises. On top of what TEA provided to school districts such as face masks, face shields, and sanitizer, school districts were still responsible for purchasing additional resources that were designated to keep buildings disinfected and ensure an overall safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning. A collaboration with their county health officials was mentioned throughout each interview in relation to ensuring safe and clean buildings with resources available for distribution such as face mask. Furthermore, superintendents were also tasked with collaborating with county health officials to offer their schools if needed for vaccination clinics. Dr. Ricard shared

As the leader, you could sometimes be the motivator and other times you can be this democratic leader doing the things that you got to do, and then all of a sudden you can be situational and deal with something pressing for your attention. When the pandemic

hit, you had to be all of that altogether one time, on one given day. There was no time to think. So, this is where you really have to meet within you and say, okay, take a deep breath and analyze the situation and really think through it.

The final critical task that Boin et al. (2017) illustrates is called "Learning" which he defines as purposeful efforts of reexamining, reassessing, and recalibrating every scenario that had transpired in the midst of the crisis phenomenon. In essence, this emergent theme was an area that each participating superintendent addressed as learning from their mistakes and creating a vision for the future. It was noted that looking forward was imperative for these superintendents amid the COVID-19 pandemic, in which setting the example as the leader was the start of restructuring a new vision based on their learning experience.

Learning: Vision for Future Education

According to Boin et al. (2017), it is clear that governments do indeed learn from their experiences in navigating through a crisis; however, different lessons are learned and implemented uniquely in many occasions. Boin et al. (2017) emphasized that asking the necessary questions y to understand the complexities that must be addressed such as "what went wrong, why, and what needs to be changed so that it will not happen again" are critical. In addition to this approach, having the ability and strength to make changes and reform when needed is crucial to the future of leading an organization in the event that the same crisis returns.

It was evident throughout the interviews with each of these superintendents that pre-existing protocols did not exist within their organizations for a global pandemic crisis. Dr. Mendez shared her initial approach of not allowing the pandemic to determine any of the outcomes her organization would endure.

So, we're not using the pandemic as a crutch, nor are we accepting that it determines our success or failure; it's just an obstacle and we must learn from it. And when you have bright minds and you surround yourselves and say, 'What are our goals?' One goal has always been to make sure kids thrive academically, then we find a way to work around those obstacles that come our way.

Every superintendent had an opportunity during the interview to discuss what their vision for education in the future looked like. It was clear to the researcher that every superintendent had a desire to advocate for instructional continuity, regardless of the circumstances. Nonetheless, while educational dynamics may pivot, limitless education was the embodiment of every superintendent's vision. Dr. Chavez described her vision as learning from mistakes and capitalizing on them with new approaches.

The vision is that we take the best of what we've learned and be limitless, not limit ourselves to, 'We can only teach from 8:00 to 4:00, we can only teach in a school room setting.' Never say only and provide opportunities endlessly.

In addition, Dr. Rios shared her vision on allowing students to return back to in-person instruction ensuring that they are safe and protected in their environment.

My vision is to bring students back into the classroom where they have a sense of belonging, a sense of safety, and to do whatever we can to engage them in learning, that will result in decreasing any of the gaps that have been created by COVID, and by honoring their need for social and emotional healing.

Boin et al. (2017) emphasized three types of learning that were instrumental to developing sub-themes which include experience, explanation, or competence-based mechanisms. Experience-based learning is depicted from having first-hand exposure to the crisis

phenomenon enabling opportunity to gain insights for problem-solving strategies. Explanation-based learning is described as a collaborative teamwork approach to identify cause and effects of any conflict needing a resolution ultimately determining validity. Competence-based learning encourages reform that is necessary due to the effects a crisis may have on society or organization. These three types of learning enabled the researcher to analyze the data and emergent theme in the context of learning, in which lessons learned, closing the achievement gap, and conflict resolution were overarching sub-themes that were discovered to be addressed below.

Lessons Learned

The interviews for this study were conducted approximately one year from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This gave the superintendents who were interviewed time to identify lessons learned during the pandemic that could be refined for better service to their communities. One challenge that many school districts faced was the disconnection that they would suffer with families who were satisfied with the remote setting for their own children. Dr. Mendez spoke to the researcher about having to re-educate parents on the importance of having their children learn from the classroom versus through an electronic device remotely.

> *And when you have the family saying, 'Well, my kid is not doing well virtually, and I'm not going to bring them in,' it really limits our ability to influence, guide, and accelerate*.

Dr. Serna was a leader who consistently spoke about being a transformational leader during these times, thus expressing that learning the ins and outs of every situation allowed her to make transformational changes for the best interest of the organization. In essence, understanding the importance to learning from mistakes was vital to the balance that was

necessary within her community not only with the students and staff, but on the political spectrum as well.

> *Again, I think we're learning that we can do teaching and learning differently. We're learning that we can do our own work in a different way, in a more efficient way in some cases, I think learning that a crisis like this brings out the best in people, and it also brings out the very worst in people, there's been just sort of this political charge, politically charged environment around. Just where you live on the political spectrum, people take that to an extreme in a crisis. Wearing face masks has become political.*

Furthermore, it was noted throughout each interview that listening was the key for these leaders. Having the patience to listen and learn as leaders was a prevailing theme exhibited in their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Rios shared how listening became one of the most impactful skills she developed when it came to empathizing what students were going through on a daily basis, realizing that this was an extreme adjustment that they had to endure. She stated that "Everyone has a story and we know the importance of listening, and we know the importance of staying in contact with our students"

Dr. Rodriguez shared his thoughts about crisis leadership in a sense of confronting every situation strategically and being prepared for future crisis events due to learning from mistakes that were made.

> *We're going to confront different levels of crisis, no matter if it's a pandemic or if it's a parent who's upset because their child is failing. I think that the term of crisis is going to be based on the situation and the view of the person that it's being impacted by it. So, going back to leadership, leadership is critical to the success of any situation in the outcome.*

Closing the Achievement Gap

The lack of in-person instruction was clearly a contributing factor to the negative effects education endured during these unprecedented times. Based on the conversations the researcher had with each interviewed superintendent, digital divide was revealed for many economically disadvantaged populations where students around the state did not have the electronic devices or internet access they needed to complete their daily assignments. Another factor discovered was that parents were losing their jobs during these hard-economic times which also had a negative effect in schools.

It was imperative that educators refine their approaches to closing the achievement gaps that have continued to expand since the strike of this global pandemic. During the interviews, superintendents expressed their thoughts on these issues for all populations within their schools. Dr. Rios raised concern for 75% of the students at her school district who had selected the option to learn remotely when schools were allowed to open their schools to the public.

> *We still have 75% of our families learning remotely because they had to learn to do it that way. And now that they have a system, they'd rather keep that system, rather than sending their children in. The low percentage of students that are actually in our classrooms right now is absolutely a contributing factor to their achievement, or lack of achievement, growth, or lack of growth. And every day that goes by, there is an extra gap that is occurring academically, an extra problem to figure out.*

For Dr. Rodriguez, the concern was based on those families who come from poverty backgrounds. The evidence was clear that closing the achievement gap on student learning was not the case for those students who did not have the same resources compared to others who came from a wealthy economic background. He said that the term

'Achievement Gap,' I think is what we're most familiar with, but that has always existed. But I think the setback of definitely working with children who come from families of higher poverty, it puts them back ten-fold compared to a student from a middle-class home who has maybe more comforts or options in their education.

During a conversation that was focused on closing the achievement gap, Dr. Mendez spoke about each community being unique and having to make decisions that were specific to their own needs. He was concerned about the time it would take to recoup from this crisis phenomenon for low poverty areas.

And I realize that every community has its own different views on how to handle the COVID crisis because they got uniquely hit. But what I'm referring to is the education standpoint on how people are now trying to attend to it. The more affluent parts of our state didn't get hit as hard as the most stressed parts of our state. The poorer the communities, the more on the border, the harder hit they were. And so, I'm surprised to see a lack of intentional focus from the state on how to quickly recover our students to recover because that recovery process, especially in numeracy will take years.

Dr. Chavez referenced external factors that contributed to closing the achievement gap for students sharing the elements that are faced at home with parents such as job loss.

Just knowing that there are so many contributing factors, not even mentioning the fact that parents have lost employment. There could be job security concerns, financial constraints, social emotional issues parents are dealing with. We know that there is an increase in domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and divorce. All those factors play into, 'Is the child able to learn'?

Conflict Resolution

> *You have to build that, though, over time and the characteristics of looking them in the eye, being a relationship person, telling them, 'Look, I care about you, I love you, but this is what we have to do.'*

The statement above is what Dr. Chavez described when discussing the impact that learning had in his leadership experience when it came to conflict resolution. Furthermore, each of the superintendents interviewed expressed a desire to resolve all conflict that emerged from the outcomes this detrimental pandemic produced. School districts have suffered a great deal of hardships that not only interfere with academics, but human capital management, morale, trust, and other related aspects of the intricacies that are in an educational institution. When the topic of conflict resolution came up in the interviews, it was evident that so many strategies had been manifested during these difficult times for these leaders. Dr. Rios stated

> *My vision is to bring students back into the classroom where they have a sense of belonging, a sense of safety, and to do whatever we can to engage them in learning, that will result in decreasing any of the gaps that have been created by COVID, and by honoring their need for social and emotional healing.*

In the context of learning, the ability to resolve conflicts that were emerging rapidly had a significant impact of these leaders who were expected to ensure a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning, regardless of the circumstances. Dr. Ricardo described her experience as a constant conflict that affected her holistically.

> *And that's why I say this whole pandemic, COVID-19, it took everything you had and for the first time ever in our career, or at least in mine, I've had to use everything I have in me, from head to toe, all at one time to resolve problems.*

Conclusion

> *That's why it's so important that leadership becomes a driving force versus management or any other related approach, because with leadership you're able to bring the best out of others bringing the best ideas forward and make sense of your situation. To be able at the end, launch a strategic plan that was developed collaboratively, not your own plan.*
>
> *Dr. Rodriguez*

The statement above was articulated by one of the superintendents encapsulates what crisis leadership meant to them in particular, thus comparing how leading versus managing in an organization plays a critical role when it comes to sense-making, decision-making and coordinating, meaning-making, accounting, and learning. This chapter presented the results of the analysis aligned to both the research questions and CTSCL framework. Six Texas public school superintendents were interviewed utilizing an IPA methodology. Each interview question was structured to maximize data pulled in the context of the CTSCL framework.

Even during a pandemic, it was evident in every interview that each superintendent possessed a sense of passion for education. These leaders are expected to provide a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning, thus deliver high levels of student achievement results each school year. The pandemic was an unanticipated phenomenon that frightened many leaders in the education industry; however, the passion that was recognized by these leaders was remarkable. Each of them declared willingness to put their lives on the line day in and day out for the students and staff they lead. In light of the circumstances, resilience was disclosed in their organizations so that the education system continued onward.

In conclusion, Dr. Chavez said it best when he spoke about leading innately from the heart often without time to think ahead of needed action, in saying

I think the characteristic of leading from the heart, being transparent, being calm in the middle of a crisis, and really just being smart about it, like using your intuition and doing what your gut is telling you, is right and should happen.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS

Superintendents have the responsibility of ensuring the smooth running of day-to-day activities in the different schools that they represent. The COVID-19 pandemic called for a new kind of leadership in an unmistakable and unpredicted crisis. While the extant literature provided some insight into crisis leadership, this global pandemic created a void in the literature almost overnight. This study, as well as other reports, were designed to begin filling that gap with the voices of leaders in the field during what turned out to be an historic and world-wide pandemic with profound implications for education. This chapter provides a summary of the study as well as a discussion of the findings from the study as related to the literature including various bodies of work. Additionally, this chapter will share implications of the research as well as make recommendations for future studies.

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively capture and examine the leadership experiences of six superintendents who have navigated, and continue to navigate, leading their school districts during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of the Boin et al. (2017) Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership framework centered on sense-making, decision-making and coordinating, meaning-making, accounting, and learning. This phenomenological case study design will share how the lived experiences (Clandinin & Connally, 1996) may inform the emerging scholarly literature on leading in times of crisis.

Research Questions

The research questions for the study were:

1. What innate characteristics do public school superintendents exhibit during times of crisis when it comes to decision-making and coordinating in the context of having an equity-oriented mind-set?
2. How does school superintendent sense-making while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to school district operations, instruction, technology, child-nutrition, community perception, and other areas?
3. How does school superintendent meaning-making while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to instructional continuity, teaching, learning, and technology?
4. How does school superintendent accountability while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to maintaining transparency, continued focus on student achievement, and building a positive culture?
5. How does school superintendent learning while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic phenomenon inform actions taken with regard to lessons learned, closing the achievement gap, and ongoing conflict resolution in navigating this unprecedented event?

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Key findings for the study were grounded in the Boin et al. (2017) CTSCL framework. While the COVID-19 pandemic was unique, that framework held true and served as an essential guidepost for this study. Sense-making, decision-making and coordinating, meaning-making, accounting, and learning are the five critical tasks that were pinpointed as emergent themes in the context of crisis leadership. The researcher's data analysis from six superintendent interviews captivated rich qualitative data that will be integral in preparing for and understanding influential circumstances that may arise during a crisis phenomenon. Figure 1 in Chapter IV gives the

reader an illustration of each finding that was assessed and interpreted. The critical task of decision-making and coordinating was determined to be an overarching undertaking for these leaders who navigated as superintendents of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of innate leadership skills that were attributed to the decision-making and coordinating approach that superintendents exhibited, the sub-themes of teamwork, trust, and empathy all played a vital role in leadership amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Decision-Making and Coordinating: Innate Leadership

In this study, decision-making and coordinating in the context of the Boin et al. (2017) framework was discovered as the overarching critical task that was essential across all aspects of school-district leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was evident that innate leadership skills exemplifying this critical task were inadvertently expressed in some way, shape, or form by the six superintendents that participated in this study.

Teamwork was one essential component that was described as a critical element of decision-making and coordinating in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and one that set the tone for leaders in public education. The researcher concluded from each superintendent interviewed that teamwork was effective across the board not only when local participation was occurring, but also when state and federal collaboration was introduced. Working together to ensure that students and staff had the ability to continue providing a safe and conducive environment for learning was the ultimate objective for the school superintendents that were interviewed.

The ability to convey trust in every aspect of leading during these unprecedented times was another key component that was highlighted through the lens of decision-making and coordinating. As these leaders made decisions that they felt were necessary, it was vital to gain

trust from stakeholders that were seeking guidance. In essence, Chapter IV centers on gaining trust predominantly from school boards of trustees which serve as elected governing bodies for each school district. It was imperative that these superintendents felt empowered to make major decisions in light of the challenging situations that were evolving, and having the authority to make decisions without any type of micromanagement from the school board of trustees was a critical finding in this study.

Decision-making and coordinating had become a non-stop action that these superintendents expressed was inevitable. The COVID-19 pandemic was the first global pandemic that struck since the year 1921. Crisis management plans specifically for leading during a pandemic were not in place, panic was imminent, and educational leaders around the world were trying to make sense of how to proceed with an academic program. The researcher identified that every participant exhibited empathy in their decision-making and coordinating efforts. Empathy is the third sub-theme identified by the researcher as a key component to decision-making and coordinating in the context of innate leadership. Leading by example in a calm, empathic manner was an approach that was identified in the data. Despite having to make tough decisions in light of this pandemic, these transformative leaders who were interviewed expressed their approach of putting themselves in another individual's situation prior to making a decision that would impact any facet of the school district.

Based on the researcher's findings, it was evident that the decision-making and coordinating critical task outweighed the four other tasks in this overwhelming crisis phenomenon that was new to this generation of school leaders. Nonetheless, it is imperative to point out the critical effectiveness of other tasks in the Boin et al. (2017) CTSCL which were significant based on the participant data in the study.

Sense-Making: Support Services

The ability to make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic was crucial for these interviewed superintendents. This global pandemic was impacting everyone differently around the world, thus creating uncertainty for many leaders who were expected to make sense of the situation and give guidance and direction. In this study, it was discovered that ensuring a safe and conducive environment for teaching and learning was the number one priority. In the context of support services, areas of child nutrition, health and safety, and school funding were identified as major areas of concern related to making sense of the situation and acting upon it.

The researcher noted stories of children that were going hungry during temporary closures that were mandated by federal and state governments at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the data gathered, the superintendents interviewed exhibited leadership strength to act on this problem, thus providing curbside meal distribution programs that allowed parents to drive up to their campuses and pick up a meal for their children daily.

In addition, health and safety measures were important procedures that were instrumental in operating campuses effectively. The TEA and CDC were two major resources that school districts relied on for information about health and safety measures that were recommended in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Practices were implemented across the state such as wearing face masks, disinfecting classrooms daily, and providing rapid tests to students and staff for the purposes of diagnosing the COVID-19 disease.

School districts were left with large expenses during these unprecedented times. This study revealed that students and staff in many school districts did not have an electronic device or internet access at home when the option of learning or teaching remotely was advanced in the state of Texas. In essence, local education agencies were forced to spend a significant amount of

unbudgeted funding to ensure that students and staff had the resources they needed to pursue their academia responsibilities. The researcher learned that superintendents were initially left with a burden of figuring that problem out prior to the federal government stepping in approximately six months later and providing federal relief funding devoted to eliminating the digital divide, providing school buildings with PPE, accelerating learning opportunities, and other related supplemental services that would be effective for their school district.

Making sense of every circumstance was an essential task that was identified as a challenge for the six superintendents interviewed; however each of them expressed their commitment towards unfolding every situation to the best of their ability. This approach enabled them as leaders to make critical decisions based on their overall intuitions. Furthermore, the superintendent of schools also had the responsibility of conveying an explanation to parents, students, and the community about everything that was transpiring in relation to the school district. Each participant emphasized the next critical task of meaning-making. Something that was not new for these leaders was the practice of explaining common situations; however, this situation was very different and carried many strings that could move at any given time.

Meaning-Making: Instructional Continuity

Ensuring instructional continuity was the mission from many educators across the state at the onset of this global pandemic, notwithstanding every obstacle that would soon appear. There were many factors to overcome, such as temporary closures, a digital divide, creating options to attend school remotely, and more. It was critical for leaders of schools to step up and advocate for education; however, one critical factor was having the proper resources that were essential for instructional roll-out purposes. Furthermore, superintendents of schools who are known as the top leader of a school district were designated to convey information that was related to the

school district, thus ensuring the academic program was extant. Three sub-themes related to meaning-making that were identified in the study were teaching, accelerating learning, and technology. The researcher discusses each of them individually.

In this study, it was evident that teaching in general was disrupted in a manner that had not previously been experienced. Each day, teachers were forced to transform their teaching approach of instructing in a traditional classroom to addressing students through a virtual/remote format. This has proven to be very challenging for teachers, especially those who did not have much experience with the utilization of technology for their lessons. Making meaning of this teaching reform was imperative for school leaders, especially when addressing students and families who were enrolled in these school districts.

Furthermore, the researcher learned from these superintendents how detrimental this pandemic was for students who were forced to stay home during temporary closures and the impact it had on instructional continuity. Students and families were also left with a decision to make once schools were allowed to gradually re-open: either go to in-person classes or stay home and learn through a virtual platform. Nonetheless, these leaders showed a sense of urgency in administering an accelerated learning model to allow students an opportunity to catch up on lost learning time. The ultimate goal for these superintendents was to bring students back into the traditional classroom setting; however, it was sometimes difficult to make meaning of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic and how it was impacting their campuses. In essence, these leaders relied on guidance from the TEA and CDC who were instrumental agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In light of the crisis phenomenon, technology advancements were essential to reforming the instructional program of a school-district. In order to continue an academic program, this

study found that technology would never be looked at the same after the COVID-19 pandemic was contained. Schools were responsible for making sure students had an electronic device and access to the Internet if they were providing an optional virtual instructional model for their students. These superintendents all spoke about the inevitable need they had to purchase new technology for their student populations.

Nonetheless, these superintendents were held accountable for many facets of what would transpire within their school systems. The next critical task of accounting in the context of having an equity-oriented mind-set was vital during the COVID-19 pandemic when it comes to crisis leadership.

Accounting: Equity-Oriented

High expectations were at the forefront of these leaders' positions in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, it was evident that each superintendent experienced multiple occasions where accountability was enforced upon their. By virtue of accountability, it was vital to promote an environment of transparency across their organizations. In addition, setting high expectations for teaching and learning was critical to each participant in the context of student achievement. Additionally, instilling hope in their communities was vital during this crisis phenomenon, thus enabling a sense of pride in the overall culture of the organization. The data analysis discovered how critical each participant felt about addressing all stakeholders throughout the crisis to ensure that everyone had the information they needed to be successful.

The commitment to education was evident throughout this study when it comes to student achievement. Despite all the obstacles that hindered the education system, the researcher identified the impact of having an equity-oriented mind-set. The superintendents who

participated in this study highlighted the importance of providing every student with the resources they needed to be successful academically.

Leading by example and setting the tone when establishing a strong culture was essential for the participants' role during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the uncertainty, communicating a sense of hope for better days to come was something that was highlighted within the study. In addition, parental engagement was identified as a key factor for building a strong culture and exhibiting equity for all students.

These leaders identified examples when they made the right calls, but also learned from their mistakes. Learning was the next critical task discussed in Chapter IV which set the pace for creating a vision for the future in each local education agency.

Learning: Vision for the future

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendent of schools were already expected to develop a shared vision for their communities and students. In light of the Boin et al. (2017) CTSCL framework, the ability to learn during a crisis is crucial for a leader; nonetheless, future research and understanding are vital in the event such a crisis returns. The researcher discovered that the leaders' learning was important during the pandemic, specifically to prepare for the future. Lessons learned, closing the achievement gap, and conflict resolution were three sub-themes related to the importance of learning during a crisis and creating a new vision for the future.

Mistakes were inevitable throughout the pandemic, which enabled the superintendent participants to learn from mistakes made not only by themselves, but perhaps by other leaders. The key for learning was having the ability to network with peers in the same field and refine establishment from within their own organizations. Major key findings included superintendents

understanding the intricacies of their situations in order to make transformational decisions and capitalizing on new innovative ways of teaching.

Major burdens that these superintendents endured were closing the achievement gaps for students who fell behind academically during the COVID-19 pandemic due to all the hardships that arose in their lives and around the world. In this study, the researcher discovered that the achievement gap would take years to regain, which was one key component to which each superintendent devoted their attention moving forward in their careers.

In the context of learning and setting a vision for the future, many conflicts occurred during these unprecedented times because there was so much uncertainty that led to times of confusion, stress, distrust, and fear among everything. It was imperative for educational leaders to stand firm in their values and beliefs and address each conflict with a sense of calmness and understanding. Participants in the study demonstrated full commitment to their organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

School superintendents were not ready for the COVID-19 crisis, and. neither were the students, parents, staff, and communities. Furthermore, the TEA-mandated crisis management plans became less relevant because this crisis was totally unanticipated. These crisis plans needed to be critical, real, and necessary and not just being on paper or in place; rather, they needed to be committed to memory and represent a true plan for future leadership in schools. Implications for practice in schools will no doubt be grounded in the emergent inequity that could not be hidden as a consequence of the pandemic. Many students who normally struggle the hardest with learning in the best of circumstances will no doubt find it even more difficult, perhaps even impossible in some cases, to catch up on the learning that was interrupted by the

COVID-19 pandemic. These students must receive effective instruction, and they have experienced interruptions in their learning that will need to be ameliorated.

However, the pandemic has exposed some opportunity to make needed shifts in the industrial model of schooling that likely will never be re-implemented, as the severity of the crisis exposed long-standing practices that simply must be reviewed and revised. For example, shifts in instructional delivery that had to happen if schools were going to remain viable during the entire crisis required previously resistant faculty to overcome mental blocks and support students through the use of virtual instructional platforms and other new ways of delivering instruction. Many of those changes indeed are expected to implicate how schools continue to operate in the future.

Numerous benefits arose from new ways of thinking about instruction and parents and communities will, and should, likely demand multiple modes of instructional delivery. Likewise, how teachers deliver instruction will likely shift as well. Not only were varied instructional modes effective options for students, but despite drawbacks and stressors for educators, they did have some benefits for teachers who could also enjoy some work-from-home time as options. Moreover, the attraction of working at home for families, while presenting challenges, also served to strengthen families who depended on one another and their communities, thus possibly creating a societal shift and a return to the importance of family as opposed to a strongly individualistic society.

What the long-term implications will be as the world moves forward and recovers from the COVID-19 crisis, are yet to be determined, but in the world of academia, these implications lead nicely into recommendations for future research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some pandemic-related research is beginning to emerge given the various ways in which the crisis has widened existing socioeconomic disparities and how these inequities affect learning and educational outcomes. Future research, particularly from a superintendent leadership perspective, should continue to explore how to lead in the context of decision-making and coordinating during a crisis phenomenon, nevertheless the incorporation of sense-making, meaning-making, accounting, and learning abilities highlighted in Figure 1 (Boin et al., 2017).

Also, the review and revision of school-districts' crisis management plans is recommended to maximize effectiveness and efficiency during a crisis. Based on this study, it was noted that these types of plans did not fulfil their overall expectations when it came to leading during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic-specific measures are much needed within these plans, including lessons learned about how to lead during any crisis in order to be prepared for a similar event in the future.

Furthermore, professional development for educators and all stakeholders to continuously improve instructional delivery, particularly using instructional technology and other resources, is essential. The ultimate goal should include the provision of instructional continuity regardless of any type of crisis, if possible. In addition, professional development that is focused on non-traditional approaches such as leading from the heart, providing community and other emotional support, and ensuring that transparency is at the forefront is imperative.

The researcher further recommends that instructional improvements be made with an emphasis on systemic alignment, utilizing approaches that are favorable and effective at all academic levels. Leaders should have time to reflect, in advance, on future approaches rather

than being bombarded with new policies and requirements to improve academic programs while in the midst of crisis situation.

Finally, chronic absenteeism and disengagement of students and families during the pandemic only heightened the need for schools to address student engagement and strategies to enhance that engagement even during non-crisis periods. Perhaps most critical of all is the need to study the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning, how to recover the learning loss that occurred, and what might be ways to ensure that a similar crisis can be mitigated in the future by better preparation and planning.

CONCLUSION

In the context of innate crisis leadership and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher identified decision-making and coordinating efforts superlative in comparison to the remaining CTSCL within the Boin et al. (2017) framework. The COVID-19 pandemic was an abnormal phenomenon that demanded instantaneous decision-making and coordinating efforts from the six superintendents interviewed in this study due to life-and-death circumstances hindering their ability to sometimes make sense of the situation initially. Furthermore, crisis leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic called for an immediate response from school leaders, given that they were responsible for accommodating and leading an educational institution which generally embodies congregation of large amounts of students and staff. In essence, this study revealed that there was little time to reflect on the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic thus requiring school leaders to make decisions unconventionally. It is imperative to note how vital teamwork, trust, and empathy contributed towards these superintendents' decision-making and coordinating experiences.

This study has revealed that the need for reimagining crisis response as well as reimagining education is imperative. This will require commitment from school superintendents as the integral leaders in this effort. Restoration and reimagining are only the beginning moving toward the future. Our children's futures as well as our own depend on it.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX PAGE

APPENDIX 1: EXEMPT DETERMINATION APPROVED BY IRB 141

APPENDIX 2: VITA 142

Appendix 1: Exempt Determination Approved by IRB

Dear Dr. Gerri Maxwell,

On 03-10-2021, the Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Institutional Review Board reviewed the following submission:

IRB ID:	TAMU-CC-IRB-2021-03-169
Principal Investigator:	Dr. Gerri Maxwell
Title:	CRISIS LEADERSHIP: THE EXPERIENCES OF SIX TEXAS SUPERINTENDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
Exempt approval date:	03-10-2021
Checkin due date:	03-09-2022

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Institutional Review Board reviewed the project and based on the information provided has determined the research meets exempt category: 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2) (Research involving use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior).

Therefore, **this project has been determined to be exempt from IRB review.** You may proceed with this project.

Reminder of Investigator Responsibilities: As principal investigator, you must ensure:

1. **Informed Consent:** Ensure informed consent processes are followed and information presented enables individuals to voluntarily decide whether to participate in research.
2. **Amendments:** This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. Any planned changes require an amendment to be submitted to the IRB to ensure that the research continues to meet criteria for exemption. The Amendment must be approved before being implemented.
3. **Completion Report:** Upon completion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a Completion Report must be submitted.
4. **Records Retention:** All research related records must be retained for 3 years from the completion of the study in a secure location. At a minimum these documents include: the research protocol, all questionnaires, survey instruments, interview questions and/or data collection instruments associated with this research protocol, recruiting or advertising materials, any consent forms or information sheets given to participants, all correspondence to or from the IRB or Office of Research Compliance, and any other pertinent documents.
5. **Adverse Events:** Adverse events must be reported to the Research Compliance Office immediately.
6. **Post-approval monitoring:** Requested materials for post-approval monitoring must be provided by dates requested.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Office of Research Compliance with any questions at irb@tamucc.edu.

Respectfully,

Germaine Hughes-Waters

Office of Research Compliance

Appendix 2: VITA

Ismael Gonzalez III

Assistant Superintendent for Business and Finance
Gregory-Portland Independent School District
608 College Street, Portland, Texas, 78374
Office: 361-777-1091
Cell: 361-425-4783
igonzalez@g-pisd.org

EDUCATION:

Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi Doctorate in Educational Leadership Graduated: August 2021	Corpus Christi, Texas
Dallas Baptist University Master's in Business Administration Graduated: May 2015	Dallas, Texas
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi Bachelors in Business Administration Graduated: May 2012	Corpus Christi, Texas
Laredo Community College Associates in Arts Graduated: May 2010	Laredo, Texas
Robstown High School High School Diploma Graduated: May 2008	Robstown, Texas

CERTIFICATE: SBEC Texas Educator Certified (Superintendent – Grades EC-12)

EXPERIENCE:

Gregory-Portland Independent School District Assistant Superintendent for Business and Finance	Portland, Texas March 2021 - Present
Sharyland Independent School District Assistant Superintendent for Business-Finance & Support Services	Mission, Texas June 2018 – March 2021
Robstown Independent School District Chief Financial Officer Director of Finance	Robstown, Texas July 2017 – June 2018 July 2013 – June 2017