

Self-evaluation of Educational Leadership Practices During COVID-19

Dr. Mike Coquyt
Associate Professor
MSUM

Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, school districts, and specifically, superintendents, are under increased pressure to lead. Irregularity and ambiguity are now the mantras of those tasked with leading in our schools.

Using tolerance for ambiguity as a framework, this qualitative case study aims to determine precisely how some school leaders have adjusted their leadership, or not, in the throes of this disruptive pandemic. The results of this study determined that many superintendents saw the pandemic as another challenge that needed to be overcome, believed their leadership and organizational skills became sharper, and needed to accede a measure of control in their district to the state.

Intro.

Teaching in today's educational climate is fraught with anxiety, frustration, and apprehension for many teachers who now find themselves teaching from home, and utilizing online and distance learning techniques that are foreign to them (Bradbury et al., 2020). While much attention is given to teaching and learning during this pandemic, and for good reason, little consideration has been given to how superintendents in P-12 schools have adjusted and adapted their leadership style during this time of uncertainty.

Tolerance for Ambiguity

In order to do this successfully, a tremendous amount of tolerance for ambiguous and sometimes confusing situations is required by the educational leader. This research study is motivated by an attempt to discover how educational leadership has adapted to the “new normal”.

Participants

The participants included eight superintendents. Years of experience varied from four to 23 years. The size of the district varied from just over 300 P-12 students to a little more than 2,500 students.

Tolerance for Ambiguity

To address any changes in their leadership, all participants were asked to reflect, explain and self-evaluate their leadership behaviors during the pandemic in their respective districts. Tolerance for Ambiguity (TA) is the ability to perceive uncertainties, contradictory issues that may be difficult to understand, as well as information with vague, contrary or multiple meanings in an impartial way (McLain et al., 2015).

Learning Model Parameters

Table 1

Learning Model Parameters

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

Change in Delivery Model

Table 2

Change in Delivery Model

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

Supt. Speaks

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

Purpose

Purpose & Research Objectives

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

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

Ambiguity

McLain et al., (2015) argued, Ambiguity hinders choice because desirable alternatives are difficult or impossible to distinguish from undesirable members of the feasible set of options ([Hirsh et al., 2012](#)). In an ambiguous situation, behavioral choices cannot be linked to predictable outcomes. Thus, alternative conceptualizations of cognition-behavior-outcome relationships must be developed and examined until predictability can be achieved (p. 3).

Participants

Table 3

Participant Demographics

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

Uncertainty

Table 4

Superintendent Responses Related to Uncertainty “Confidence”

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

Supt. Speaks

Experience:

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

Communication:

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

Fluctuating Stimuli

Table 5

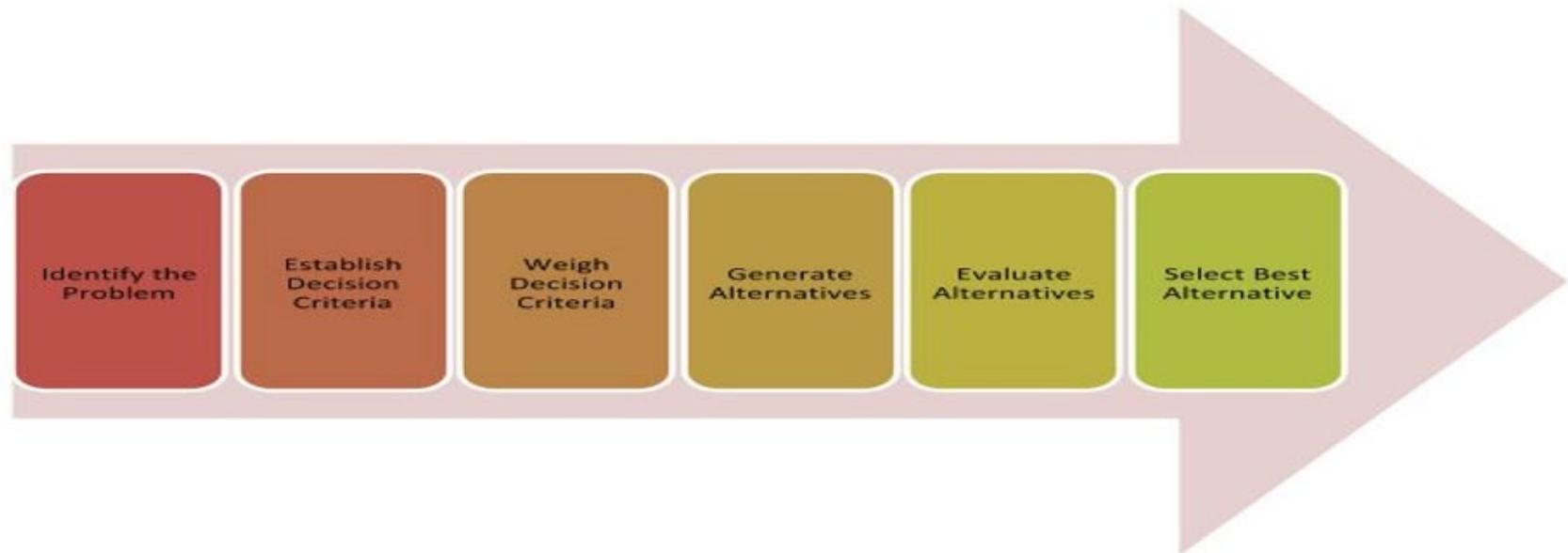
Superintendent Responses Related to Categorization and Fluctuating Stimuli “Coping”

Participant	Phrase	Theme
S7	Mandates create changes in cultural practices	Core Values
S6	Reliance on core values to weather the storm	Core Values
S1	Loss of social relationships or social capital	Satisfice
S2	New challenges creating new motivations	Satisfice
S1	Limit on time, knowledge, resources	Satisfice
S3	Enhanced flexibility and adaptability	Satisfice
S1	This is a collaborative effort	Sensemaking/Networking
S5	Many levels of support	Sensemaking/Networking
S4	Relationships intensified with colleagues	Sensemaking/Networking

Dewey

Figure 1

Dewey's Decision-Making Model



Satisfice

Simon (1957) maintains that sound decision-making requires resources, knowledge, and time. As stated above, time is a resource that is in short supply during COVID-19. Simon's 1957 work, (as cited in Marion and Gonzales, 2014) offers, "all we need to do is satisfice. This means that we find a solution that will take care of the situation from a set of solutions to which we have fairly ready access (p. 211). Although none of the subjects specifically used the word "satisfice", that is exactly what they needed to do.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is another term that fits within the discussion about fluctuating stimuli. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) define sensemaking as “the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations” (p. 57).

Supt. Speaks - Core Values

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

Supt. Speaks - Satisficing

There are some things, curriculum items for example, that have definitely taken a backseat right now, and that is unfortunate. COVID dominates your day...communicating with the families, staying fully staffed, and putting out fires. That is our focus right now, unfortunately.

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

Unfamiliarity

Table 6

Superintendent Responses Related to Unfamiliarity “Calmness”

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

Supt. - Even Keel

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

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

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

Supt. - Managing Emotions

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

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

Novelty & Delayed Selection

Table 7

Superintendent Responses Related to Novelty and Delayed Selection “Control”

Superintendent	Phrase	Theme
S5	Strategic planning	Dominion
S3	Projects moving forward	Dominion
S6	Higher level of social reflexivity	Dominion
S2	Communication needs to be as clear and precise as possible	Compliant
S5	New level in the chain of command	Compliant
S4	Producing the desired effects is delayed	Compliant
S4	State Guidelines	Compliant
S5	Student achievement is a concern	Compliant
S1	Unpredictable and changing messages	Compliant
S2	Not knowing	Compliant

Locus of Control

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

Strategic Planning

Several superintendents mentioned strategic planning as well as novel projects that emerged during the pandemic. S5 commented, “We have not forgotten about our strategic plan and continue to allocate resources to those teachers that were promised materials and supplies.” S4 opined, “I admire my teachers for not only the work they have done during the pandemic, but also their understanding that we have re-prioritized some of our former plans, but they have not been forgotten...just delayed.”

New Projects

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

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

Social Reflexivity

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

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

Compliant - Heads

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

Compliant - Tails

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

Compliant - Tails

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

Inductive Coding

Table 8

Inductive Coding Phrases and Themes

Superintendent	Phrase	Themes
S1	Teachers are transforming their thoughts about teaching	Reevaluation
S5	Everyone involved needs to be proactive moving forward. We need to be more timely; our community expects this from us now	Reevaluation
S4	This changes the way we will deliver instruction	Reevaluation
S3	We can't go back to the way we operated before COVID	Reevaluation
S8	We all need to listen to the community better	Reevaluation
S2	Seeing others step up as leaders	Collaboration
S5	Good leaders surround themselves with good people	Collaboration
S3	Work on delegating more and empower those who seek out opportunities to lead	Collaboration
S3	More familiar with MDE and MDH because of COVID and the resources they can provide	Collaboration
S6	We all needed to work together and this effort has created more efficiency	Collaboration

Collaboration

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

Leadership

One of the things that motivates me right now is seeing other people step up and be leaders. We always talk about leaders and how we want to create leaders in our school. This is actually happening...people are stepping up and taking on challenges, whether it's in food service, custodial, human resources, and our nurses...oh my gosh.

Leadership cont.

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

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

Inductive Summary

COVID-19 more or less forced districts to change the way they had performed certain procedures in the past. COVID-19 provided districts with the opportunity to decide if all or certain elements of the “new normal” should remain as is, augment what was previously used, or abandon it altogether. The results of this segment suggests that nothing will be completely abandoned. Anything that facilitated better-quality teaching and improved student learning will be retained.

Distributive Leadership

Almost to a person, the superintendents who did not employ a distributed leadership approach prior to COVID-19 have witnessed, first hand, the benefits of collaboration, empowerment, and shared decision-making.

Summary

The implications for future practices brought to light a few pearls that anyone in a leadership position should take into consideration.

Summary cont. – Collaborative Leadership

It was not as if none of the superintendents understood or were not practicing some form of collaborative leadership prior to COVID-19. I do question whether the leadership capacity of those NOT in a leadership position would have been ascertained if not for COVID-19. To a person, the superintendents commended certain individuals and appreciated how they tirelessly endeavored to make teaching and student learning succeed during the pandemic. My hope is that these proven leaders are not forsaken after the pandemic has passed. Presently, all educational leaders can simply stop and realize that there is leadership potential in many of those working right under your nose. Identifying, growing, developing, and empowering the leadership potential in these individuals is a crucial piece to realizing true collaborative leadership.

Sensegiving

No one could possibly make sense of the pandemic in the early stages, but in time, most of the superintendents could at least make sense of the situation, and develop an appropriate response. In short, they became sensegivers. Sensegivers impart insight to others, understand the importance of providing action plans rather than perfect plans, and value the need for promptness (Marion & Gonzales, p. 225). This concept is directly related to reevaluation; one of the major themes uncovered in the inductive coding segment. It would be prudent for all in a leadership role to apply some sensemaking acumen in order to make the decision-making process a bit less cumbersome.

