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Crisis Leadership of Exemplary Superintendents of Urban Elementary K–8 Districts

During the COVID-19 Crisis of 2020

A Dissertation by

Raymond Andry

University of Massachusetts Global

Irvine, California

School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

May 2022

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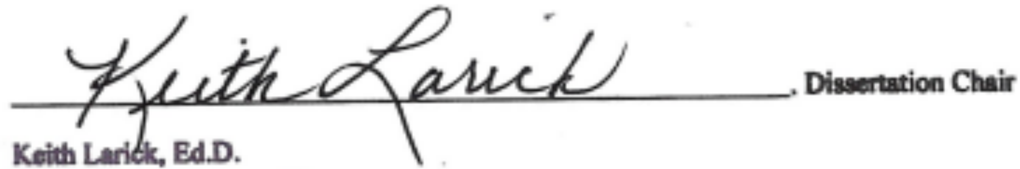
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

The dissertation of Raymond Andry is approved.



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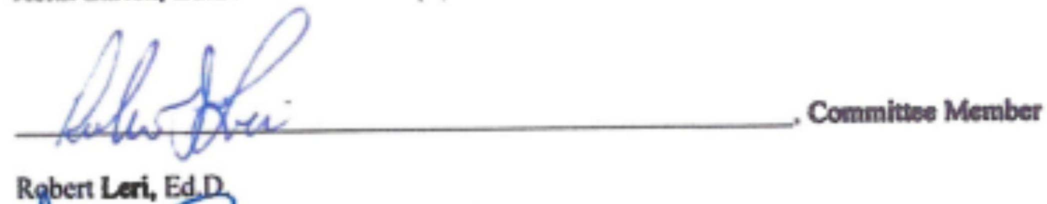

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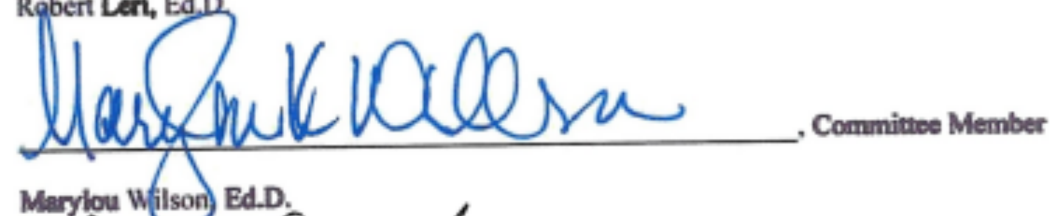

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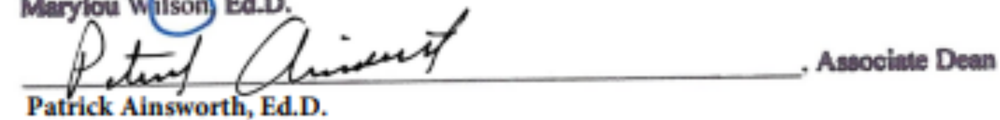

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May 2, 2022

Crisis Leadership of Exemplary Superintendents of Urban Elementary K–8 Districts

During the COVID-19 Crisis of 2020

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This dissertation is dedicated to my mom, Darlene Andry, and dad, Robert Andry. My mom, a woman who taught me how to be strong, kind, brave in the face of adversity, and compassionate because sometimes you are the only one someone else may have. My dad, the man who taught me to be of service to others and to give, not to receive but to make things a little better for others. I lost both too soon, but the imprint you left on my heart will never fade.

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Finally, I would like to thank the five superintendents who participated in the study. You gave your time without a second thought when you were still dealing with a pandemic. Your words and leadership were insightful and inspiring. The commitment to the children, families, and staff you serve is commendable and heartwarming. I appreciate you and believe the world is a better place because of your work.

ABSTRACT

Crisis Leadership of Exemplary Superintendents of Urban Elementary K–8 Districts

During the COVID-19 Crisis of 2020

by Raymond Andry

Purpose: The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to identify and describe strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties used to lead in crisis using the five critical tasks of strategic crisis leadership (CTSCL; sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Arjen Boin et al., 2017) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. In addition, it was the purpose to understand and describe the experiences of exemplary leaders during a time of crisis.

Methodology: Through a qualitative multiple-case study, interviews were obtained to collect qualitative data. Qualitative data were collected through one-on-one interviews and artifacts from exemplary superintendents of elementary urban K–8 public school districts in Southern California. Semistructured interview questions were tied directly to the CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Arjen Boin et al., 2017). After data collections from each study participant, a narrative report detailing each case in the multiple-case study was developed to share empirical findings and to identify and describe the strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school district used during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and describe their experiences during a time of crisis.

Findings: Exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts interviewed for this research study described the importance of prioritization,

communication, trust, incorporating lessons learned, strategic crisis leadership, and management related to the five CTSCL of sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning.

Conclusions: By identifying and describing strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts used to lead during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is concluded that current and aspiring superintendents be supported with strategies to address crises to better lead their organizations successfully.

Recommendations: Further research is recommended for replication with broader populations, including superintendents in rural areas and as a mixed methods study. It is recommended to include principals and the five CTSCL be incorporated into aspiring superintendent academies and standards for educational leaders.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION 1
Background 3
    Leadership in Times of Crisis 3
    The Importance of Effective Leadership 4
Theoretical Foundations of Crisis Leadership 5
    Functions of the Executive 5
    Four Phases of Crisis Management Model 5
    Incident Command Model 6
    Mitroff's Five Phase Model 6
    Attribution Theory 7
    Normal Accident Theory 7
    Situational Crisis Communication Theory 8
Theoretical Framework 8
    Sense Making 9
    Decision Making and Coordination 9
    Meaning Making 10
    Accounting 10
    Learning 10
Public School Systems as a Backdrop to Crisis 11
The Role of the Superintendent During COVID-19 11
Gap in Research 13
Statement of the Research Problem 13
Purpose Statement 15
Research Questions 15
Significance of the Problem 16
Definitions 18
    Five Critical Task of Strategic Crisis Leadership 19
    General Definitions 20
Delimitations 21
Organization of the Study 22

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 23
Leadership in Times of Crisis 25
The Importance of Effective Leadership 30
Theoretical Foundations of Crisis Leadership 31
    Functions of the Executive 32
    Four Phases of Crisis Management Model 34
    Incident Command Model 36
    Mitroff's Five Phase Model 40
    Attribution Theory 42
    Normal Accident Theory 43
    Situational Crisis Communication Theory 44
Theoretical Framework 45
    Sense Making 49
    Decision Making and Coordination 50

Meaning Making ... 51
Accounting ... 52
Learning ... 53
Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership and School Leaders ... 54
Public School Systems as a Backdrop to Crisis ... 54
Public School Systems ... 54
Crises and Disasters in Schools ... 56
Traditional School Preparation for Crisis ... 57
The Role of the Superintendent ... 58
School Superintendent Crisis Leadership During COVID-19 ... 60
Gap in Research ... 61
Summary ... 62

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY ... 64
Overview ... 64
Purpose Statement ... 64
Research Questions ... 64
Research Design ... 65
Qualitative Study ... 67
Case Study ... 67
Population ... 69
Target Population ... 69
Sample ... 70
Sample Subject Selection Process ... 72
Instrumentation ... 75
Interviews ... 75
Researcher as an Instrument in the Study ... 77
Field Testing ... 78
Validity ... 79
Construct Validity ... 79
Internal Validity ... 80
External Validity ... 80
Reliability ... 81
Data Collection ... 81
Data Analysis ... 84
Limitations ... 86
Researcher as the Instrument ... 86
Location ... 87
Sample Size ... 87
Summary ... 87

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS ... 89
Overview ... 89
Purpose Statement ... 89
Research Questions ... 90
Research Methods and Data Collection ... 90
Interview Process and Procedures ... 91

Population 96
Sample........ 97
Demographics 99
Presentation and Analysis of Data 100
Research Question 1 100
Developing plans 101
Communication........ 105
Data sources 109
Research Question 2 113
Authoritative 114
Communication........ 121
Data collection 124
Collaboration........ 127
Research Question 3 131
Common message 131
Connecting 137
Providing resources........ 140
Research Question 4 143
Taking responsibility 144
Being purposeful........ 150
Shared responsibility........ 154
Research Question 5 158
Reflection........ 158
Incorporating learning........ 163
Research Question 6 166
Trust 166
Values 172
Relationships........ 175
Summary 178

CHAPTER V: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS........ 180
Overview........ 180
Purpose Statement........ 180
Research Questions........ 181
Interview Process and Procedures 181
Population 185
Sample........ 185
Major Findings........ 187
Major Finding 1: Urban Superintendent of Elementary K–8 District Prioritized the Health and Safety of Their Staffs and Overall Communities 188
Major Finding 2: Urban Superintendent of Elementary K–8 District Relied on Health Experts and Teams to Justify Their Decisions and Coordinate Plans Aligned With COVID-19 Protocols........ 189
Major Finding 3: Urban Superintendent of Elementary K–8 District Collaborated With Peers and Internal Teams to Make Sense Within Their Local Context 189

Major Finding 4: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 District Focused on Ensuring Their Communities Trusted Them as a Reliable Source of Information 190
Major Finding 5: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 District Were Committed to Providing Resources Beyond Traditional School Supplies to Ensure Students and Families Had Their Basic Needs Met..... 191
Major Finding 6: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 District Made Decisions in Alignment With Their Organizational Values and Held Themselves Accountable 191
Unexpected Findings 192
Unexpected Finding 1: Exemplary Urban Elementary K–8 Superintendents Took on Multiple Roles on Their Own Within the Volatile Conditions Presented by COVID-19 192
Unexpected Finding 2: Exemplary Urban Elementary K–8 Superintendents Have Found It Challenging to Find Time to Reflect and Formally Debrief With Their Teams Because of the Prolonged Nature of the COVID-19 Crisis 193
Unexpected Finding 3: Urban Elementary K–8 Superintendents Focused on Limiting Conflict by Aligning Health and Safety Protocols With Neighboring Districts 195
Conclusions 196
Conclusion 1: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 School Districts Must Hold Themselves Accountable for Making Decisions Aligned That Provides Clear Direction and Builds Trust With Their Teams 196
Conclusion 2: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 Districts Must Be Collaborative and Use Multiple Sources of Data to Be Considered Trustworthy and Reliable During Times of Crisis 197
Conclusion 3: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 Districts Must Have Strong Collaboration Skills to Be Able to Collaborate With Multiple Stakeholders to Make Sense of a Crisis and Develop a Shared Understanding 197
Conclusion 4: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 Districts Must Be Reliable and Consistent Communicators to Reduce Anxiety and Fear in Their Communities 198
Conclusion 5: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 Districts Must Focus on Meeting the Basic and Essential Needs of Their Communities to Effectively Lead and Build Trusting Relationships 199
Conclusion 6: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 Districts Must Make Decisions Aligned With Their Organizational Values and Hold Themselves Accountable for Educating Children During Times of Crisis 199
Implications for Action 200
Implication 1: Educational Leadership Programs Should Emphasize Building Trust Through Accountable Leadership Practices 201
Implication 2: Incorporate the Use of Technology and Virtual Communication Platforms Into Standard District Communication Plans 201

Implication 3: Include the CTSCL Framework to the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders ... 202
Implication 4: County Offices of Education Should Provide Training for Superintendents on Crisis Response and Management Strategies Through the CTSCL ... 203
Implication 5: New Superintendents Should Participate in the Association of California School Administrators Superintendent Leadership Academy ... 203
Implication 6: Include a Module on Crisis Leadership and Management Using the Five CTSCL in the ACSA Superintendent Leadership Academy ... 204
Recommendations for Further Research ... 205
Recommendation 1: Phenomenological Study to Examine Values Driven Leadership ... 205
Recommendation 2: Meta-Analysis of School District Communication Plans ... 205
Recommendation 3: Multiple Case Study of Crisis Leadership Through CTSCL ... 205
Recommendation 4: Phenomenological Study on Communication Strategies ... 206
Recommendation 5: Mixed Method ... 206
Recommendation 6: Meta-Analysis ... 206
Concluding Remarks and Reflection ... 207

REFERENCES ... 209

APPENDICES ... 231

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Superintendent Description of Sample ... 99

Table 2. Strategies for Critical Task of Sense Making and Overarching Theme of Developing Plans ... 103

Table 3. Strategies for Critical Task of Sense Making and Overarching Theme of Communication ... 106

Table 4. Strategies for Critical Task of Sense Making and Overarching Theme of Data Sources ... 109

Table 5. Strategies for Critical Task of Decision Making and Coordination Overarching Theme of Authoritative ... 115

Table 6. Strategies for Critical Task of Decision Making and Coordination and Overarching Theme of Communication ... 122

Table 7. Strategies for Critical Task of Decision Making and Coordination and Overarching Theme of Data Collection ... 125

Table 8. Strategies for Critical Task of Decision Making and Coordination and Overarching Theme of Collaboration ... 127

Table 9. Strategies for Critical Task of Meaning Making and Overarching Theme of Common Message ... 133

Table 10. Strategies for Critical Task of Meaning Making and Overarching Theme of Connecting ... 137

Table 11. Strategies for Critical Task of Meaning Making and Overarching Theme of Providing Resources ... 141

Table 12. Strategies for Critical Task of Accounting and Overarching Theme of Taking Responsibility ... 145

Table 13. Strategies for Critical Task of Accounting and Overarching Theme of Being Purposeful ... 151

Table 14. Strategies for Critical Task of Accounting and Overarching Theme of Shared Responsibility ... 154

Table 15. Strategies for Critical Task of Learning and Overarching Theme of Reflection ... 159

Table 16. Strategies for Critical Task of Learning and Overarching Theme of Incorporating Learning ... 163

Table 17. Strategies for Crisis Leadership and Overarching Theme of Trust 168

Table 18. Strategies for Crisis Leadership and Overarching Theme of Values.............. 172

Table 19. Strategies for Crisis Leadership and Overarching Theme of Relationships 175

Table 20. Overarching Themes Through the Lens of the Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership.. 178

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. A visional representation of the functions.. 33

Figure 2. The four phases of emergency management 35

Figure 3. Incident command model 37

Figure 4. Mitroff's five-stages of crisis management.. 42

Figure 5. Frequency of coded entries for sense making ……………………………….103

Figure 6. Frequency of coded entries for decision making and coordination …………113

Figure 7. Frequency of coded entries for meaning making…………………………….126

Figure 8. Frequency of coded entries for accounting ………………………………….137

Figure 9. Frequency of coded entries for learning ……………………………………..…151

Figure 10. Frequency of coded entries for crisis learning ……………………………..158

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Crisis is increasingly interconnected and can impact on a global scale (Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2017; Gainey, 2009). Although there are no standard set of guidelines for leaders to turn to during a crisis, those affected look to leaders to respond efficiently and effectively (Boin et al., 2017; Colvin, 2002). For public leaders facing unknown risk during a crisis, decision making is full of uncertainty requiring them to act rapidly based on available information, subsequently requiring adaptive leadership as new information becomes available (Al Saidi et al., 2020). According to Fortunato, Gigliotti, and Ruben (2017), leaders must predict, recognize, detect, and address issues that turn into crises and strategically respond.

The COVID-19 pandemic is something the world has not similarly faced for over a century, presenting one of the greatest threats in recent human history and creating prolonged and potentially existential challenges for organizations (Al Saidi et al., 2020; Tabish, 2020). During a prolonged crisis, especially one with severe consequences such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for effective leadership is critical (Al Saidi et al., 2020). Leaders of organizations facing a crisis with people facing physical, psychological, and emotional threats must respond with grit and resiliency (Al Saidi et al., 2020; Goodyear, 2020; Tabish, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic, officially declared on March 11, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO), tested leaders' limits across the globe (Eby, 2022). The emergence of the coronavirus disease in China was first recognized by the WHO on December 31, 2019 (Eby, 2022). Within weeks, cases were reported in the United States, and by the end of January 2020, the federal government declared a national public

emergency (Eby, 2022). In California, the virus was first detected on January 26, 2020, in a traveler from Wuhan, China (Eby, 2022). Similar reports from across the state prompted counties to declare local states of emergency, and on March 4, 2020, the governor of California declared a state of emergency (Eby, 2022).

The nature of crisis is characterized as large-scale events that threaten people, organizations, culture, and society and cause disorder (Boin et al., 2017). During these times, crisis leaders must limit the depth and duration of disorder caused by the crisis and manage it within the context of their community's political, legal, and moral order (Boin et al., 2017). During a crisis, leaders are expected to keep their citizenry safe and effectively communicate how they plan to move forward (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and fundamentally changed the world and the way people conduct their personal and professional lives according to Tsipursky (2020), CEO of Disaster Avoidance Experts. According to Tsipursky, life will never return to what it was before the pandemic, and to survive, people will need to adapt to a world the pandemic has shaped. Moreover, Tsipursky stated that even postvaccination, society will be permanently changed, and the feeling of risk will continue to linger, possibly for years.

Outside of healthcare, one of the institutions most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic has been America's schools. Teachers and students alike struggled with school closure and transitioning to distance learning (Bhamani et al., 2020; Schaefer, Abrams, Kurpis, Abrams, & Abrams, 2020). Parents, teachers, businesses, and communities wanted schools to reopen (Bhamani et al., 2020). In the face of crisis, the key leader the

school district and community look to is the superintendent who is expected to provide strategic leadership to effectively navigate the impact of the crisis on the organization (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Williams, 2014). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a highly polarized environment, and beliefs about the best way to respond to the impact on schools and society vary greatly (Panda, Siddarth, & Pal, 2020; Pereira, Medeiros, & Bertholini, 2020; Yeung, Lai, & Luo, 2020). Many feel COVID-19 has exposed economic and social inequities, presenting opportunities to reimagine and realign education (Pacheco, 2020; Panda et al., 2020; Sarap et al., 2020; Seke, 2020; Xie, Siau, & Nah, 2020). Although great uncertainty remains, one thing is certain; when the COVID-19 pandemic is over, virtual learning is likely to remain part of K–12 schools along with increased concern for the social-emotional well-being of students (Superville, 2020). Because of the complexities of crisis and the sheer number of crises affecting schools today, it is necessary to examine the superintendent's role and how superintendents plan, respond, and effectively navigate the impact of the crisis on their organization (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2020a; Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; The School Superintendent's Association, 2020).

Background

Leadership in Times of Crisis

Crisis is no longer bound by social, geographic, or singular aspects of society (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2009). Financial crises, natural disasters, and unforeseen events continue to threaten an organization's ability to function (Boin et al., 2017). Although there is no standard set of guidelines for leaders to turn to during a crisis,

stakeholders and community members look to leaders to respond effectively in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world (Bennis & Nanus, 2007; Boin et al., 2017; Colvin, 2002).

As leaders, superintendents face challenges during crisis and must demonstrate strategic leadership (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Williams, 2014). Responding to crises in an ever-changing world requires superintendents to have the skills, strategies, and resources needed to lead their organizations through crisis. Responding to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic tested superintendents' skills and leadership abilities, requiring them to accurately interpret threats, coordinate with support agencies, and support their stakeholders through recovery.

The Importance of Effective Leadership

The world is increasingly interconnected, and crises can impact on a global scale (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2009). An effective response to these conditions requires leaders to predict, recognize, detect, and address issues that turn into crises and strategically respond (Fortunato et al., 2017). Moreover, contemporary crisis management must consider the effects of rapid communication through social media and the increasing expectations that organizations respond quickly and effectively to crises (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2010). Further, the 24/7 news cycles create conditions in which leaders are expected to recognize and manage threats early or face backlash for actual or perceived failures (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2010). The failure of a leader to respond adequately has the potential to destroy trust and jeopardize the reputation of the organization and possible survival (Gainey, 2010).

Theoretical Foundations of Crisis Leadership

Crisis leadership is a very important part of leading in today's world (Boin et al., 2017). Every organization, including the public school system, goes through some form of crisis on a fairly regular basis (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Williams, 2014). In terms of this research, crisis is an incident or situation that typically develops rapidly and creates high levels of uncertainty and threat to an organization's mission and goals. The school superintendent is the CEO for school districts and is responsible for the welfare of both adults and students in the district (Colvin, 2002; Superville, 2020; Townsend et al., 2007). Although superintendents cannot predict what will happen day to day, they can take steps to prepare to lead in a way that stabilizes the organization and plan for the future (Boin et al., 2017; Colvin, 2002; Lowy, 2008; Moilanen, 2015; Van Wart, 2011).

Functions of the Executive

Barnard (1938/1968), the author of *The Functions of the Executive*, was foundational in developing the five critical tasks of strategic crisis leadership (CTSCL). Barnard's research laid the foundation for organizations being fundamentally cooperative systems that require cooperation that is conscious, deliberate, and purposeful to be effective. Further, Barnard's work focused on the importance of communication and moral imperative for leaders to establish authority to move subordinates to action.

Four Phases of Crisis Management Model

The phases of crisis management models were first conceptualized in the 1930s to describe, examine, and understand disasters (Baird, 2010). The four phases of traditional crisis management are presented as a cycle of mitigation, preparedness, response, and

recovery identified by the National Governors' Association (NGA) Center for Policy Research (1979) to develop a comprehensive emergency management system. The four phases produce a common language for emergency management response (Baird, 2010; Kennedy, 2004).

Incident Command Model

The incident command system (ICS) model arose from the aftermath of wildfires in California in the 1970s when local, state, and federal agencies came together to better integrate their efforts through the development of common language, management concepts, and communication (Moynihan, 2009; NGA Center for Policy Research, 1979). The ICS model is "a standardized approach to the command, control, and coordination of on-scene incident management that provides a common hierarchy within which personnel from multiple organizations can be effective" (Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], 2017, p. 34). The ICS model establishes a clear line of command, identifying one person as the incident commander responsible for directing all responders (FEMA, 2017; Moynihan, 2009; NGA Center for Policy Research, 1979; U.S. Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2010). The five major functions are command, operations, planning, logistics, and finance/administration (DHS, 2010).

Mitroff's Five Phase Model

In 1994, Ian Mitroff introduced a five-stage crisis model that included crisis signal detection, probing and preventions, containment, recovery, and learning (Marker, 2020). Unlike previous life cycle models, Mitroff recognized that organizations could neither prepare for every type of crises nor have resources available to address them all (Marker, 2020; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Therefore, the five stages model divided crisis

into types or clusters based on shared characteristics, such as breaks or defects in equipment, external actions, and threats (Marker, 2020; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Moreover, the model recommended that organizations create a crisis portfolio consisting of the identified crisis clusters and another consisting of preventative actions to address those clusters (Marker, 2020; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory emerged in the 1960s based on the premise that humans are motivated to attribute cause to their actions and behaviors and want to know why events in their environment happen (Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Weiner, 2019). Attribution theory is divided into two types of attribution: external and internal (Martinko, 1995b; Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Weiner, 2019). External attribution refers to individuals interpreting their behavior based on their environment; for example, damage to a vehicle can be attributed to poor road conditions (Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Weiner, 2019). Internal attribution refers to interpreting the cause of the individuals' behavior to an internal characteristic such as charisma in which the individuals believe they are personally responsible for everything that happens to them (Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Weiner, 2019). Organizational attribution is based on the premise that organizations suffer reputation harm based on how the public interprets their responsibility for a crisis (Martinko, 1995b).

Normal Accident Theory

Perrow (1999) constructed normal accident theory in the 1960s to address the highly complex systems he perceived made crisis unavoidable. The theory attempts to explain that regardless of management's effectiveness at managing operations, the

complex systems within an organization make pending crisis unforeseeable and thus cannot be prevented (Perrow, 1999, 2004). According to Perrow (1999), three conditions make systems susceptible to normal accidents: the system is complex, the system is tightly coupled, and the system has catastrophic potential. Moreover, Perrow argued that as technology in highly complex organizations, such as nuclear power plants, aviation, and chemical manufacturing, systems failures have catastrophic potential with the ability to affect large numbers of people in a single instance and require better training, safer designs, and greater oversight.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Coombs (2007) constructed situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) as a framework for understanding how an organization's reputation would be impacted in terms of stakeholder perception. According to Coombs, an organization's reputation is based on stakeholder perceptions of how well the organization meets stakeholder expectations and past behavior. During a crisis, an unexpected event can threaten an organization's reputation by giving people a reason to think badly of it (Coombs, 2004, 2007). To prevent or minimize the threat to an organization's reputation, it must adjust its communication during a crisis to account for past crisis that the public may be aware of to protect its reputation (Coombs, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

According to Boin et al. (2017), the purpose of the CTSCL framework is to help leaders in crisis "manage a response in an effective and legitimate way" (p. 15). In times of crisis, citizens look to leaders to respond in a way to prevent or minimize the damage and harm of the crisis (Boin et al., 2017). Further, beyond the crisis, leaders are expected

to publicly present the details of how they handled the crisis, account for what went wrong, and restore public confidence as a sign that the crisis has ended (Boin et al., 2017). To support these expectations of the citizenry, Boin et al. presented the CTSCL as a framework for crisis leaders. The five critical tasks are sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning (Boin et al., 2017).

Sense Making

Ideally, leaders are able to detect potential crises and work to move in a more favorable direction (Boin et al., 2017). Nevertheless, most crises come as a complete surprise to leaders, putting them in a position to understand what is happening and respond in a manner to effectively deal with the impact (Boin et al., 2017). Leaders must determine who is affected and develop systems to ascertain what might develop next while assessing the political implications of the crisis in real time (Boin et al., 2017).

Decision Making and Coordination

Crises are not everyday events, and leaders are called upon to make difficult decisions, usually without a great deal of time or all of the information readily at hand (Boin et al., 2017). Leaders are responsible for bringing a wide array of stakeholders together to align resources and coordinate efforts to provide the best possible response (Boin et al., 2017). Coordinating these efforts is critical to prevent miscommunication and duplicate efforts and to minimize conflicts between many agencies responding (Boin et al., 2017). Moreover, leaders must understand the realities of the crisis at hand and the broader political context in which the crisis unfolds to provide the most effective response (Boin et al., 2017).

Meaning Making

Once leaders determine what is going on, why it is happening, and what needs to be done, they are expected to effectively communicate to those directly affected and the population as a whole to reduce fear and anxiety (Boin et al., 2017). Further, leaders must also work to convince others of the accuracy of their appraisal and strategic policy choices they intend to enact (Boin et al., 2017). To do this, they must present factually, show empathy, and instill confidence in framing the crisis and response measures (Boin et al., 2017).

Accounting

Accounting is the ability to move beyond the crisis and begin to instill a sense of normalcy by rendering an account of what happened and why to reestablish a leader's legitimacy and restore confidence (Boin et al., 2017). Critical to this process is leaders' demonstrating the crisis was of no fault of their own, and the response was the best given for the situation (Boin et al., 2017). A leaders' political challenge is to ensure accounting does not turn into blaming but rather ends the crisis and does not prolong it through undignified and protracted blaming and punishing others (Boin et al., 2017).

Learning

Most crises present an opportunity to clean up and start anew from the lessons learned about previously developed plans, organizational structures, and policies (Boin et al., 2017). A crisis exposes systems and practices that, although once considered adequate, are now outdated (Boin et al., 2017). The critical task of learning presents opportunities for reform and restores public confidence by addressing the lessons from collective memory for future leaders (Boin et al., 2017).

Public School Systems as a Backdrop to Crisis

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021), there were 98,159 public schools in the United States during the 2016–2017 school year serving over 54 million children in prekindergarten through 12th grade. Families trust public schools and educators to protect their children during the day (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). However, schools can be directly or indirectly affected by crisis at any time (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Crises such as floods, earthquakes, shootings, and fires can strike with little warning (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Families and children rely on teachers and staff to protect them and help them through a crisis (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Because of the threats schools face, school and district leaders must adopt crisis management plans under both state and federal legislation (Brickman, Jones, & Groom, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* advises that all schools develop individual plans to address possible threats and crises that may affect their communities using a four-phase crisis management process that includes mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery and prevention (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The document further acknowledges that crisis planning begins with top leadership making crisis planning a priority and inclusive of all school stakeholders to be effective (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The Role of the Superintendent During COVID-19

Traditionally public school systems in the United States have been governed by a board of education that oversees a superintendent (Townsend et al., 2007). The school

board's role has been to establish goals and policies to ensure the school district meets local, state, and federal requirements to educate children (Townsend et al., 2007). The superintendent's role is to implement the board of education's goals and policies and manage the day-to-day operations (Townsend et al., 2007). In this capacity, superintendents are required to take on complex and challenging problems regularly, including fiscal, curriculum, legal, and political challenges (Boin et al., 2017; DiPaola, 2010). As leaders, they must be able to recognize, acknowledge, interpret, and respond effectively to these challenges (Boin et al., 2017; Colvin, 2002; Lowy, 2008). During a crisis, superintendents must deal with the immediate threats being presented, the emotions, and the uncertainty (Boin et al., 2017). Further, they must respond during times of crisis with self-efficacy, decisiveness, and flexibility (Moilanen, 2015; Van Wart, 2011).

The COVID-19 crisis has presented challenges and has tested abilities, including those of superintendents (Gainey, 2009, 2010; The School Superintendent's Association, 2020). At the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, superintendents acted quickly, following recommendations for school closure to ensure the safety of their students, families, staff, and communities (Adely & Balcerzak, 2020; The School Superintendent's Association, 2020). By March 23, 2020, with the WHO's announcement that "the pandemic is accelerating," district instructional leaders mobilized to realign instructional programs, resources, and materials for distance learning (Adely & Balcerzak, 2020; Eby, 2022). Traditional instructional models began to be transformed into virtual online learning environments. In lower income communities, barriers to online access, such as access to devices and connectivity, became widely apparent as children could not access online

learning platforms that more affluent children were able to access (Adely & Balcerzak, 2020).

Gap in Research

A superintendent is an executive position responsible for a myriad of roles in a school district ranging from managing finances, educational programs, community outreach and partnerships, and safety (Björk et al., 2018; Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 2005). Although a great deal of the literature concerning superintendents' focuses on their roles in traditional areas, there is limited research on contemporary crisis management and leadership in these roles. Specifically, there was a deficit in the research related to contemporary crisis management and leadership of school superintendents and their use of the CTSCL.

Statement of the Research Problem

Crises have always been a part of the international landscape from the ancient world to the present, affecting people from times so long ago that people today have no knowledge or memory of them (Holla, Ristvej, & Titko, 2018). Unlike ages past, crisis in the modern world is no longer bound by borders, social, geographic, or any singular aspects of society; globalization has created a vast interconnected world (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2009). Today, people and organizations face the threat of financial crises, natural disasters, and unforeseen events that continue to threaten their ability to function (Boin et al., 2017). According to Boin et al. (2017), today's leaders must manage crises in the context of political, legal, and moral order to meet a liberal democracy's demands. Modern citizenry expects leaders, especially public leaders, to keep them safe and

effectively communicate how they plan to move forward after a crisis has passed (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2010).

School districts are no different than other organizations; they experience a wide range of crises, and superintendents, as leaders of school districts, must be prepared to lead through crisis or face the potential of disastrous consequences for children (Colvin, 2002; Gainey, 2009; McCarty, 2012; Porter, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Lowy (2008) explained, “A critical task of leadership is recognizing, acknowledging and interpreting the enterprise’s core dilemmas in a timely and useful fashion” (p. 33). Routine events can lead to crisis, escalating quickly and disrupting the core functions of a school, potentially resulting in unpredictability, disorder, and turbulence (Gainey, 2010; Griffiths, Hart, & Blair, 1991). These relatively unpredictable events can threaten the stability and welfare of school communities, requiring superintendents to effectively deal with these threats of uncertainty, emotions, and consequences in a timely manner to bring things back to normal (Boin & ‘t Hart, 2003; Brock, 2002; Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001).

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and fundamentally changed society and the way people conduct their personal and professional lives according to Tsipursky (2020), CEO of Disaster Avoidance Experts. America’s schools have been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic with teachers, students, and their families struggling with school closure and a new virtual learning environment (Bhamani et al., 2020; Schaefer et al., 2020). Leading through change is challenging on its own; leading during a global crisis amplifies the urgency and magnitude of every decision a leader makes (Elliott & Taylor, 2006; Hemmer & Elliff, 2020). No one knows when or where the next disaster or

tragedy might occur, but it remains the school superintendent's responsibility to be prepared for all possibilities (Boin et al., 2017; Williams, 2014). The superintendent has the greatest influence in the school district and community, and it is essential to know more about what strategies and skills superintendents need to lead their organizations during and through a crisis successfully (Cuban, 1976; Gainey, 2009).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to identify and describe strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties used to lead in crisis using the CTSCL (sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and accounting; Boin et al., 2017) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to understand and describe the experiences of exemplary leaders during a time of crisis.

Research Questions

1. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use sense making crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
2. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use decision making and coordination crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
3. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use meaning making crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?

4. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use accounting crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
5. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use learning crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
6. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties describe their experiences as leaders during the time of crisis?

Significance of the Problem

The potential for crisis to arise without warning is unbounded and has constantly threatened the world and the existence of humankind (Holla et al., 2018). Leaders, both historically and in modern times, are expected "to advert the threat or at least minimize the damage of the crisis at hand" (Boin et al., 2017, p. 3). In addition to navigating tactical response efforts, today's leaders are expected to navigate the legal and political issues that arise during a crisis and meet the public's demands in communicating and accounting for their actions (Boin et al., 2017).

When crisis strikes in the American public education system, the superintendent heading the district is the one the community looks to for guidance and leadership; if the superintendent fails, the whole system fails, and as a result teachers, students, parents, and the community suffer (Björk et al., 2018; Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Kitamura, 2019). These complex and challenging issues require superintendents to navigate the political interest of their communities (Colvin, 2002; Gainey, 2009; Kowalski, McCord, Peterson,

Young, & Ellerson, 2011; McCarty, 2012; Porter, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). To be successful, superintendents must be able to coordinate with community partners, communicate with local stakeholders, and understand the political environments and legal mandates that need to be addressed (Kitamura, 2019; Willis, Krausen, & Caparas, 2020).

During the 2019–2020 school year, superintendents faced the COVID-19 pandemic that as of February 2021 had resulted in the death of a reported 2,381,295 people worldwide and 471,765 people in the United States and impacted at least 55.1 million students in 124,000 public and private schools that closed because of state orders or recommendations (EducationWeek, 2020; WHO, 2021). Superintendents had to deal with unprecedented issues to establish health and safety priorities for students, staff, and families (The School Superintendent's Association, 2020). Further, superintendents serving low-income communities faced structural inequities including broadband/internet access, disparities in resources, and other inequities that historically have impacted achievement among racial, ethnic, and economic groups (The School Superintendent's Association, 2020).

The contribution of this study is to add to the limited and insufficient body of literature regarding school superintendents and their crisis leadership experiences, strategies, and actions during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. More importantly, this study serves to connect the traditional and contemporary crisis response and management strategies to the CTSCL proposed by Boin et al. (2017) in their framework for crisis leaders. Thus far, there is limited research on superintendents' strategies for making

decisions and coordinating response efforts, accounting for their actions, or demonstrating learning from a crisis event during a prolonged crisis such as a pandemic.

This qualitative multiple-case study provides superintendents with a valuable resource to help them develop comprehensive crisis response plans to lead during and through a crisis, addressing tactical and operational strategies and political challenges that can affect their organizations and careers. Equally important will be the value to university and professional organizations that train and provide resources to superintendents and school districts to guide crisis response and mitigation efforts. Crisis leadership support for superintendents beyond traditional tactical response is limited; however, superintendents who successfully navigate and comprehensively respond during times of crisis will be invaluable to the communities they serve, equipped with skills to prevent or at least minimize the impacts of future crises (Boin et al., 2017; Hemmer & Elliff, 2020). When leaders successfully respond to a crisis, the damage is limited (Boin et al., 2017). More importantly, when vulnerabilities to crisis emerge, and these threats are adequately addressed, some potentially devastating emergencies never happen (Boin et al., 2017).

Definitions

This section defines terms as they were used in this study. A team of peer researchers collaboratively developed these terms, with the assistance of faculty, investigating the crisis leadership and management practices of exemplary leaders, including superintendents, as described in the background. The definitions were organized regarding the CTSCL (sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and accounting; Boin et al., 2017).

Five Critical Task of Strategic Crisis Leadership

Accounting. Accounting is taking personal responsibility for identifying and accepting a crisis and taking actions to achieve goals and answering to the community for the results (Boin, 2019; Brändström, 2016; McGrath & Whitty, 2015).

Decision making and coordination. Decision making and coordination in a crisis is the process of making well-informed decisions that delineate a clear course of action through analysis, planning, communication, collaboration, and cooperation between partners and the expected value to mitigate the crisis response (Boin et al., 2017; Crowe, 2013; FEMA, 2010; T. Johnson, 2018).

Learning. Crisis learning is determining causes, assessing the strength and weaknesses of the responses, and taking actions based on new understanding then recalibrating existing beliefs, policies, and organizational structure supporting the success of the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1997; Barnett & Pratt, 2000; Boin et al., 2017; House, 1999).

Meaning making. Meaning making is the communication of an account of a crisis situation to those directly affected, the factual presentation of a narrative that shows empathy and instills confidence in the leader's framing of the crisis and response measures to establish a sense of direction and hope to reduce fear and anxiety (Barnard, 1940; Boin & McConnell, 2007; Boin & Renaud, 2013; Boin et al., 2017; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017).

Sense making. Sense making is the process by which leaders give meaning to their collective experiences and develop plausible images to comprehend, understand, explain, and predict during crisis. It is a way of processing, communicating, and problem

solving that lead to actions that make sense and give meaning (Boin et al., 2017; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

General Definitions

Crisis. A crisis is based on unpredictable events or situations that develop rapidly, threatening the social norms and core values of an organization and requiring leaders to respond for the safety, security, health and welfare of people and the organization (Boin, Overdijk, & Sanneke, 2013; Boin & 't Hart, 2003; USA.gov, n.d.).

Crisis leadership. Crisis leadership is the ability of leaders to identify issues that have high levels of uncertainty and threat, process information, set priorities, and make critical decisions that influence and enable others to contribute to achievement of a common goal (Clark White, Harvey, & Fox, 2016; Harms, Credé, Tynan, Leon, & Jeung, 2017).

Exemplary. Exemplary is the ability to perform in a supreme manner above the level of quality or attainment of the best behaviors, principles, and intentions worthy of imitation (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Salas, 2018; Thompson, 2018).

Superintendent. A superintendent is the CEO of a school district who works with the school board to establish the district's goals and policies to provide vision, direction, and oversight of all aspects of district operations (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Townsend et al., 2007).

Urban school district. Urban school districts are generally located within densely populated areas. In comparison to suburban and rural areas, urban school districts often serve a significant number of immigrant students, have language diversity, operate with more racial and ethnic groups, experience high levels of poverty, and sustain

inexperienced teachers and low-student performance (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus, & Noguera, 2014; C. J. Johnson, 2014; Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

Values-driven leadership. Values-driven leadership is a conscious commitment to lead with a deep sense of purpose and values such as honesty, integrity, excellence, courage, humility, trust, and care for people that connect to organizational practices that guide decision making during times of crisis (Boin & ‘t Hart, 2003; Gentile, 2014; Griffin, 2006).

Delimitations

According to Goodwin et al. (2014), moral character traits are important in describing an “ideal” person or someone set apart from peers in a supreme manner with suitable behavior, principles, or intentions that can be copied. For this study, exemplary leaders are defined as those who are set apart from peers in a supreme manner with suitable behaviors, principals, or intentions that can be copied (Goodwin et al., 2014). This study was delimited to five exemplary superintendents who have a minimum of 3 years‘ experience in their position and who have demonstrated successful leadership during crisis. In addition, the exemplary leaders in this study must meet two or more of the following criteria:

- recognition by their peers;
- articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings;
- membership in professional associations in their field; and
- participation in workshops training or seminars focused on crisis leadership.

Organization of the Study

Chapter I stated the purpose for this study, which was to identify and describe strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties used to lead in crisis using the CTSCL (sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and accounting; Boin et al., 2017). Additionally, Chapter I set the background and stated the problem, the purpose, and research questions of this study. Chapter II introduces the topic of crisis leadership and management and organizes the review of literature, including major elements, variable, and research to extend the breadth of the study related to the field presented in the background of Chapter I. Chapter III provides a framework of the methodology of the study, describing the research design, population, sample, and data collection process. Chapter IV presents the quantitative data obtained through the process of the study. Finally, Chapter V presents the conclusions, implications, and recommendations postulated from the attained data or findings.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The potential for crisis to arise without warning is unbounded and has constantly threatened the world (Holla et al., 2018; Zamoun & Gorpe, 2018). Seldom has there been a time when humankind has not had to deal with threats to its existence or way of life (Holla et al., 2018; Zamoun & Gorpe, 2018). The threat of modern global crisis has increased in scope and magnitude because of increased urbanization, deforestation, and environmental degradation (Alkhaldi et al., 2017). Because people around the world are increasingly interconnected, crises can impact on a global scale, and incidents of financial crisis, weather disasters, seismic events, violent crime, acts of terrorism, and public health emergencies have increased substantially over the past few decades (Alkhaldi et al., 2017; Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2009).

To be considered a crisis, threats to an organization's reputation and validity must be present and outside of the organization's complete control, requiring leaders to respond for the safety, security, health, and welfare of people and organizations (Boin & 't Hart, 2003; Boin et al., 2013; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Reilly, 1987; USA.gov, n.d.). When crisis strikes, there are no set guidelines for leaders to follow; however, those affected by a crisis look to their leaders and others in positions of power to respond efficiently and effectively (Boin et al., 2017; Colvin, 2002). For these leaders, decision making is full of uncertainty with new information rapidly coming in and requiring them to be adaptive, flexible, and decisive (Al Saidi et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic posed one of the greatest threats in human history (Al Saidi et al., 2020; Tabish, 2020; Tsipursky, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic affected hundreds of millions of people around the globe, causing severe illness for many and a

death toll in the millions (Al Saidi et al., 2020; WHO, 2021; Worldometer, 2022). In addition, this worldwide unprecedented crisis caused a global recession, reducing the productive capacity of the global economy (Tabish, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in prolonged and existential challenges for many organizations, and decisive leadership has been a key factor in determining how successful leaders are in addressing it (Al Saidi et al., 2020).

WHO declared coronavirus a pandemic on Thursday, March 11, 2020, testing the limits of leaders around the globe (Al Saidi et al., 2020; Eby, 2022). On March 13, 2020, the Los Angeles County Office of Education superintendent held a press conference stating that she recommended all school districts in Los Angeles County close for 2 weeks beginning the following Monday (Haire, 2020). School district leaders across the county began implementing communication plans and notifying families of school closures in their districts, many sending students home with textbooks and instructional materials to cover the anticipated 2-week period (Haire, 2020). By Monday, March 16, 2020, California counties began announcing shelter in place orders with Governor Newsom ordering a statewide mandate to shelter at home (Eby, 2022). Schools across California began announcing school closures' extension first through mid-April and finally announcing schools would be closed for the remainder of the school year (Eby, 2022). The job of a superintendent is extraordinarily challenging, and COVID-19 has made it tougher and riskier than ever before (Cohn, 2021; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Williams, 2014). During the time of this study, superintendents were pushed in contradictory directions by school boards, caught between the politicized mandates of mayors and governors, subjected to legal actions by parents, and faced with union

conflicts (Bush, 2020; Kitamura, 2019; Panda et al., 2020). Never has there been a time when it has been tougher to be a superintendent (Cohn, 2021).

Chapter II provides a review of the research literature regarding crisis leadership, school crisis and superintendent leadership, the strategies used by superintendents, and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review begins with the nature of leadership in times of crisis, the importance of effective crisis leadership, and the role of the superintendent during crises affecting schools. The literature review presents theoretical foundations. The theoretical foundation used in this study was the five critical tasks of strategic crisis leadership (CTSCL; sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and accounting; Boin et al., 2017). The review then focuses on public education as a backdrop to crisis, crisis leadership and management in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role of superintendent leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, this review investigates the superintendent and contemporary crisis leadership and management strategies used by the superintendent.

Leadership in Times of Crisis

Crisis is no longer contained by region or limited to a few communities, countries, or continents; a crisis situation that affects one will likely affect another at some point (Gainey, 2009). Crisis events are characterized by the fact that they are rare, significant, high impact, ambiguous, urgent, and high stakes; large-scale events disrupt society and threaten people, organizations, and cultures (Boin et al., 2017; Simola, 2014; Zamoun & Gorpe, 2018). The threat of modern global crisis has increased in scope and magnitude in recent years because of increased rates of human activity such as changes in land use,

including agriculture and deforestation (Alkhaldi et al., 2017). In a highly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, these events have great consequences and require leaders and organizations to respond effectively to resolve them, especially when the frequency of these events increases annually (Alkhaldi et al., 2017; Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

The complexity of organizations similarly places them in a constant state of threat of impending crisis at a rate that is challenging to keep up with (Bennis & Nanus, 2007). Threats of financial crisis, natural disasters, and other unforeseen events threaten organizations' abilities to function and even their existence (Boin et al., 2017). In an interdependent world that is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, few things are more important than effective leadership (Alkhaldi et al., 2017; Bennis & Nanus, 2007). During a crisis, leaders of organizations face many unknown risks yet are expected to predict, recognize, and detect issues that turn into crises and respond strategically even when information is limited (Al Saidi et al., 2020; Fortunato et al., 2017). For these leaders, decision making is full of uncertainty with new information rapidly coming in (Al Saidi et al., 2020). These expectations require leaders to demonstrate flexibility and an awareness of self and others to initiate and sustain action under great stress (Bennis & Nanus, 2007; Boin et al., 2017).

Modern leaders must also manage crises in the context of political, legal, and moral order to meet the demands of liberal democracy, operating under an indirect democratic form of government (Boin et al., 2017). During a crisis, leaders are expected to take actions that limit the depth and duration of the disorder and confusion caused (Boin et al., 2017). Today's citizenries expect leaders, especially public leaders, to keep

them safe and effectively communicate how they plan to move forward (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic posed one of the greatest threats in human history (Al Saidi et al., 2020; Tabish, 2020; Tsipursky, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic affected hundreds of millions of people around the globe, causing severe illness for many and a death toll in the millions (Al Saidi et al., 2020; WHO, 2021; Worldometer, 2022). In addition, this worldwide unprecedented crisis caused a global recession, reducing the productive capacity of the global economy (Tabish, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in prolonged and existential challenges for many organizations, and decisive leadership has been a key factor in determining how successful leaders are in addressing it (Al Saidi et al., 2020). Key characteristics of decisive leadership include the ability to respond quickly, development of clear understandings of current threats, and determination of the impacts of delaying response during critical situations (Al Saidi et al., 2020). Leaders facing a prolonged crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic with an unpredictable and dangerous virus and untold physical and emotional human impact, must respond with grit and resiliency (Tabish, 2020; Tsipursky, 2020).

WHO declared coronavirus a pandemic on Thursday, March 11, 2020, testing the limits of leaders around the globe. The virus was determined by the WHO to have first emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, as a mysterious form of pneumonia that affected dozens of individuals (Eby, 2021). The virus rapidly spread globally, and the WHO declared it a public health emergency of international concern as of January 30, 2020 (Eby, 2021). Also, at the end of January 2020, the first confirmed case of coronavirus had reached the United States, resulting in the declaration of a national

public health emergency by the U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary (Eby, 2021). The first deaths as a result of the coronavirus of individuals with no travel connections to China were announced in Washington State. In California, Governor Newsom declared a state of emergency on March 4, 2020, and ordered establishments such as bars and nightclubs closed and recommended that adults aged 65 and over and those with chronic illnesses stay home on March 11, 2020 (Eby, 2021). Major cities, including San Francisco, banned public gatherings of 1,000 people or more, and major sports leagues around the country began announcing the postponement or cancelation of their scheduled games (Eby, 2021). Over the next few days, the U.S. president banned travel with Europe and other nations (Eby, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally disrupted society as a whole and threatened people's personal and professional lives (Tsipursky, 2020). According to Tsipursky (2020), CEO of Disaster Avoidance Experts, the world will never return to life before the COVID-19 pandemic and more likely than not, people will live with the pandemic and its consequences for several years. Moreover, even with vaccinations, outbreaks and disruption to the economy will continue, society will be permanently changed, and the ongoing feeling of risk will continue for years (Tsipursky, 2020). The social norms, habits, and expectations of people have been fundamentally changed (Tsipursky, 2020). Organizations will also have to adapt to the new normal by implementing plans to manage employees and production impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and consider fundamentally changing their business models to survive the next several years (Tsipursky, 2020).

One of the organizations drastically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, outside of the healthcare system, has been America's schools. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the United States and the world closed for in-person schooling and transitioned to distance learning (Bhamani et al., 2020). School closures, initially anticipated for 2 weeks, in Los Angeles County and across California ended up being extended through the end of the school year along with shelter in place orders called for by the governor of California (ABC 7, 2020, August 9; Haire, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a highly polarized environment in countries around the world (Panda et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020). In the United States, polarization has fallen in alignment to the ideologies of political parties (Panda et al., 2020). Dependent on the political party, the framing of the COVID-19 crisis centered on healthcare to economic impacts being the priority (Panda et al., 2020). Beliefs about issues such school closures, social distancing, mask mandates, and reopening the economy increased polarization and at times resulted in conflicting messaging by leaders to the public (Panda et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020; Radwan & Radwan, 2020). Many feel the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the economic and social disparities children and families face that have impacted their ability to successfully engage and navigate education and learning (Seke, 2020; Yeung et al., 2020; Zviedrite, Hodis, Jahan, Gao, & Uzicanin, 2021). According to Pacheco (2020) and Xie et al. (2020), the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic present opportunities for educators to reimagine and realign education to a new normal that includes new technologies and incorporating what was learned from school closures and virtual learning. Despite the great uncertainty for K–12 education because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that virtual learning

and the increased concern for the social-emotional well-being of students will remain long after the pandemic is over (Superville, 2020). Tasked with managing the new normal for education will fall to superintendent leaders to navigate the complexities of the crisis and plan, respond, and effectively navigate the impact of the crisis on their organizations (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

Teachers and students alike struggled with these closures, being required to transition to new online distance learning environments while being away from classrooms (Bhamani et al., 2020; Schaefer et al., 2020). Parents, teachers, businesses, and communities wanted schools to reopen yet had differing views on how to get it accomplished (Bhamani et al., 2020; Mangu-Ward, 2021). In public education, the community looks to the superintendent as the key leader of the school district (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Though schools are generally considered safe places, a crisis may strike at any given time (Williams, 2014). In the face of crisis, it is the superintendents who are expected to provide strategic leadership to effectively navigate the impact of the crisis on their organization (Williams, 2014).

The Importance of Effective Leadership

In an increasingly interconnected world with complex systems supporting globalized market places, advanced travel networks, and sociotechnical systems, crisis can impact on a global scale crossing geographical and geopolitical boundaries (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2009; Keys, 2000). Though it is virtually impossible to know when a crisis will strike, an effective response to a crisis requires leaders to predict, recognize, detect, and address issues that turn into crises and strategically respond (Boin et al., 2017; Fortunato et al., 2017). Leaders' relationships with stakeholders are often tested during a

crisis when possible leaders are expected to predict and avert potential crisis situations (Fortunato et al., 2017). However, when crisis cannot be averted and does strike, "leaders have to manage multiple dimensions simultaneously, including the ability to analyze the situation, mobilize appropriate resources, respond in an appropriate and timely manner, and communicate any decisions and their rational to all relevant internal and external stakeholder groups" (Fortunato et al., 2017, p. 207).

To do this, contemporary crisis management must consider the effects of rapid communication through social media (Boin et al., 2017). According to Matejic (2015), "Crisis have gone from largely contained events to broadly uncontainable disasters that might have been preventable but are now impossible to erase" (p. 5). Organizations have not kept up with the pace of digital consumerism and the speed in which stakeholders have access to information (Matejic, 2015). Leaders now must respond quickly and effectively to crisis to frame the message and meet the public's demand for nearly instantaneous information to demonstrate they have recognized and managed threats early or face backlash for actual or perceived failures (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2010; Matejic, 2015). Leaders who fail to respond in a manner that meets public expectations run the potential risk of destroying trust and jeopardizing their organization's reputation, harming their future prospects and losing control of the situation in their eyes (Gainey, 2010; Matejic, 2015).

Theoretical Foundations of Crisis Leadership

Crisis leadership is an increasingly important part of organizational governance in today's world because crises often arise without notice and cause mayhem and disorder to public institutions and threaten the legitimacy of their leaders (Boin et al., 2017;

Gainey, 2010; Suchman, 1995). Whether by natural disasters, financial crisis, terrorist acts, mass revolts, or a litany of other crisis events, every organization and society is routinely affected (Boin et al., 2017; T. Johnson, 2018). Like any other organization, public school systems go through some form of crisis on a regular basis; these situations typically develop rapidly and create high levels of uncertainty and threat to an organization's mission and goals. In public school systems, the superintendent is the leader of the organization who is tasked with duties and functions ranging from teacher–scholar, business manager, democratic leader, social scientist, risk manager, and chief communicator for the elected school board (Kowalski, 2006). In this capacity, the school superintendent is responsible for the overall welfare of the organization, including both adults and students in the district (Colvin, 2002; Superville, 2020; Townsend et al., 2007). The potential risk within a school district are quite broad, and the superintendent is expected to reduce the school district's exposure to crisis and respond accordingly when crisis strikes (Colvin, 2002; Kowalski, 2006; Townsend et al., 2007). Although superintendents cannot predict what will happen day to day, they can take steps to prepare for crisis and control or mitigate risk by leading in ways that stabilize the organization and plan for the future (Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Boin et al., 2017; Colvin, 2002; Kowalski, 2006; Lowy, 2008; Moilanen, 2015; Van Wart, 2011).

Functions of the Executive

Barnard's (1938/1968) book *The Functions of the Executive* provided a comprehensive theory of cooperative behavior in formal organizations from a sociological and psychological viewpoint. Barnard believed it was possible to improve effectiveness and efficiency through formal organizations by combining the structural

requirements for an organization with the needs of a sociohuman system (S. Fernández, 2010; Nikezić, Dželetović, & Vučinić, 2016). Moreover, Barnard's work has shaped significant management theories over the past 30 years (McNally, 2018).

Barnard (1938/1968) defined an organization as "a system of consciously coordinated activities or forces of two or more persons" (p. 73). In what Barnard called cooperative systems, he described the formal organizations as a conscious, deliberate, and purposeful cooperation among the people working in the organization and stated that successful cooperation was not the normal condition. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship.

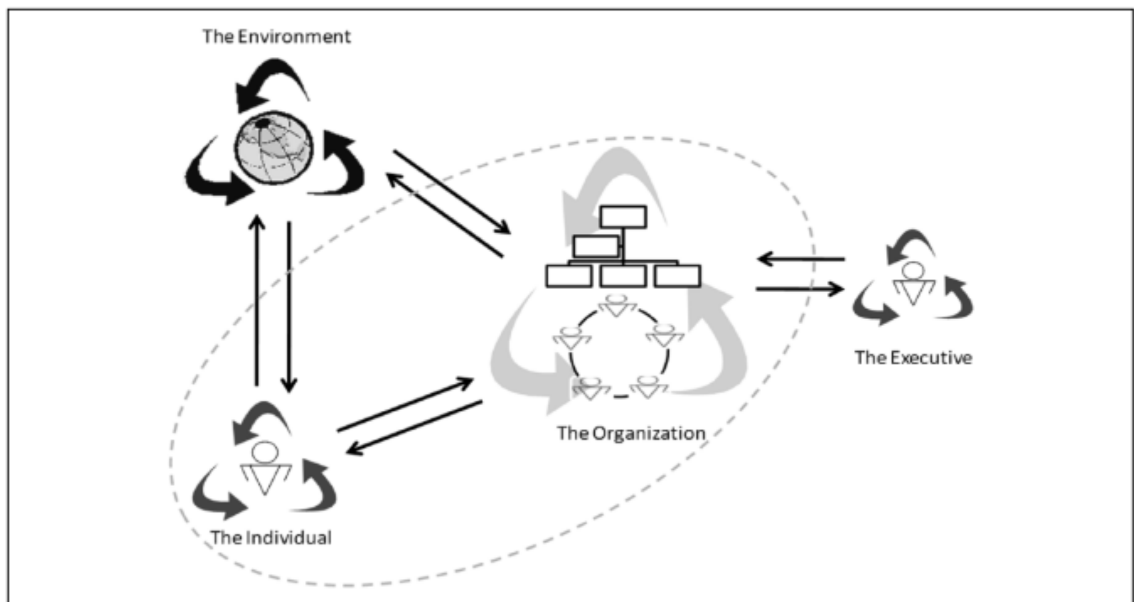

Figure 1. A visional representation of the functions. From "The Functions of the Executive at 75: An Invitation to Reconsider a Timeless Classic," by P. C. Godfrey & J. T. Mahoney, 2014, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *23*(4), p. 362 (https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492614530042).

Additionally Barnard's work focused on the importance of communication and moral imperative for leaders to establish authority through motivation and meeting needs to move subordinates to action. Based on these ideologies, Barnard believed for an organization to survive long term depended on its ability to communicate its purpose and

the willingness of people within the organization to contribute to the common efforts in a cooperative system. Barnard believed that these critical tasks were the responsibilities or functions of executives within the organization.

Barnard's work laid the foundation for organizations being fundamentally cooperative systems that require cooperation that is conscious, deliberate, and purposeful to be effective, marking a striking contrast to previous works that emphasized prescriptive approaches and focused on empirical reality (S. Fernández, 2010; Rainey, 2009). This approach focused on the people in the organization and made the point that the authority of management had to be accepted to be efficient (McNally, 2018). According to Rainey (2009), Barnard's work analyzed organizations as an operating system rather than a set of artificial principals dependent on the people within the organization for long-term survival.

Four Phases of Crisis Management Model

The concept of phases in crisis management was first conceptualized in the 1930s in social science research (Carr, 1932; Neal, 1997). According to Carr (1932), the phases of a disaster sequence pattern included a period of preparation in which the impending disaster is known. This initial phase was followed by a preliminary or prodromal phase in which the forces that are the cause of the disaster get underway, marking the actual onset of the disaster. Next, the dislocation and disorganization phase marked the period in which the consequences of the disaster followed, including deaths, injuries, and other losses. Last, the phase of readjustment and reorganization marked the period of individual, interactive, and cultural readjustment. In this phase, individuals and organizations respond to diffuse the disaster, and cultural readjustment reoccurs to a new

level of equilibrium (Carr, 1932). These early phases of crisis management were used to describe, examine, and understand disasters (Baird, 2010).

From this early conceptualization of crisis management, a four-phase crisis management cycle comprising mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery (Figure 2) was identified by the NGA Center for Policy Research (1979) to develop a comprehensive emergency management system.

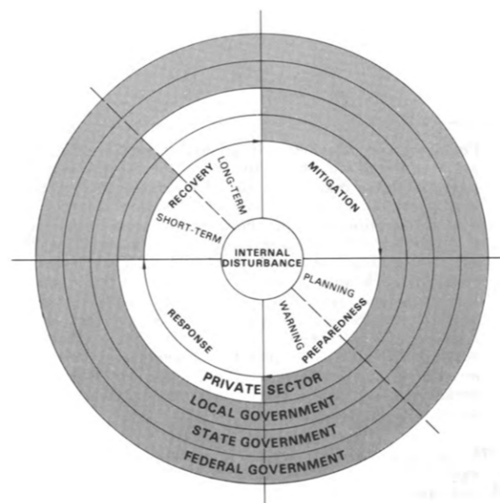

Figure 2. The four phases of emergency management. From *Comprehensive Emergency Management: A Governor's Guide*, by National Governor's Association, Center for Policy Research, 1979, p. 21 Washington, DC: Defense Civil Preparedness Agency.

The concerns of governors centered on the lack of coordination of emergency management efforts at both the federal and state levels during crisis events (Baird, 2010). The NGA and subsequent subcommittee recommendations resulted in a comprehensive emergency management guide that produced a common language for emergency management response to support coordinated mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery efforts (Baird, 2010; Kennedy, 2004). The mitigation phase included any activities that eliminated or reduced the probability of a disaster occurring (Baird, 2010).

The preparedness phase included activities necessary when the mitigation measures were not sufficient to prevent a disaster from occurring (Baird, 2010). During the preparedness phase, governments, organizations, and individuals prepare plans focused on saving lives, minimizing damage, and ensuring response operations, including supplies and training are in place (Baird, 2010). The response phase includes all the activities that follow once a disaster has occurred (Baird, 2010). The response activities provide emergency assistance for casualties, seek to reduce the probability of secondary damages such as water contamination and civil disobedience, and try to speed recovery operations such as damage assessments (Baird, 2010). Finally, the recovery phase includes the short-term and long-term activities that must continue until all systems are returned to their normal state or better (Baird, 2010)

In response to the findings from the NGA and the subsequent report, in 1979 President Carter created FEMA, which combined multiple federal disaster-related programs from multiple federal agencies to better coordinate emergency management responses (Baird, 2010; NGA Center for Policy Research, 1979). Moreover, the NGA resulted in a comprehensive emergency management guide that produced a common language for emergency management response personnel to support coordinated mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery efforts (Baird, 2010; Kennedy, 2004).

Incident Command Model

The Incident Command System (ICS) model was developed by an interagency group in Southern California called FIRESCOPE. The impetus to develop the ICS was the disastrous 1970 fire season in Southern California that took the lives of 16 individuals, burned more than 700 structures, and covered more than 500,000 acres

(FIRESCOPE, n.d.). To respond, local, state, and federal agencies came together to better integrate their efforts through the development of common language, management concepts, and communication (Chase, 1980; FIRESCOPE, n.d.; Moynihan, 2009; NGA Center for Policy Research, 1979). After extensive review conducted by the U.S. Forest Services and partnering agencies in Southern California, two critical issues were identified (FIRESCOPE, n.d.). First, at the incident or field level, confusion was abundant because of differing terminologies, organizational structures, and operating procedures used by the multiple responding agencies (Chase, 1980; FIRESCOPE, n.d.). Second, at the coordination level, the methods of coordination and competition for resources and resource priorities were inadequate (Chase, 1980; FIRESCOPE, n.d.). The federal and state response was to establish the FIRESCORE multiagency partnership in 1973 to support the effective response to fire disasters in California that later resulted in the development of a functional model for the ICS in 1974 (Chase, 1980; FIRESCOPE, n.d.).

According to FEMA (2017), the ICS model is "a standardized approach to the command, control, and coordination of on-scene incident management that provides a common hierarchy within which personnel from multiple organizations can be effective" (p. 24). The ICS model (Figure 3) is structured into the five major functions of command, operations, planning, logistics, and finance/administration (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; DHS, 2010). As a continuum of the Multiagency Coordination System that coordinates the operations of individual agencies, the ICS command structure establishes an incident command post that keeps track of incident resources and reporting, incident situation assessment and reporting, and an incident communication center through an

incident commander (FEMA, 2017; FIRESCOPE, n.d.). Moreover, the incident command post provides common organizational procedures and terminology required for agency staff to efficiently plan and coordinate activities involving two or more agencies (FIRESCOPE, n.d.). The ICS establishes a clear line of command, control, and coordination through the identified incident commander who coordinates personnel from multiple agencies (DHS, 2010; FEMA, 2017; Moynihan, 2009; NGA Center for Policy Research, 1979). Although the incident command post is unified with a single incident commander, each participating responder agency maintains authority, responsibility, and accountability for its personnel and resources and is further responsible for maintaining communication within the systems (FEMA, 2017).

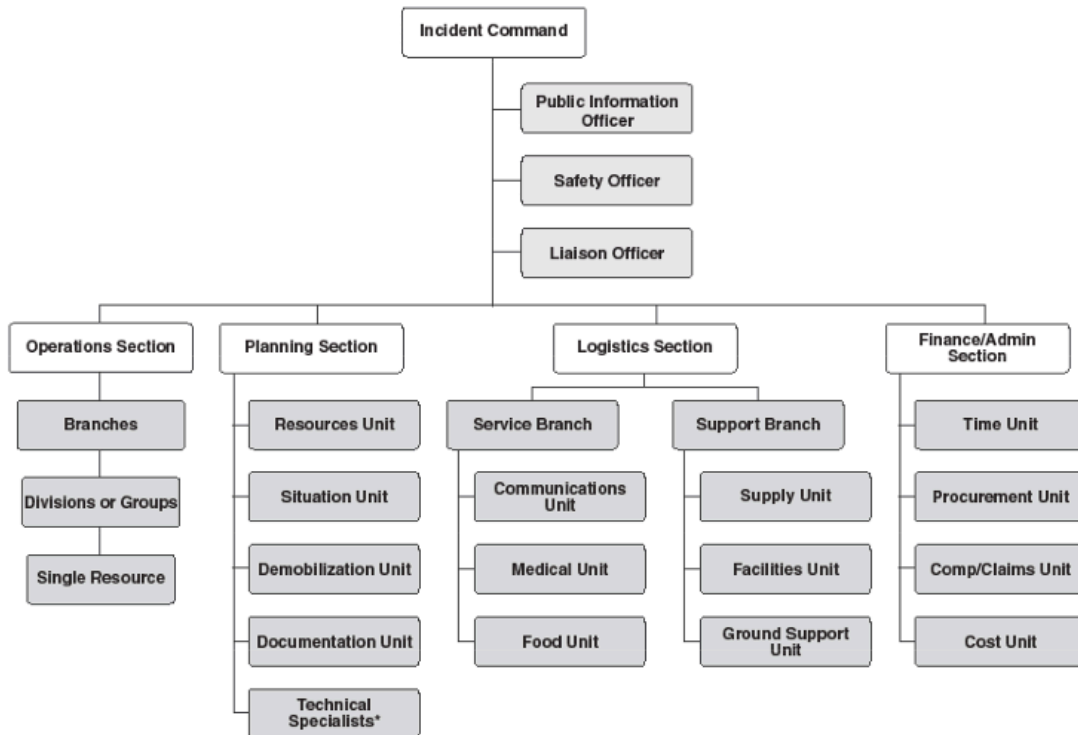

Figure 3. Incident command model. From *National Incident Management System: Emergency Responder Field Operations Guide*, by U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2010, pp. 2–10 (https://www.ahimta.org/Resources/Documents/FEMA-2009-0014-0002-1.pdf)

The operation section of the ICS model addresses operational planning and on-scene tactical operations to achieve incident objectives identified by the incident commander (DHS, 2010; FIRESCOPE, n.d.). The operations section is under the command of an operations section chief who organizes the section of the incident under his or her command based on the nature and scope of the incident; jurisdictions and organizations involved; and the incident priorities, objectives, and strategies (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; DHS, 2010). Further, the operations section develops and implements the specific strategies and tactical responses to best meet the needs of the situation, maintaining a manageable span of control and optimizing the use of resources (DHS, 2010).

The staff in the planning section are responsible for collecting, evaluating, and disseminating incident situational information on the situations being addressed and forecasting what may come (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; DHS, 2010). Staff acting in this role prepare status reports for the incident commander (DHS, 2010). Status reports produced under this section include reporting the status of resources and anticipated resources needed, reporting incident status information and analysis of situations as they change, planning for the orderly and safe demobilization of incident resources, and ensuring all incident documents are collected and secured (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; DHS, 2010).

The logistics section is composed of staff who are responsible for effective and efficient incident management (DHS, 2010). Incident management includes the ordering, receiving, storing, and processing of incident-related resources in coordination with the planning section (DHS, 2010). Also, this section provides support to personnel by

providing medical services to incident personnel, maintaining and accounting for communication and infrastructure technology equipment, and determining facilities and essential food and water resources necessary to maintain the health and safety of incident personnel (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; Security, 2010).

When the need arises, the incident commander may choose to establish the finance/administration section to provide administrative support including determining future needs for additional subordinate support units if necessary (DHS, 2010). The section is an essential support in large, complex incidents when funding is originating from multiple sources (DHS, 2010). The finance/administration section provides the support necessary to monitor these sources and track and report the accrued cost as the incident progresses (Bigley & Roberts, 2001; Security, 2010).

Mitroff's Five Phase Model

Mitroff (1994) developed a model that organizes crisis management into five stages or phases. Unlike previous life cycle models, Mitroff recognized that organizations could not prepare for every type of potential crisis (Marker, 2020). Additionally, considering the potential for large-scale crises to exceed the ability for management structures and organizations' ability to control them, resources could not reasonably be available to address every type of potential crisis an organization may face (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Therefore, the five-stages model divided crisis into types or clusters based on shared characteristics, such as breaks or defects in equipment, external actions, and threats (Marker, 2020; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Moreover, the model recommended that organizations create a crisis portfolio consisting of the identified crisis

clusters and another consisting of preventative actions to address those clusters (Marker, 2020; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

Mitroff's five-stage crisis model (illustrated in Figure 4) included crisis signal detection, probing and preventions, containment, recovery, and learning (Marker, 2020). The first two stages of signal detection and probing and prevention are opportunities for organizations to avert a crisis from occurring. The signal detection is a precrisis phase in which early warning indicators or signals are present that are indicative of a looming crisis (Mitroff, 1988; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). This phase is dependent on an organization having various types of early warning systems in place to detect the different warnings that crises can present, including minor systems failure, incidents, or errors (Mitroff, 1988; Paraskevas & Altinay, 2013). The probing and prevention phase occurs concurrently with the signal detection phase and will not work if early warnings are not systematically monitored (Mitroff, 1988). Before a crisis strikes, organizations must have tested prevention and preparation mechanisms in place to avert disasters and actively probe for signs of weakness (Mitroff, 1988). Once crisis strikes, the containment phase is to limit the effects of the crisis. The potential success of the containment phase is dependent on the probing and prevention phase. Management of the containment phase requires detailed plans for preventing a localized crisis from affecting other parts of the organization or the larger environment (Mitroff, 1988). The final two phases of recovery and learning are postcrisis. The recovery phase is divided into short-term and long-term mechanisms that an organization needs to have planned to recover from a crisis and return to conducting normal business (Mitroff, 1988; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). The last phase is learning, a systematic reflection and examination of the lessons learned from

the crisis experience with an emphasis on improving future capabilities and fixing current problems (Mitroff, 1988; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

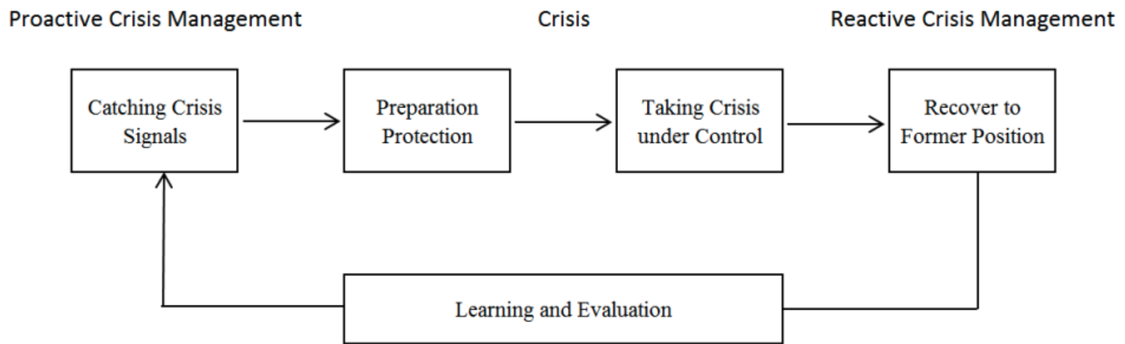

Figure 4. Mitroff's five-stages of crisis management. From "Crisis Management: Cutting Through the Confusion," by I. I. Mitroff, 1988, *MIT Sloan Management Review*, *29*(2), p. 15.

Attribution Theory

Social psychologist Bernard Weiner in the 1960s developed attribution theory based on the premise that humans are motivated to attribute cause to their actions and behaviors and want to know why events in their environment happen (Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Rainey, 2009; Weiner, 2019). Researchers have applied this perspective to leadership to examine how leaders form impressions about how their subordinates are working and behaving and how their subordinates form impressions about their leaders (Rainey, 2009). According to Martinko and Mackey (2019), attribution theory provides a framework to understand how individuals make causal ascriptions to explain why events in their environment happen.

Attribution theory is divided into two types of attribution: external and internal (Martinko, 1995b; Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Weiner, 2019). External attribution refers to individuals interpreting their behavior based on their environment as a deflection of self and self-image (Martinko, 1995b; Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Weiner, 2019).

Individuals may have external causal beliefs that their success or failure is influenced by factors other than themselves and outside of their control (Weiner, 2010) whereas internal attribution refers to interpreting the cause of the individuals' behavior to an internal characteristic such as charisma in which the individuals believe they are personally responsible for everything that happens to them (Martinko & Mackey, 2019; Weiner, 2019). Like individuals, organizations can be viewed as entities about which individuals make attributions (Martinko & Mackey, 2019). The public makes strong judgments when they believe that an organization's failures are based on negligence or lack of awareness (Martinko & Mackey, 2019). Organizational attribution is grounded on the premise that organizations suffer reputational harm based on how the public interprets their responsibility for a crisis (Martinko, 1995b).

Normal Accident Theory

Perrow (1999) constructed normal accident theory in the 1960s to address the highly complex systems he perceived made accidents unavoidable. According to Perrow, in highly complex systems, accidents are inevitable or even normal. Although normal does not mean accidents should happen frequently, it does refer to the fact that in these highly complex systems, there is a high probability of high-impact crisis occurring because of their interactive complexity and tightly coupled systems, meaning processes that happen very quickly and cannot simply be turned off (Perrow, 1999). Further, in systems with high catastrophic potential, such as power plants or aviation, risk will never be eliminated because the failure of multiple components or operator failure cannot fully be addressed until some unknown interactions in these complex and tightly coupled systems result in a failure or crisis (Perrow, 1999). Perrow theorized that because risk

cannot be fully eliminated, instead of blaming or attributing failures to people or factors and trying to fix systems in ways that make them riskier, crisis managers should analyze the ways in which systems interact with each other to gain a better understanding of why accidents occur and why some technologies should be abandoned altogether or modified (Perrow, 1999). Normal accident theory explains that regardless of management's effectiveness at managing operations, the complex systems within an organization make pending crisis unforeseeable and thus not preventable because of their complexity and tight coupling (Perrow, 1999, 2004). According to Sagan (2004), Perrow has had significant influence on the way crisis managers think about complex organizations that have potential for catastrophic crisis events and the study of safety in hazardous technologies, influencing managers and operators in business, in government, and in the general public.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is one of the leading theories in crisis communication research. Timothy Coombs constructed SCCT in 2007 as an evidence-based framework for understanding how an organization's reputation would be impacted in terms of stakeholder perception. According to Coombs (2007), an organization's reputation is based on stakeholder perceptions of how well the organization meets its expectations and on its past performance. To prevent or minimize the threat to its reputation, an organization must adjust its communication during a crisis to account for past crises that the public may be aware of (Coombs, 2004). During a crisis, an unexpected event can threaten an organization's reputation by giving people a

reason to think badly of it (Coombs, 2004, 2007). The way stakeholders respond to a crisis informs postcrisis communication (Coombs, 2007).

SCCT research is based on experimental methods and identifies how key aspects of a crisis situation "influence attributions about the crisis and the reputations held by stakeholders" (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). In the development of SCCT, elements of reasoning from attribution theory, which originated from the field of psychology, were used and addressed all three phases of a crisis using a modified three-stage approach of precrisis, crisis, and postcrisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). SCCT uses three major categories for crisis types, categorized by the level of responsibility that could potentially be attributed to an organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). These categories are aligned to four response type categories, categorized by the position to take toward their responsibility in a crisis situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). Combined, these event and response types make specific recommendations for organizations to use when selecting their crisis response strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

The COVID-19 pandemic created a global crisis demanding effective crisis leadership from organizations and in all segments of life (Tabish, 2020; Tsipursky, 2020). In education, superintendents were called upon to lead their organizations through the crisis and into a new normal as the world works to end or mitigate the pandemic's impacts (AASA, 2020a). Superintendents were the local face of educational organizations the community looked to for guidance and reassurance during this once-in-a-century crisis (Cohn, 2021). Effectively navigating crisis is a complex leadership challenge requiring leaders, including superintendents, to navigate challenges and keep

core values in mind while living with the consequences of their actions and decisions (Boin et al., 2017).

Boin et al.'s (2017) book *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure*, 2nd edition, examined how strategic leaders deal with challenges, political risks and opportunities, pitfalls to avoid, and paths to moving forward toward reform and recovery in the face of crisis. During crisis, citizens look to their public leaders to respond effectively to avert threats or at least to minimize the damage of the crisis (Boin et al., 2017). Boin et al. defined the concept of strategic crisis leadership in terms of the five critical tasks that leaders can use to lead during times of crisis. The five critical tasks of strategic crisis leadership (CTSCL) proposed by the authors are sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning (Boin et al., 2017).

According to Boin et al. (2017), these five CTSCL provide a framework for leaders to use during times of crisis to respond effectively and legitimately. In addition to leaders responding during times of crisis to prevent or minimize the damage and harm, citizens look to their leaders to publicly present the details of how they handled the crisis, account for what went wrong, and restore public confidence as a sign that the crisis has ended (Boin & 't Hart, 2003; Boin et al., 2017). To help meet these expectations of the citizenry, Boin et al. (2017) presented the CTSCL as a framework for crisis leaders.

The CTSCL framework is grounded in multidisciplinary case study research and aligned to the seminal works and theoretical foundations presented in this study (Boin et al., 2017). Barnard's (1938/1968) publication of the *Functions of the Executive* defined his theory of natural systems in which he describes formal organizations as cooperative

systems needing to achieve system equilibrium to successfully function. Barnard additionally described his theory of inducement and contribution in which he believed members of the organization made contributions to the organization as long as what they received in return was worthwhile to them. The theory of inducement and contribution aligned to the concept of organizations being cooperative systems, motivating members of the organization either through incentive or persuasive methods such as salary or by identifying what motivates them (Barnard, 1938/1968). Combined, Barnard indicated that leaders were able to effectively lead with legitimate authority, and members of the organization would comply with orders or complete their job functions as long as leadership maintained the equilibrium of the system. Cited in numerous studies, Barnard's *Functions of the Executive* provided pioneering thinking in moving beyond organizational management to organizational leadership in formal organizations, introducing concepts of cooperation, moral and values-driven leadership, interdependence, and decision making (Gehani, 2002; McNally, 2018). The idea that formal organizations consciously coordinate activities and groups is foundational to the concept of crisis management and leading during times of crisis. The theoretical principals and constructs presented by Barnard support and align to the CTSCL, and his work is cited as seminal by Boin et al. (2017) in their book *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure*.

In the 1960s, Perrow began examining the industries working in high-risk technologies with complex and tightly coupled systems that had great potential for large-scale catastrophe (Perrow, 1999). Perrow's (1999) research led to the development of the normal accident theory, which described how accidents in some systems are inevitable

because of their highly interconnected, interactive, and tightly coupled systems. In these tightly coupled systems, organizational culture of decentralized worker autonomy, open communication, and independence support detection and mitigation of some accidents; however, in tightly coupled systems, Perrow argued that some accidents are nearly impossible to detect. Because of the highly volatile nature of these organizations, leaders face the complex task of crisis prevention and mitigation and must be prepared to comprehensively respond to a catastrophe or crisis that may not be preventable (Perrow, 1999).

As potential for crisis to cause catastrophic events impacting large numbers of people increases, public expectation for accountability and transparency also increase (Boin et al., 2017). The public demand for explanation and being informed led to the development of attribution theory in the 1960s and later situational crisis communication theory in the 2000s. Attribution theory in the social sciences examined the concepts of causality that defined the perception of one's environment (Martinko, 1995a). The theory was extended to organizational settings where organizational structure can influence moral inferences about attribution of causality, especially during times of important instances of crisis (Martinko, 1995a). Attribution theory later influenced the development of SCCT (Coombs, 2004). According to Coombs (2004), SCCT suggests that to protect an organization's reputation, "management must adjust their communication to account for possible past crises about which relevant publics are aware" (p. 265). The level of attribution the public associated to an organization during a crisis serves as a guide for how the organization responds to the crisis situation (Coombs, 2004).

Each of the works presented by the seminal authors was cited in by Boin et al.'s (2017) book *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure*. The framework presented in the CTSCL proposed by the authors provides a comprehensive approach to crisis management and leadership (Boin et al., 2017). The critical task of sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning incorporate elements from the seminal works presented to guide leaders in effectively leading during times of crisis.

Sense Making

Making sense of a crisis is a critical task for leaders to become crisis managers who must assess the situation and make decisions with information at hand (Boin & Renaud, 2013; Boin et al., 2017). Ideally, leaders are able to detect emerging threats and potential crises early on to mitigate the impact or prevent it altogether (Boin et al., 2017). However, once a crisis is detected, arriving at a collective understanding of the nature, characteristics, consequences, scope, and potential effects of a developing threat presents tremendous challenges (Boin et al., 2017). Defining a common and collective understanding of a situation is characterized by struggles to define the situation with others who may not have a common way of making sense of their experience (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). During a crisis, leaders must give meaning to the collective experience and develop plausible images to comprehend, understand, and explain the crisis at hand (Boin et al., 2017; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Weick et al., 2005).

Sense making is a critical element in crisis management as an ongoing process by which meaning is materialized to inform action and develop plausible images about what is happening (Weick et al., 2005). However, most crises come as a complete surprise to

leaders, putting them in a position in which they must determine who is affected and develop systems to determine what might develop next while assessing the political implications of the crisis in real time (Boin et al., 2017). Doing so requires that leaders process information, communicate what is happening, and problem solve in a manner that leads to actions that make sense and give meaning (Boin et al., 2017; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Weick et al., 2005).

Decision Making and Coordination

Decision making and coordination during a crisis involve the process of making informed decisions that delineate a course of action based on information available to decision makers at the time (Boin et al., 2017; Ho, Oh, Pech, Durden, & Slade, 2010). The complex and unstable nature of crisis presents situations in which every time a decision is made, new information appears, and a leader’s decisions are scrutinized and questioned (Ho et al., 2010). Despite this volatility, leaders are called upon to make well-informed, difficult decisions usually without a great deal of time and with only the information readily at hand (Boin et al., 2017). The expectation, especially for public leaders, is that crises are averted or the damage from them is mitigated (Boin et al., 2017). In these extreme circumstances, leaders are under a great deal of stress yet are expected to respond effectively despite the brain’s sense-making capabilities deteriorating under high levels of stress (Boin & Renaud, 2013).

During a crisis, leaders are expected to delineate a clear course of action through analysis, planning, communication, collaboration, and cooperation between partners and the expected value to mitigate the crisis response to align resources and coordinate efforts to provide the best possible response (Boin et al., 2017; Crowe, 2013; FEMA, 2010;

T. Johnson, 2018). An effective crisis response includes making big decisions and making hard calls (Boin et al., 2017). According to Boin and McConnell (2007), "Leaders need to develop their capacity to facilitate resilient behaviour in times of crisis" (p. 55).

Crises are not everyday events, and coordinating efforts is critical to an effective crisis response (Boin et al., 2017). Leaders are expected to coordinate efforts to prevent miscommunication and duplicate efforts and minimize conflicts between many agencies responding (Boin et al., 2017). Poor coordination can have devastating effects during a crisis, and getting multiple agencies and local stakeholders to work together during a crisis is challenging (Boin et al., 2017). However, an effective crisis response includes coordination of resources, which are often limited and in great demand, and requires leaders to understand the realities of the crisis at hand and the broader political context in which the crisis exists (Boin et al., 2017).

Meaning Making

The general public perception of a crisis is largely determined by how leaders give meaning to unfolding events (Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017). Meaning making is the effective communication of an authoritarian account of a crisis situation to those directly affected and the population as a whole (Boin et al., 2017). During a crisis, leaders should compose a message that is convincing and effective at providing a sense of direction and hope to reduce uncertainty (Boin & McConnell, 2007).

Framing of a crisis situation is a critical task for leaders and their organization (Boin & McConnell, 2007; Boin et al., 2017). Leaders must work to convince others of the accuracy of their appraisal and strategic policy choices they intend to enact (Boin et

al., 2017; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017). To do this, they must present factually, show empathy, and instill confidence in their framing of the crisis and response measures to establish legitimacy (Barnard, 1940; Boin & McConnell, 2007; Boin & Renaud, 2013; Boin et al., 2017). As new information is obtained, leaders must translate what is learned about the external conditions and develop new communications to explain their responses and next steps (Barnard, 1938/1968; Boin & Renaud, 2013). Leaders who fail to provide sufficient meaning to a crisis and unfolding events risk losing public confidence in the decisions they make and their ability to handle the crisis (Boin et al., 2017).

Accounting

Crises are intense events that put leaders under extreme pressure and scrutiny and are highly political in nature (Boin et al., 2017; Brändström, 2016). Because of the nature of crises, leaders are required to demonstrate some form of accountability to inform and satisfy the interest of those they serve (Boin et al., 2017; McGrath & Whitty, 2015). The expectation is that leaders as decision makers provide an explanation for the decisions they make and justify their actions (Boin et al., 2017; McGrath & Whitty, 2015). It is crucial for leaders to skillfully communicate with the public, mass media, and other constituents to effectively explain what happened and why (Boin et al., 2017; Brändström, 2016).

Moving beyond a crisis to a sense of normalcy is critical for leaders and their organizations to regain their legitimacy and return to performing their usual functions (Boin et al., 2017). Rendering an account of what happened and why instills a sense of normalcy and restores confidence (Boin et al., 2017). Postcrisis, a leader must take personal responsibility for answering the community for the result (Boin et al., 2017).

An essential task that leaders must perform is demonstrating the crisis was no fault of their own and the response was the best, given the situation (Boin et al., 2017). Politically, leaders must work to ensure accounting does not turn into blaming but rather ends the crisis and does not prolong through undignified and drawn out tactics (Boin et al., 2017).

Learning

Natural- and human-induced disasters and crises are virtually built into the fabric of modern society along with the growing awareness that crises can span large regions or even occur on a global scale (Boin et al., 2017; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Every crisis presents opportunities for learning potential lessons for contingency planning, organizational reform, policy planning, and training for future crises because what is learned from one specific crisis may be transferable to future events (Boin et al., 2017; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Those involved in crisis response and leadership are expected to study the lessons learned and reincorporate them into organizational practices, policies, and laws (Boin et al., 2017).

The critical task of learning presents opportunities for reform and restores public confidence by addressing the lessons from collective memory for future leaders (Boin et al., 2017). Reforms after a crisis are often difficult to enact and sustain (Boin et al., 2017). Often, institutional politics and barriers prevent accurate accounting and learning after a crisis because leaders fear the risk of rehashing old wounds or being blamed (Boin et al., 2017; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). However, organizations that invest time and resources in learning after a crisis to integrate them back into their crisis management processes are well prepared to emerge from the crisis performing better than before the

crisis occurred (Boin et al., 2017; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Moreover, organizations that engage in no-fault learning, or learning without assigned blame, create an environment where critical information, both positive and negative, emerges to improve future capabilities, improve performance, and fix current problems (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership and School Leaders

Like other organizations, school districts experience a wide range of crises, and the superintendent as the public leader of the school district must be prepared to lead through a crisis or face the consequences of potential harm to children in the school district (Colvin, 2002; Gainey, 2009; McCarty, 2012; Porter, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). When children are involved in a crisis, the stakes immediately become higher as young children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of disasters, crisis, and traumatic events (Schonfeld, Demaria, & Kumar, 2020). The communities these leaders serve, mass media, and politicians expect leaders, especially superintendents, to minimize risk, mitigate threats, and handle crises effectively (Boin et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). As leaders of complex educational systems, superintendents, along with other public leaders, can utilize the CTSCL as a framework during times of crisis to respond effectively and to lead legitimately the school district and communities.

Public School Systems as a Backdrop to Crisis

Public School Systems

Public education is a core element in an educated and democratic society (Thattai, 2017). Public school systems are generally considered public entities that provide education to elementary and secondary students within a specific geographic territory or

boundaries through a school district (California Department of Education, n.d.). Until the 1840s, education systems in the United States were largely localized and served wealthy families (Thattai, 2017). Reformers in the 1800s made free elementary education available under the premise that common schooling would create good citizens, prevent crime and poverty, and unite society (Thattai, 2017). By the end of the 19th century, elementary level public education was available to all American children, and by 1918, all states had created systems requiring all children to attend elementary school (Thattai, 2017). Secondary high school enrollment significantly began to increase in the United States in the 20th century but has never been made compulsory in all states (Thattai, 2017). In 1826, Massachusetts formalized the school board structure, giving elected or appointed citizens authority to govern over public education (Illinois Association of School Boards, n.d.).

The role of the school district superintendent followed in the 1830s, employed by a board of education to run the day-to-day operations of the school district and manage its schools (Kowalski, 2005). Today, superintendents are the CEOs tasked with leading day-to-day operations of a school district and are the ones to whom the community looks to lead the organization (Björk et al., 2018; Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, 2005). In this role, superintendents and school boards govern together to support student achievement and manage facilities and all operations of a modern school district (Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Kowalski, 2005). The superintendent is the face and chief communicator for the school district working with labor unions, community members, and staff (Kowalski, 2005).

Crisis can occur in one form or another in all organizations including schools and school districts. Superintendents, as leaders of their organizations, face leadership challenges during times of crisis and must demonstrate strategic leadership (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Williams, 2014). Students, staff, and the community look to the superintendent to address crises and restore a sense of normalcy to the school district (Smith & Riley, 2012). Leadership during times of crisis in an ever-changing and complex world requires that superintendents have skills, strategies, and resources needed to lead their organization through the crisis in a way that minimizes personal and organizational harm to the school district (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Crises and Disasters in Schools

In the fall of 2020, approximately 48.1 million students attended public schools' grades kindergarten through Grade 12 in the United States (NCES, 2021). Approximately 3.2 million teachers provided services in these schools to students ranging from diverse backgrounds, economic status, and in both in-person and virtual learning environments (NCES, 2021). Families entrust public schools and educators to protect and keep their children safe while they are in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Tremendous efforts are made by teachers, school administrators, and school leaders to make schools safe havens for the nation's youth (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). However, school districts and schools across the United States are vulnerable to being directly or indirectly affected by crises of some kind at any time (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, fires, and hurricanes have the potential to strike communities with little warning or predictability (U.S. Department of

Education, 2007). Infectious disease can easily spread from person to person very quickly causing serious illness within schools and communities and globally (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The modern era has brought with it increased cases of terror from threats and school shootings, threatened or actual, presenting scenarios of horrific and chilling events that impact schools across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The horrific events of the Columbine School shootings in 1999 in Littleton, Colorado, and the terror attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, changed the expectations of how and for what crises schools prepared (Brickman et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). In all these instances and more, the community, families, and children relied on teachers and staff to protect them and help them through the crisis (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

Traditional School Preparation for Crisis

To address and plan for crises, federal and state laws require many school districts to develop crisis management plans (Brickman et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). In 1994, the U.S. federal government enacted the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act that required school districts receiving federal funds to attest that they had adopted crisis management plans (Brickman et al., 2004; Hantman & Crosse, 2000). Under this act, funds were provided to support drug and violence prevention programs under the premise that students needed to be academically proficient and needed a safe learning environment to do so (Hantman & Crosse, 2000).

In 2003, the U.S. Department of Education released a document titled *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities* that recommends all schools develop individual plans to address possible threats and crises that may affect

their communities (Brickman et al., 2004). The guide outlined a four-phase crisis management process that included mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery and prevention (Brickman et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). A crucial element of this guide was that it acknowledged that crisis planning begins with top leadership making crisis planning a priority and inclusive of all school stakeholders to be effective (Brickman et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The goal was that every school had systems in place to respond quickly and efficiently in a crisis situation to ensure the safety of the school and students (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

The Role of the Superintendent

An elected board of education has traditionally governed public school systems in the United States and is responsible for establishing goals and policies to ensure the school district meets local, state, and federal requirements to educate children (Townsend et al., 2007). Beginning in the 1800s, boards of education began employing superintendents to oversee schools under their jurisdiction (Townsend et al., 2007). By the 1920s, the position of the superintendent, serving as the head of the educational organization, was institutionalized throughout the United States in public school systems (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000).

The role of the superintendent has evolved a great deal over the years and has become more extensive, complex, and demanding (Kowalski, 2005). Early superintendents were hired to serve as schoolmasters who supervised students and staff as public schools grew, serving larger numbers of students (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Cuban, 1976). In addition to operating schools under their jurisdiction, early

superintendents were tasked with the challenge of being early advocates for the common free public education school movement (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Glass et al., 2000). The goal of this movement was to educate all children to ensure the growth and well-being of a democratic society in which the citizenry contributes to the vitality of the nation's economy (Glass et al., 2000).

The role of the modern superintendent can be equated to that of an orchestra conductor (ECRA Group, 2010). Once the board of education establishes goals and policies to ensure the school district meets all requirements to educate children, the superintendent conducts all aspects and functions of the district (ECRA Group, 2010; Townsend et al., 2007). Superintendent responsibilities include guiding a shared vision of performance through the integration of different parts and constituents to ensure progress toward the board's goals and policies (ECRA Group, 2010; Townsend et al., 2007). It is the superintendent who is faced with school reform measures, accountability for student academic performance measures, implementation of curriculum, fiscal management, and all other aspects of district operations (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; DiPaola, 2010). In this capacity, superintendents are regularly required to take on complex and challenging problems, often involving changing demographics, diversity, inequity of resources, and legal and political issues (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Boin et al., 2017; DiPaola, 2010). As the primary leaders of their organizations, they must be able to recognize, acknowledge, interpret, and respond effectively to these challenges (Boin et al., 2017; Colvin, 2002; Lowy, 2008). When a crisis arises, superintendents must deal with the immediate threats being presented, the emotions, and the uncertainty

and respond with self-efficacy, decisiveness, and flexibility (Boin et al., 2017; Moilanen, 2015; Van Wart, 2011).

School Superintendent Crisis Leadership During COVID-19

The evolving COVID-19 crisis presented superintendents and boards of education with challenges that tested their abilities, requiring them to be flexible to the ever-changing demand the pandemic presented to ensure the safety of their students, families, staff, and communities. According to Fay, Levinson, Stevens, Brighouse and Geron (2020), public schools have the essential responsibility to ensure students' continued learning and support the social and emotional health of staff, students, and the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents acted quickly, following the directives and mandates from local public health agencies, the Center for Disease Control, and other governmental agencies. Superintendents, especially those serving in lower income communities, were challenged to support students with barriers to access to devices and connectivity, which became widely apparent as children could not access online learning platforms that more affluent children were able to (Adely & Balcerzak, 2020).

Superintendents serving in urban school districts faced even more significant challenges because of the highly contagious nature of the coronavirus and the rapid spread of the disease because of their schools generally being located within densely populated areas in comparison to suburban and rural school districts (Ahram et al., 2014; Schaffer, White, & Brown, 2018). Urban school districts often experience significant and unique challenges compared to suburban and rural areas. These challenges included serving a population comprised of a significant number of immigrant students, having

language diversity, working with more racial and ethnic groups, and families experiencing high levels of poverty (Ahram et al., 2014; C. J. Johnson, 2014; Ratcliffe et al., 2016; Schaffer et al., 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Each of the attributed characteristics of urban schools created challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health guidelines to prevent the spread of the virus included social and physical distancing, self-isolation, and quarantine (Salama, 2020). In densely populated urban communities experiencing high levels of poverty and overcrowding in housing, public health guidelines for preventing and controlling the spread of the virus were often not feasible in the areas urban school districts resided (Blake, Kellerson, & Simic, 2007; Salama, 2020). These challenges were significant in preventing students from engaging in online learning during school closure and accessing the resources needed to navigate the challenging conditions resulting from COVID-19 (AASA, 2020a; Adely & Balcerzak, 2020).

Gap in Research

A superintendent is an executive leader responsible for a myriad of roles in a school district ranging from managing finances, educational programs, community outreach and partnerships, and safety (Björk et al., 2018; Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 2005). Although there is significant research on the traditional role superintendents have in curriculum, acting as a liaison with the board of education and working with state and federal educational agencies, there is little research on the role they have in leading during times of crisis and crisis management (Andero, 2000; Kowalski, 2005). Specifically, there was a deficit in the research related to contemporary crisis management and leadership of school superintendents and their use of the CTSCL.

This qualitative multiple-case study provides valuable information in identifying and describing strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties used to lead in crisis using the CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Boin et al., 2017) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. The results of this study may assist school leaders with the strategies necessary to lead during times of crisis, especially during times of school closure, school reopening, and addressing health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategies learned in this study potentially have the ability to impact future professional development and preparation of school district superintendents. Additionally, this study may provide support for superintendents with exemplary leadership strategies to lead their teachers, administrators, staff, communities, and students during times of crisis.

Summary

The unexpected global health crisis and pandemic that resulted from the novel coronavirus and the disease it caused has fundamentally impacted every aspect of life around the world (A. A. Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Hundreds of millions of people around the globe have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing severe illness for many and a death toll in the millions (Al Saidi et al., 2020; WHO, 2021; Worldometer, 2022). Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global recession resulting in existential challenges for many organizations (Tabish, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally disrupted society as a whole and threatened people's personal and professional lives, and more likely than not, people will live with the pandemic and its consequences for several years (Tsipursky, 2020).

Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic global health crisis, superintendents in K–8 elementary school districts were tasked with leading and managing schools across the United States as the world closed for in-person schooling, transitioning to distance learning (Bhamani et al., 2020). Superintendents faced a highly polarized environment where the framing of the COVID-19 crisis centered on healthcare to economic impacts being the priority (Panda et al., 2020). Beliefs about issues, such as school closures, social distancing, mask mandates, and reopening the economy, increased polarization resulting at times in public ideologies falling into alignment with political parties in the United States and abroad (Panda et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020; Radwan & Radwan, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the economic and social disparities children and families face, especially in urban areas that have impacted their ability to engage successfully and navigate educational systems and access resources (Ahram et al., 2014; C. J. Johnson, 2014; Ratcliffe et al., 2016; Schaffer et al., 2018; Seke, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022; Yeung et al., 2020; Zviedrite et al., 2021). Further, school closure and distance learning have impacted every aspect of the school community for students and educators alike. In public education, the community looks to the superintendent as the key leader of the school district (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Faced with the unfamiliarity of a global crisis and potentially life-threatening consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents have been tasked with becoming crisis leaders and managers in a situation in which there is no playbook to follow or easy answers to address contemporary issues.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

Chapter III begins with a review of the purpose statement and research questions. In addition, the chapter also describes the qualitative research design, the population studied, and the methodology used to determine the sample population. A detailed description of the research instruments used, the methods of data collection, and the methods of data analysis are defined. Finally, the assumptions and limitations of the study and the ethical procedures used to safeguard the human subjects who were voluntary participants in the research study are also outlined in this chapter.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to identify and describe strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties used to lead in crisis using the five critical tasks of strategic crisis leadership (CTSCL; sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Boin et al., 2017) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to understand and describe the experiences of exemplary leaders during a time of crisis.

Research Questions

1. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use *sense making* crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?

2. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use decision making and coordination crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
3. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use meaning making crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
4. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use accounting crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
5. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use learning crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
6. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties describe their experiences as leaders during the time of crisis?

Research Design

A research design is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting data in research studies (Creswell, 2012). In contrast, research methods are the various processes, procedures, and tools used to collect and analyze data to provide the most credible answers to the research questions (Creswell, 2012; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The main difference between research methods and research design is that research design is the blueprint for conducting the research project, and the

research methods are standardized measures used to collect data (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018).

There are two major research designs: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative designs have many forms and are frequently used in different social and humanities disciplines (Patton, 2015). The major designs included in qualitative research are case study, phenomenological, ethnographic, heuristic, and grounded theory studies. The design selected for this study was a qualitative multiple-case study because it provided a systemic approach to describe life experiences of exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and their experiences during times of crisis that gave them meaning and allowed the researcher to gain insight, richness, and complexity inherent in the phenomenon.

The selection of a methodology should primarily be based on the problem and research questions to be investigated, purpose of the study, theory base, and nature of the data (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The study employed a multiple-case study to holistically describe the leadership experiences of urban elementary school superintendents during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. This study examined the strategies of the superintendents as an in-depth phenomenon within a bounded system (Creswell, 2012; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). Data were collected from interviews, documents, and archival records from five exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts to identify and describe strategies and understand their experiences.

Qualitative Study

Qualitative research is a suitable research method used when little is known about a topic either through previous studies or settings or when a population is difficult to reach (Patten & Newhart, 2018). According to Patton (2015), qualitative research is personal, using documents, interviews, and data collected from the field through semistructured, open-ended questions, allowing the researcher to determine methods as the study progresses. The inductive, exploratory nature of qualitative research is not based on the development of a hypothesis or attempts to be predictive; instead, it seeks to identify themes and patterns formed from the data researchers collect (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Finally, according to Patton (2015), the qualitative method researches and documents the things that "happen among real people in the real world in their own words, from their own perspectives, and within their own context" (p. 12). Because of the exploratory, open-ended design of qualitative research, it is a useful method to identify unintended consequences and side effects that quantitative research methods are unlikely to identify (Patton, 2015).

Case Study

A case study is an in-depth exploration of a system that is bounded in terms of time, place, or physical boundaries to explain a complex whole or make connections between parts in real-life scenarios, and it is commonly found in social science disciplines (Creswell, 2012; Patten & Newhart, 2018; Yin, 2009, 2018). Yin (2018) described a case study as an empirical inquiry that can be used to investigate contemporary phenomena within real-life context to understand the "how" and "why" of an event or issue. Yin further stated that a case study (a) "copes with the technically

distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result," (b) "benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide design, data collection, and analysis, and as another result," (c) "relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion" (p. 15).

Case studies that include several cases are called collective or multiple-case studies in which several cases are described and compared to provide understanding of a case or event (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995). Multiple-case study research design is often considered more robust than a single case study and able to produce findings that are deemed more reliable and valid (Yin, 2018). Single case studies have been criticized and viewed as less reliable and valid (Yin, 2018). However, Yin (2018) argued that case studies are generalizable to theoretical populations with the goal of expanding and generalizing theories.

A primary focus of this study was to provide in-depth descriptions of how exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties used to lead in crisis using the CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Boin et al., 2017) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. The goal and purpose of this study was to understand and describe the experiences of exemplary leaders during a time of crisis. A small sample of five exemplary superintendents was the subject of the study to increase reliability and validity of the case study findings. A unique strength of a case study is being able to deal with a variety of data, including statistical data, documents, artifacts, quotes, and interviews (Yin, 2018). Moreover, qualitative research is personal,

aiming to capture the rich viewpoints of participants within their context (Patton, 2015). For these reasons, a qualitative, multiple five-case study was the most appropriate design for this research.

Population

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described a study population as a group of subjects or populations who correspond to a specific set of criteria from which a sample can be drawn to generalize results. The population for this study was all 1,037 superintendents in California (California Department of Education, n.d.-a). A superintendent is the CEO of a school district who works with the school board to establish the district's goals and policies to provide vision, direction, and oversight of all aspects of district operations (Björk et al., 2018; Giannini, 2021; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Townsend et al., 2007). In addition, a superintendent oversees the hiring of staff, manages budgets, monitors student success, and develops a vision for the district. Given such a challenging and multifaceted position, the superintendent is a unique leader serving in the public education sector.

Target Population

The target population is the entire group of subjects from whom a researcher wishes to generalize a study's findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), it may not be possible to study large groups of study participants because of geography, availability of funds, or convenience. The target population for this study included superintendents in California who led districts during the 2020 COVID-19 crisis in urban elementary K–8 public school districts. At the most technical level, urban schools are those classified by NCES (2021) as city schools.

NCES (2006) categorizes all schools into four locales determined by size, population density, and location in relation to a city. This is an “urban-centric” classification system, meaning differentiation is determined based on proximity to large urban areas (NCES, 2006). The four locale categories used by NCES are city, suburban, town, and rural. Urban schools are further broken down into three subcategories based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s definitions of urbanicity, including large, midsize, and small, to refer to areas within an urbanized area (NCES, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Elementary K–8 school districts included in this study within an urbanicity are considered urban.

For this study, the focus was on urban elementary schools serving Grades K-8. According to the California Department of Education (n.d.-b), there are 525 elementary school districts in California. Within Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties, 36 elementary K–8 school districts are classified as urban based on the four locales by their size, population density, and location in relation to the city in which they are located. Of those identified elementary urban K–8 school districts, 15 were located in Los Angeles County, 11 in Orange County, three in Riverside County, and seven in San Diego County.

Sample

A sample is a group of subjects or participants identified from the larger population from whom data are collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Identifying participants for a study can be done through either probability or nonprobability sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, the sample was selected through nonprobability purposeful sampling. Nonprobability purposeful sampling allows a researcher to identify particular elements from the population that are illustrative of the

topic being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Moreover, qualitative purposeful sampling aims to access information-rich subjects and can offer more profound insight into the central phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select relatively small samples that are information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). Although several different purposeful sampling strategies exist, criterion sampling appears to be the most commonly used in implementation and critical-incident research (Patton, 2015).

In criterion research, the researcher first identifies the criteria that are important to the research, and then identifies cases that have that information and meet the criteria (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Participants are selected based on their knowledge and experience with the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, the information is both in-depth and generalizable to a larger group.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), sampling is selecting a "group of subjects from whom data are collected" (p. 129). Similarly, Patton (2015) and Creswell (2012) defined a sample as a subset of the target population or sampling frame representing the whole population. There are no specific rules when determining an appropriate sample size in qualitative research (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). Qualitative sample size may best be determined by the time allotted, resources available, and study objectives (Patton, 2015). For qualitative studies, Creswell (2012) indicated that samples range from one to 40, and Morse (2000) suggested at least six. For this qualitative multiple-case study, the sample was determined to be five by a team of peer researchers with the assistance of faculty.

For this study, the criteria for identifying exemplary superintendent leaders included having a minimum of 3 years of experience in their position and having demonstrated successful leadership during crises. In addition, the exemplary leaders in this study were identified based on meeting two or more of the following delimitating characteristics:

- recognition by their peers;
- articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings;
- membership in professional associations in their field; and
- participation in workshops, training, or seminars focused on crisis leadership strategies and planning.

The qualitative sample included five interviews from exemplary superintendents of elementary urban K–8 public school districts in Southern California in the Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties who were interviewed with semistructured, open-ended interview questions to collect the qualitative data.

Sample Subject Selection Process

After approval of this study was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher contacted the superintendents from a list of eligible participants who were considered exemplary urban superintendents serving in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties and who met the nonprobability purposeful sampling selection criteria. Expert panels are often used to identify research participants who are required to meet certain criteria for inclusion in a research study. An expert panel member is an individual with extensive knowledge and experience in a particular profession or area of

study who is called upon to provide expert advice (Patton, 2015). The sample selection of participants for this research study began with identifying an expert panel familiar with superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in California. The panel members were asked to nominate possible participants based on the criteria using their knowledge of superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts. The panel included Dr. Keith Larick and Dr. Lillian Maldonado French. Each individual has worked as a superintendent in California, strategically leading a public school district, and has networked with various superintendent leaders in public school districts. Dr. Larick has 25 years of experience as a superintendent and 30 years of experience as a leader and doctoral program chair in two universities. In addition, Dr. Larick has been recognized as a superintendent of the year and honored as California State education professor of the year.

Dr. Maldonado French has 17 years of experience as a superintendent, has been featured in leadership publications and research studies, and was recognized as the Los Angeles County Superintendent of the Year in 2018. Moreover, each expert panel member was familiar with superintendents in the three counties and active in professional associations, superintendent groups, and in state superintendent training and coaching and has worked as an executive search consultant. The following steps were taken to determine the selection of participants for the study:

1. Each panel member was asked to nominate five or more elementary superintendents from each county whom they perceived as exemplary and met the study criteria.
2. Superintendents recommended by both expert panel members were included in the pool of potential research study participants.

3. Each potential research study participant from each county was assigned a unique number.
4. A random number generator was used to randomly identify five exemplary superintendents to include in the research study. Use of the random number generator provided an equal chance for each potential study participant to be selected.
5. The researcher then used social media and district websites to confirm the criteria.

The five participants were contacted for the qualitative face-to-face interviews for the research study in the following manner:

1. The researcher selected five study participants from the pool of candidates identified by the panel of experts using a random selection process. A random number generator was used to select five study participants.
2. The researcher contacted the identified superintendents of the five school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties through email requesting their participation in the research study (Appendix A). Included in the email sent to the five participants was a summary of the study, purpose, and the criteria for selection as exemplary. If a participant declined to be part of the study, another candidate was selected using the random number generator. This process was repeated as necessary until five participants were confirmed.
3. The researcher contacted the five confirmed superintendents with a letter requesting a date and time for the interview. The letter included information about the study, including the purpose; procedures for the interview; disclosure of risk, inconveniences, and discomforts; and anonymity. Also included was a copy of the Participant's Bill of Rights and informed consent documents.

4. Once interview dates and times were scheduled, the researcher sent each interviewee the interview questions and interview protocol documents (Appendix B).

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, instruments or measures are the tools researchers use to collect data to address the purpose and questions of the research (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Qualitative data collection strategies employ multiple methods, including interviews using open-ended and semistructured interview questions, document review, observations, and review of other artifacts (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). To increase validity and strengthen the study, case studies triangulate findings by using multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, observations, and artifacts from multiple cases (Patten & Newhart, 2018; Yin, 2018). A team of peer researchers, with the assistance of faculty, developed the qualitative interview instrument using semistructured, open-ended interview questions and probes. The process began with an in-depth literature review and development of a definition for each of the five study variables. Each thematic team member participated in developing, reviewing, and finalizing definitions with advisors' guidance. Once definitions were approved, each was reviewed for subvariables that would guide the development of interview questions. This process provided for an alignment of the purpose, research questions, and interview questions. From this information, an interview protocol was developed with questions and probes.

Interviews

In qualitative research, open-ended questions are used so participants can best share their experiences and provide in-depth responses without being constrained by the researcher or previous research findings (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). Three basic

approaches are used to collect qualitative data, including informal conversations, an interview guide, and standardized or semistructured open-ended interviews (Patton, 2015). Informal, conversational interviewing involves using open-ended, spontaneously generated questions in a natural flow of interaction (Patton, 2015). Interviewing using an interview guide provides a list of questions and topics allowing the interviewer flexibility to explore, probe, and ask questions that expound on a specific topic (Patton, 2015). Finally, structured, or semistructured, open-ended interviewing uses a fully structured interview instrument to ask questions in the same sequence using standardized probes or subquestions under each question to elicit responses (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). For this study, the researcher used semistructured, open-ended interview questions. Each interviewee was provided the same questions in the same sequence. Probing questions were used within the context of the question posed with each subject as needed to increase the quality and depth of responses.

Case study methodologies employ interviews as one of the primary instruments to collect data (Yin, 2018). Interviews allow participants to describe in depth their lived experiences and how a phenomenon occurred (Yin, 2018). Interviews allow respondents to share their thoughts and insights into answering questions in their own words and through their own personal perspectives (Patton, 2015). Case study interviews can be prolonged, lasting 2 or more hours in a single or multiple settings or about 1 hour in a single setting, or they may be conducted through a survey (Yin, 2018).

A team of peer researchers developed the interview questions for this multiple-case study with the assistance of faculty. Each peer researcher participated in developing, reviewing, and finalizing definitions with advisors' guidance based on an in-

depth review of available literature. Next, the team of peer researchers developed definitions for each research variable with the assistance of faculty. Once definitions were approved, each was reviewed for subvariables that would guide the development of interview questions. Based on these subvariables, interview questions were developed for each variable along with probes to capture the rich viewpoints of participants within their context. This process provided for an alignment of the purpose, research questions, and interview questions.

Each member of the peer research team then conducted field testing of the interview questions and adjusted the questions as necessary based on feedback provided by the field-test observers, interviewees, and interviewers with the assistance of faculty to enhance the validity of the research study. The questions were developed with the CTSCL as a framework for crisis leaders. The five critical tasks are sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning (Boin et al., 2017).

Researcher as an Instrument in the Study

In qualitative research studies, the researcher is a key instrument with a more participatory role (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Qualitative researchers examine research problems in relation to their own backgrounds, beliefs, and personal experiences when conducting interviews, making inferences, and examining artifacts (Patten & Newhart, 2018; Yin, 2018). Moreover, qualitative researchers often go through a process of self-disclosure or explicitly address any concerns about bias and how they will eliminate or limit it (Patten & Newhart, 2018; Yin, 2018). Consequently, bias may exist within a research study because the researcher may influence the interviewee during a qualitative

interview or in the researcher's examination of artifacts (Yin, 2018). During this study, the researcher was employed as an assistant superintendent of educational services in a preschool through eighth-grade public school district in Southern California. In this role, the researcher interacted in the decision making processes the superintendent engaged in during the specific time period addressed in the study and therefore brought potential bias to the research study. The interview questions were developed by a team of peer researchers with the assistance of faculty using semistructured, open-ended interview questions and probes, and the interviews were conducted using the Zoom video-conferencing platform and a Sony digital voice recorder.

Field Testing

Qualitative interviewing is a complex endeavor, and skilled and novice researchers alike should consider conducting practice interviews and/or receive feedback from an experienced qualitative researcher (Patten & Newhart, 2018). The researcher field-tested the semistructured research questions and probes (Appendix C) designed on the CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Boin et al., 2017). The field-test feedback was collected from a sitting superintendent who met two or more of the identified purposeful sampling criteria using approved field-test instruments (Appendix C and Appendix D). Further, an experienced qualitative researcher observed and provided the researcher feedback on the quality and appropriateness of the survey process and questions. The superintendent selected for the field test was not included in the sample. Also, each peer researcher participating in the thematic dissertation field-tested the survey, providing self-reflective feedback of the field-test interview process using a set of predetermined questions.

Following completion of the field test, the researcher and thematic peer researchers and faculty advisors analyzed the feedback data, revised, and approved the final instrument.

Validity

Validity in a research study refers to the degree to which the findings are deemed credible. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated that "validity, in qualitative research, refers to the degree of congruence between the explanations of the phenomena and the realities of the world" (p. 330). Researchers conclude an instrument or measure is valid if it measures what it is designed to measure accurately and performs its intended purpose (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Further, the validity of a qualitative design is the degree to which the researcher and the participants of the study agree on the descriptions of events and the meaning of the events (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Construct Validity

Construct validity refers to how well the research design and instruments used reflect the concept being studied (Yin, 2018). Construct validity in a multiple-case study can be challenging because the researcher must replicate data collection procedures with each interviewee, and responses are subject to interpretation by each interviewee and the interviewer (Yin, 2018). Three strategies are available to strengthen and increase construct validity in a case study: establish a chain of evidence, use multiple sources of evidence, and have a draft of the case study reviewed by case participants (Yin, 2018). To improve the construct validity of this multiple-case study, the researcher used multiple sources of evidence to support interviews. Additionally, each interviewee was provided a copy of the CTSCL framework terms and definition prior to the interview to establish a

common language about the topic. Finally, transcribed interviews were shared with each interviewee to verify for accuracy of what was said and recorded.

Internal Validity

Internal validity in qualitative case study research employs pattern matching, explanation building, addressing rival explanations, and use of logic models (Yin, 2018). Patton (2015) stated that "at the core, qualitative analysis depends on insights, conceptual capabilities, and integrity of the analysis" (p. 76). Internal validity in this multiple-case study was established using cross-case analysis. Cross-case analysis examines patterns, themes, similarities, and differences between and within cases (Eisenhardt, 1989). Within-case analysis helps researchers deal with large volumes of data and become intimately familiar with each case to identify patterns (Eisenhardt, 1989). Coupled with within-case analysis is a cross-case search for patterns, a key strategy to look at data in divergent ways to limit the chance of premature or false conclusions (Eisenhardt, 1989). The triangulation of data within cases and cross cases supports stronger findings and conclusions. To improve internal validity, the researcher used cross-case analysis for this multiple-case study.

External Validity

External validity is the extent to which the findings in a study can be generalizable beyond the study itself, to other people and environmental conditions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). A research study is said to have strong external validity if generalizability is extensive (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Replication logic is recommended for multiple-case studies to bring clarity to cases being compared through careful selection of the sample or cases (Yin, 2018). For this multiple-case

study, each participant was carefully selected based on established criteria. Strict attention was paid to the replicative uses of the CTSCL.

Reliability

Reliability is determined by the extent to which an instrument or measure used to collect data provides consistent and accurate information (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Yin (2018) stated that "the objective is that, if a later researcher follows the same procedures as described by an earlier researcher and conducts the same study over again, the later investigator will arrive at the same findings and conclusions" (p. 46). To improve reliability in this multiple-case study, the researcher worked with a team of peer researchers and the assistance of faculty to develop semistructured, open-ended interview questions and probes. Protocols were developed to establish consistency in data collection procedures with study participants. Additionally, the researcher field-tested the semistructured research questions with a sitting superintendent who met four of the five identified criteria as a representative sample; an experienced qualitative researcher observed and provided the researcher feedback on the quality and appropriateness of the survey process and questions. With the assistance of faculty, the team of peer researchers used the feedback from the field test to adjust the instruments as they determined necessary. Finally, the researcher utilized a peer to analyze one of the interview transcripts to validate the themes and codes and ensure that the outcomes received a standard of 80% agreement on the interpretation of results.

Data Collection

Qualitative analysis is an inductive process by which researchers organize data into categories, moving from specific data to general categories and patterns, to provide

an explanation for a phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The explanation of data in qualitative studies, including case studies, is presented in a narrative structure using quotations from interviews as evidence-based inquiry reflecting a theoretical foundation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Yin, 2018). Case study data collection aims to triangulate data into a convergence of evidence to determine whether patterns keep repeating (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Yin, 2018).

Data collected in this multiple-case study included interviews that used semistructured questions based on the theoretical framework of the CTSCL and artifacts collected from five exemplary superintendents of elementary urban K–8 public school districts in Southern California in the Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties. Semistructured interview questions were tied directly to the CTSCL (sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and accounting; Boin et al., 2017). Interviews were conducted using an online meeting platform that recorded both the video and audio and transcribed; in addition, a Sony digital voice recorder recorded the audio. The researcher took the following steps to collect data:

1. To ensure the protection of human research participants, the researcher completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) certification (Appendix E).
2. The researcher received approval from the UMass Global University IRB to conduct the study (Appendix F).
3. The researcher emailed each participant a letter of invitation to participate in the research with details of the study (Appendix A).

4. Once the five participants agreed to the interview, the researcher scheduled 60-min interviews with each exemplary urban K–8 elementary superintendent for a day and time convenient for him or her.
5. The researcher emailed the following documents to each participant: invitation/informational letter to participate (Appendix A), the UMass Global Research Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix G), and an informed consent form (Appendix H).
6. Prior to each interview, the researcher emailed the participants the CTSCL semistructured interview questions and definitions (Appendix B).
7. In addition, prior to the interview, the researcher emailed each participant an artifact sample form (Appendix I).
8. Prior to the start of the interview questions, the participants were required to provide an audible response with a "yes" as to the informed consent within the recording, and their response was captured in the transcript.
9. Each interviewee was reminded that he or she could refer to the definition of the five critical tasks of sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning.
10. The interview protocol was used to ask the semistructured, open-ended interview questions. The researcher used probing questions when necessary to assist each interviewee in providing further detail and more in-depth responses to each question.
11. Upon completion of each interview, transcriptions were sent to all participants for review to verify accuracy.

12. The researcher requested superintendents to provide artifacts they believed exemplified crisis leadership strategies aligned to the five critical tasks of sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.
13. Upon completion of the transcription and review for accuracy process, the researcher secured all data, including transcriptions and artifacts, for 3 years.

After the collection of data from each study participant, the researcher developed a narrative report detailing each case in the multicase study. Each report included interview transcriptions, notes, documents, and narratives summarizing the data collection process for each case study. All interview transcriptions, notes, documents, and narratives summarizing the data collection process were kept in a password-protected file on the researcher's computer and cloud storage. All data related to the study remained secure and were destroyed 3 years from the date of the interview. Additionally, the researcher ensured that each participant was nonidentifiable to specific information contained in the study. Participants were identified as Superintendent A, Superintendent B, and so forth.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of qualitative research involves identifying patterns and relationships through the examination, categorization, tabulation, and recombining of evidence to draw empirically based conclusions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) described four general strategies that can be employed for analyzing collected data in multiple-case studies. The four strategies rely on theoretical propositions, developing case descriptions, using both qualitative and quantitative data,

and examining rival explanations (Yin, 2018). For this multiple-case study, the researcher employed the strategy of relying on theoretical propositions. The theoretical propositions were based on the CTSCL (sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and accounting), which were used to develop theoretical propositions stemming from "how" research questions. These research questions provided the delimitations of what data would be collected. For each research question, the researcher worked in the CTSCL and management's theoretical framework to produce patterns and themes that resulted from individual and multiple cases.

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) indicated that qualitative research produces large quantities of data that are analyzed during the data collection process as well as after the data have been collected. After interview transcriptions and artifacts were collected, the researcher employed a process of inductive analysis to identify patterns and themes in the data. Inductive analysis is a systematic approach to coding, categorizing, and interpreting data to synthesize and make meaning from them (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, an inductive process of reviewing the data multiple times was utilized to identify key aspects of the interview transcriptions, documents, and artifacts to discover major and emerging themes without the use of predetermined categories. Responses, patterns, and themes were identified that directly answered the research questions related to strategies used by exemplary superintendents during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and that described their experiences during a time of crisis. Once themes were identified, the researcher used NVivo qualitative data analysis software, an electronic resource, to code the data for the study and to count the number of sources and frequencies of responses. Artifacts were coded to triangulate the data when

applicable. Finally, the researcher used measures of frequency and coded these data in specifically developed frequency tables to share empirical findings and presented the data in a narrative form to identify and describe the strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts used during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and to describe their experiences during a time of crisis.

Limitations

This thematic study on the crisis leadership strategies used by exemplary leaders during times of crisis was replicated by eight peer researchers who utilized the same qualitative instruments and methodology but were focused on different types of leaders, a strategy that supported the validity of this study's findings. Various limitations may have affected this qualitative multiple-case study, including the researcher as an instrument, location, and sample size. Limitations are often outside a researcher's control and may impact research results and the generalizability of findings (Patton, 2015; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Researcher as the Instrument

At the time of the study, the researcher had worked in public education for over 23 years and had served in a leadership capacity for 19 of those years, including serving as a superintendent's cabinet member during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. When conducting qualitative research, the researcher is one of the instruments of the study, and as such, could negatively affect the credibility of the study (Patten & Newhart, 2018; Patton, 2015). To limit the impact of this researcher as an instrument in the study, he conducted the interviews using a live virtual meeting platform with both video and audio in an environment that was comfortable for the participants. The interviews were

transcribed and were sent to the participants to ensure accuracy and correctness of the transcriptions and to ensure the neutral and transparent representations of their responses.

Location

Geographical location was a limitation for this study. There were 1,096 superintendents in California at the time this multiple-case study was started. The researcher limited the scope of the study to exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts located in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties to ensure in-depth information pertinent to the focus of this study on identifying and describing strategies superintendents used during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and understanding and describing their experiences during a time of crisis.

Sample Size

Case study research utilizes samples ranging from one case to multiple cases to study a particular phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Multiple-case studies can include from three to 15 participants (Yin, 2018). This multiple-case study was limited to five exemplary superintendent participants to present in-depth descriptions of their strategies used during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and to understand and describe their experiences during a time of crisis.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to identify and describe strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties used to lead in crisis using the CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting,

and learning; Boin et al., 2017) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. In addition, it was the purpose to understand and describe the experiences of exemplary leaders during a time of crisis. The researcher relied upon the recommendations made by an expert panel consisting of a current superintendent and a faculty advisor to determine the sample for this study. Data were collected in a replicative process with multiple sources to triangulate findings for validity and reliability and to limit researcher bias. A study protocol was created, and interview questions were written to directly connect to the CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Boin et al., 2017) framework. The participants were interviewed using semistructured interview techniques, and each superintendent was asked for artifacts to demonstrate the use of the five critical tasks during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Data were analyzed through a process of inductive coding to identify patterns and themes describing how superintendents used the five critical tasks and their experiences during a time of crisis. Chapter IV provides the results of the collected data in this multiple-case study and describes the themes and patterns that emerged through inductive coding. The key findings and conclusions of this multiple-case study are presented in Chapter V as analytical generalizations to be used for further theory development and future research.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

This qualitative multiple-case study identified and described strategies exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents used to lead in crisis using the five critical tasks of strategic crisis leadership (CTSCL) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. This chapter identifies the qualitative results obtained through semistructured, open-ended interview questions in a virtual interview setting. Artifacts were collected and interspersed with the interview data. The interview data collected from the qualitative interviews addresses each of the six research questions. The data are presented in a narrative form, followed by tables and graphs that visually support the description of the major themes. The qualitative multiple-case study data include direct quotes from the five urban elementary K–8 superintendents. Chapter IV concludes with a presentation of the qualitative data and a summary of the study's findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to identify and describe strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties used to lead in crisis using the CTSCL (sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and accounting; Boin et al., 2017) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to understand and describe the experiences of exemplary leaders during a time of crisis.

Research Questions

1. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use sense making crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
2. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use decision making and coordination crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
3. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use meaning making crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
4. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use accounting crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
5. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use learning crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
6. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties describe their experiences as leaders during the time of crisis?

Research Methods and Data Collection

This study was conducted using a qualitative multiple-case study design. According to Patton (2015), qualitative research is personal, using interviews, artifacts, and data collected from the field through semistructured, open-ended questions.

Qualitative research's inductive, exploratory nature seeks to identify themes and patterns formed from the data researchers collect (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Further, qualitative research documents things from the real-world perspectives of participants in their own context (Patton, 2015). Because of qualitative research's exploratory, open-ended design, it is a useful method to identify unintended consequences and side effects of which quantitative research methods are unlikely to identify (Patton, 2015). This research study used a qualitative multiple-case study methodology to narrate the experiences of five exemplary elementary K–8 district superintendents who led during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Study participants shared their particular experiences through the framework of the five CTSCL (sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and accounting; Boin et al., 2017). In the review of the literature, the researcher was not able to locate previously conducted studies regarding exemplary elementary K–8 district superintendents who led during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 using the five CTSCL. This may be due to the global pandemic's recency and ongoing nature. Consequently, the findings of this study are timely and relevant today and provide detailed insight into the lived experiences of five exemplary elementary K-8 district superintendents who led during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

Interview Process and Procedures

The primary data source for this multiple-case study included interviews conducted using semistructured, open-ended questions tied directly to the five CTSCL (sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and accounting; Arjen Boin et al., 2017). The principal focus of the data collection was to provide a holistic and comprehensive description of how exemplary elementary K–8

district superintendents who led during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 used the five CTSCL. In addition, the focus of the research was to include a small sample of exemplary elementary K–8 district superintendents identified through nonprobability purposeful sampling to genuinely capture each participant's experiences in the study to increase the validity and reliability of the findings.

Questions in semistructured interviews can be formulated in advance as a guide during interviews (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Interviewing using a guide provides a list of questions and topics, allowing the interviewer flexibility to explore and ask questions that expound on a specific topic (Patton, 2015). Semistructured, open-ended interviewing uses a fully structured interview instrument to ask questions in the same sequence, using standardized probes under each question to elicit responses (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). Each interviewee was provided the same questions in the same sequence. Probing questions were used within the context of the question posed with each subject as needed to increase the quality and depth of responses.

For this purpose, the researcher worked with a team of peer researchers and faculty assistance to develop semistructured, open-ended interview questions and probes. The team of researchers developed questions aligned to each variable of the five CTSCL (Appendix B), which were in alignment with each of the stated research questions. The thematic team chairs acted as experts to review whether the research questions were appropriately aligned and objective and would result in the desired quality and depth of responses. Additionally, the researcher field-tested the semistructured research questions with a sitting superintendent who met four of the five identified criteria as a representative sample while being observed by an experienced qualitative researcher who

provided the researcher feedback on the quality and appropriateness of the survey process and questions.

Potential study participants were identified from a list compiled by the researcher of eligible superintendents who were considered exemplary urban superintendents and who met the nonprobability purposeful sampling selection criteria. Experts are often used to identify research participants required to meet specific criteria for inclusion in a research study. An expert panel member is an individual with extensive knowledge and experience in a particular profession or area of study (Patton, 2015). An expert panel of former superintendents was asked to nominate possible participants based on the study criteria and their knowledge of superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts from the list the researcher generated. Superintendents recommended by both expert panel members were included in the pool of potential research study participants. Each potential research study participant was assigned a unique number. Next, a random number generator was used to identify superintendents to include in the research study. The random number generator provided an equal chance for each potential study participant to be selected. The researcher then used social media and district websites to confirm the criteria.

Prior to each interview, each superintendent was emailed the five CTSCL interview questions and definitions (see Appendix B). During the interview, the researcher asked each participant the same semistructured interview questions to ensure, as much as possible, that the interviews were conducted in the same manner with consistency of the interview process and to enhance reliability. In addition, predetermined probing questions were asked to provide an opportunity for the participant

to elaborate and provide detailed information when necessary. Case studies are a collection of multiple cases on the same topic that are compared to provide an understanding of a case or event (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 1995). Multiple-case study research design is often considered more robust than a single case study and produces findings that are deemed more reliable and valid (Yin, 2018). Therefore, the interviews were a primary focus of this study, allowing the researcher to gather data and rely on narratives and perceptions of the lived experiences of urban elementary K–8 superintendents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Qualitative interviewing is complex, and novice researchers should conduct practice interviews and receive feedback from an experienced qualitative researcher (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Before interviews were conducted, the researcher field-tested the semistructured research questions and probes (Appendix C). Feedback was collected from a sitting superintendent who met two or more of the identified purposeful sampling criteria using field-test instruments. An experienced qualitative researcher observed and provided the researcher feedback on the quality and appropriateness of the process and questions. After completing the field test, the researcher and thematic peer researchers and faculty advisors analyzed the feedback data and revised and approved the final instrument.

In total, 10 superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts who met the exemplary criteria for the study were identified by an expert panel. All 10 were invited to participate in the study. Each potential participant was provided emailed copies of the five CTSCL interview questions and definitions (see Appendix B), an informational letter to participate (Appendix A), UMass Global University Participant's Bill of Rights

(Appendix G), and an informed consent form (Appendix H). Five of the 10 invited superintendents consented to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted between March 25, 2022, and April 6, 2022. All five superintendents were interviewed using the virtual Zoom video-conferencing platform. All participant interviews were conducted remotely because of the geographical distance between the interviewer and interviewee and the COVID-19 restrictions imposed on social gatherings by the CDC and the university.

The participant interview duration ranged from 40 min to 76 min. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom. The researcher proofread the transcriptions, and edits such as “their” and “there,” “Lego,” and “so” were made. To increase the reliability of the study, interview transcriptions were individually emailed to each participant to review for accuracy. None of the superintendents interviewed made corrections.

Qualitative data collection strategies employ multiple methods, including collecting artifacts (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). To increase validity and strengthen the study, artifacts from multiple cases were collected to provide triangulation and support to explain the logic of the study and support recurring themes. For this study, the researcher asked each superintendent to provide artifacts they believed were examples of leading in crisis using the five CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning). Each elementary K–8 superintendent was provided a template defining the five CTSCL framework and a section to add artifact samples to provide the researcher with a deeper knowledge of crisis management (Appendix I). In addition, the researcher collected digital content, such as school board

agendas and minutes, COVID-19 reopening plans, presentations, memos, and other online content, to acquire artifacts for this study. A total of 25 digital artifacts were collected, including superintendent's weekly COVID-19 messages to staff and community, surveys, board agendas, COVID-19 data dashboards, community meetings, social media Zoom recordings, and school reopening plans.

Interview transcriptions and artifacts were collected, and the researcher employed a process of inductive analysis to identify patterns and themes in the data. Themes emerged from key aspects of the interview transcriptions, documents, and artifacts without predetermined categories. Once themes were identified, the researcher used NVivo qualitative data analysis software, an electronic resource, to code the data for the study to count the number of sources and frequencies of responses. Artifacts were coded to triangulate the data where applicable. The researcher used measures of frequency and coded these data in specifically developed frequency tables to share empirical findings and presented the data in a narrative form. The total coded themes answering the research questions were connected to the five CTSCL framework to identify and describe the strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts used during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and to describe their experiences during a time of crisis.

Population

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described a study population as a group of subjects who correspond to a specific set of criteria from which a sample can be drawn to generalize results. The population for this study was all 1,037 superintendents in California (California Department of Education, n.d.-a). A superintendent is the CEO of

a school district who works with the school board to establish the district's goals and policies to provide vision, direction, and oversight of all aspects of district operations (Björk et al., 2018; Giannini, 2021; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Townsend et al., 2007). In addition, a superintendent oversees the hiring of staff, managing budgets, monitoring student success, and developing a vision for the district. Given such a challenging and multifaceted position, the superintendent is a unique leader serving in the public education sector.

Sample

A sample is a group of subjects or participants identified from the larger population from whom data are collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Identifying participants for a study can be done through either probability or nonprobability sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, the sample was selected through nonprobability purposeful sampling. Nonprobability purposeful sampling allows a researcher to identify particular elements from the population that are illustrative of the topic being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Moreover, qualitative purposeful sampling aims to access information-rich subjects and can offer more profound insight into the central phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select relatively small samples that are information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). Although several different purposeful sampling strategies exist, criterion sampling appears to be the most commonly used in implementation and critical-incident research (Patton, 2015).

In criterion sampling, the researcher first identifies the criteria that are important to the research and then identifies cases that have that information and meet the criteria (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Participants are selected based on their knowledge and experience with the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, the information is both in-depth and generalizable to a larger group.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), sampling is selecting a "group of subjects from whom data are collected" (p. 129). Similarly, Patton (2015) and Creswell (2012) defined a sample as a subset of the target population or sampling frame representing the whole population. There are no specific rules when determining an appropriate sample size in qualitative research (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). Qualitative sample size may best be determined by the time allotted, resources available, and study objectives (Patton, 2015). For qualitative studies, Creswell (2012) indicated that samples range from one to 40, and Morse (2000) suggested at least six. For this qualitative multiple-case study, the sample was determined to be five by a team of peer researchers with the assistance of faculty.

For this study, the criteria for identifying exemplary superintendent leaders included having a minimum of 3 years of experience in their position and having demonstrated successful leadership during crises. In addition, the exemplary leaders in this study were identified based on meeting two or more of the following delimitating characteristics:

- recognition by their peers;
- articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings;

- membership in professional associations in their field; and
- participation in workshops, training, or seminars focused on crisis leadership strategies and planning.

Demographics

The qualitative multiple-case study included five superintendents selected from a target population using a set of criteria. The five superintendents interviewed ranged in age from 41 to 60 years. Two of the superintendents were females, and three were males. The years of experience as superintendents ranged from 3.5 to 13 years. The school district enrollment for each urban elementary K-8 district superintendents ranged from 1,314 to 7,261 students and served kindergarten through Grade 8. Two superintendents interviewed held doctoral degrees and three held master's degrees. Table 1 presents a description of the sample at the time of the study and includes years of service as a superintendent, years as of service as a superintendent in their current district, district enrollment, gender, age, and terminal degree.

Table 1

Superintendent Description of Sample

	Years of service					
Participant	In the position	In current district	District enrollment	Age	Gender	Terminal degree
Superintendent A	9.0	9.0	7,261	41–50	F	Ed.D.
Superintendent B	3.5	3.5	2,302	41–50	M	M.A./M.S
Superintendent C	7.0	7.0	4,286	51–60	F	M.A./M.S
Superintendent D	5.0	5.0	2,331	51–60	M	Ed.D.
Superintendent E	13.0	13.0	1,314	51–60	M	M.A./M.S

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The presentation and analysis of data in this chapter were generated qualitatively through virtual interviews and the collection of artifacts. The data are presented to document this qualitative multiple-case study and identify and describe strategies exemplary elementary K–8 district superintendents used to lead in crisis using the five CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Boin et al., 2017) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. The data from the interviews and artifacts were collected and coded to determine emerging themes related to the five CTSCL framework and research questions. The collected and coded data presented a narrative of the lived experiences of exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and the relationships to the five CTSCL. The interview questions were designed to allow superintendents to reflect and share their rich viewpoints within their context and their experiences and crisis-leadership strategies as they relate to the five CTSCL. Numerous themes naturally emerged from the semistructured open-ended interviews and artifacts collected. Each variable presented in the study was aligned to a research question. The data were analyzed, organized, and presented in alignment to each research question. The total frequencies for all themes was 1,083, and within this, a list of 19 themes was identified. The analysis of the data is presented by research question and is also summarized in its entirety.

Research Question 1

How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use sense making crisis leadership strategies during the COVID 19 pandemic of 2020?

Research Question 1 sought to identify and describe the leadership and management practices using sense making, one of the five CTSCL framework. For this study, sense making was defined as the process by which leaders give meaning to their collective experiences and develop plausible images to comprehend, understand, explain, and predict during a crisis. It is a way of processing, communicating, and problem solving, leading to actions that make sense and give meaning (Boin et al., 2017; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Weick et al., 2005).

A series of three questions was asked to gather data for the sense making critical task variable. Interview questions were asked of each superintendent to collect data for Research Question 1. The data were clustered into three overarching theses for sense making based on urban elementary K–8 superintendent's responses along with 169 frequencies and 40 artifacts. Figure 5 illustrates the frequency of the themes for sense making.

Developing plans. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the highest frequency under the sense making critical task was developing plans. The responses for the theme of developing plans included 52 interview frequencies and 19 artifact frequencies. Developing plans had a total frequency of 71 and represented 42% of the data for sense making and 7% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 2). In the context of this study, developing plans refers to the process that a leader uses during an event that threatens an organization. It may involve planning for a crisis, motivating employees during a crisis, managing public relations, and/or preserving an organization in the

aftermath. The respondents in this study identified developing plans as the most important strategy in making sense of a crisis.

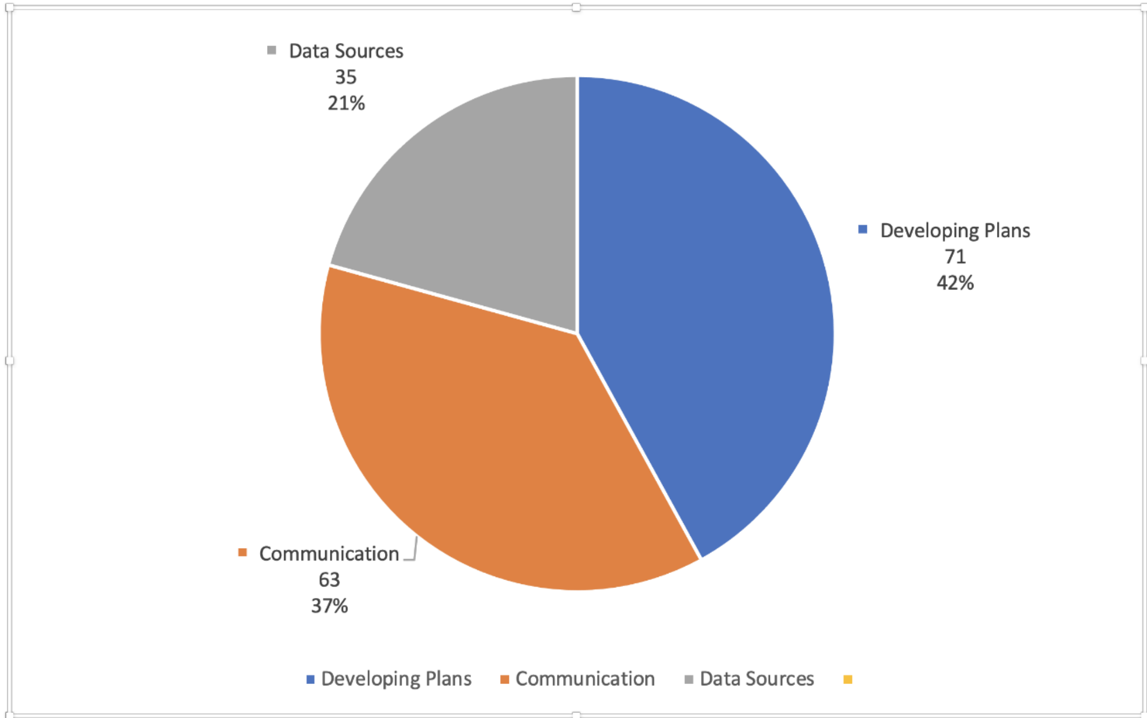

Figure 5. Frequency of coded entries for sense making.

Within the overarching theme of developing plans were the coded strategies used for sense making: utilizing multiple data sources, relying on experts, considering the local context, and forming internal crisis teams. The strategy of utilizing multiple data sources included collecting data from the state, CDC, local departments of public health, and local data to determine courses of action for their respective school districts. Superintendents also used a strategy of relying on experts to develop plans for health and safety measures to provide credible and consistent information. Considering the local context of their districts was a strategy used to develop plans aligned with those of neighboring districts and consider the impact of the crisis from the perspectives and

actual experiences of staff, students, and families. Finally, when developing plans, superintendents used a strategy of forming internal crisis teams to hear differing perspectives and process information to ensure consistent messaging of plans and assess situations to make decisions. The results were consistent with Boin et al. (2017) because the exemplary superintendents interviewed expressed the importance of developing plans to make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 to lead their urban elementary K–8 school districts.

Table 2

Strategies for Critical Task of Sense Making and Overarching Theme of Developing Plans

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Utilized multiple data sources	5	5	23	5	28	39
Relied on experts	5	5	11	6	17	24
Considered the local context of their district	3	6	9	7	16	23
Formed internal crisis teams	3	1	9	1	10	14
Total		17	52	19	71	100

Note. Total frequency of developing plans = 71.

Superintendent E described sense making through utilizing multiple data sources and relying on experts:

> I relied heavily on the Los Angeles Department of Public Health as well as the Los Angeles County Department of Education. We compiled the information the county sent out, and public health alerts on a weekly or monthly basis, so I just immersed myself in that. During the initial stages of the COVID crisis heavily

relied on both state and Los Angeles County Department of Public Health guidelines.

March of 2020, we sent our staff home for the remainder of the year, and I was meeting with each individual staff member at each of the school sites, and I explained, you know, here is what Center for Disease Control is saying, this is how the State Department of Public Health is interpreting it. However, letting them know that the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health has the ability to make things more stringent for us, so we are going to follow that along with the Los Angeles County Office of Education's recommendation to close schools in March of 2020.

Superintendent B described sense making with regional superintendents within their local context:

> Informally, a lot of us in our region developed kind of a critical friend's group of support with our SELPA districts, which consists of 14 superintendents from 14 school districts; we started meeting weekly to just talk about what was going on, how we're responding to the changing guidelines and protocols, and how our community was reacting and responding to those protocols. To a large degree, trying to make sure that we were in alignment because we're so close to each other geographically. We didn't want to implement a protocol with drastically different guideline from one of our neighbors.

Superintendent C described sense making with her administrative teams:

> In all my meetings with cabinet and principals I documented everything. I have a set of information that I wanted to share with them. In the midst of the

> conversation, thank God for the technology; I was typing information as new information is being shared, as new decisions are being made different from what I had already written down. You see how much of an organic process it was. We have very detailed notes, and most of my principals just copy and paste and then put it into their own letters to families and newsletters for their staff.

Superintendents B's and C's narrative was supported by Boin et al.'s (2017) and Boin and Renaud's (2013) research that when there is a crisis, making sense of a crisis is a critical task for leaders to become crisis managers who must assess the situation and make decisions with information at hand to detect emerging threats and potential crises early on to mitigate the impact or prevent it all together. Further, leaders must define a common and collective understanding of a situation with others who may not have a common way of making sense of their experience (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Artifacts in the developing plans theme included messages to the community and staff and school and district websites. Three participants expressed forming internal teams, and all five participants utilized multiple data sources to make sense of the crisis. Finally, multiple artifacts included evidence of the superintendents referencing multiple data sources, citing experts and sources, and working with district and regional teams to make sense of the crisis within their local context. Some of the artifact descriptions are general to protect the participants' anonymity.

Communication. The second most frequent theme under the sense making critical task was communication. The responses for the theme of communication included 47 interview frequencies and 16 artifact frequencies. Communication had a total frequency of 63 and represented 37% of the data for sense making and 6% of the overall

total of 1,083 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 3). Coombs and Holladay (2011) stated that "crisis communication can be defined broadly as the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (p. 20). Moreover, it is the exchange of information between the organization and the public during all phases of the crisis, prior to, during, and after the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2011).

Table 3

Strategies for Critical Task of Sense Making and Overarching Theme of Communication

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Clear and predictable communication	5	8	16	9	25	39
Clear channels of communication	5	3	16	4	20	32
Messaging focused on building trust	5	3	15	3	18	29
Total		14	47	16	63	100

Note. Total frequency of communication = 63.

Within the overarching theme of communication were the coded strategies used for sense making: clear and predictable communication, clear channels of communication, and messaging focused on building trust. Superintendents used the strategy of providing clear and predictable communication to ensure their communities were aware of when updates could be expected and as a way to build trust by speaking with a sense of authority. The strategy of establishing clear channels of communication was used to create support for the districts by ensuring their communities were aware of what was happening in their districts and provide opportunities for two-way communication. Finally, the strategy of communicating messaging focused on building

trust by communicating to the communities that superintendents were doing the right things and making decisions in the best interest of their communities.

Superintendent E stated how he communicated clear and predictable information that the community could trust:

> I made it clear that you can rely on me to synthesize the information. They knew when I would send out a memo. I would quote CDC, state, and county guidelines as kind of my introductory paragraph stating here is what they're saying to get into the facts. So, I was speaking with a sense of authority with regard to the public health crisis.

Sense making is a way of processing, communicating, and problem solving, leading to actions that make sense and give meaning to events and collective experience (Boin et al., 2017; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Weick et al., 2005). Superintendent A described her process of developing clear channels of two-way communication and ensuring messaging was reaching her community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

> We purchased Communicate to communicate with our school community, and I define the school community as our parents, students, and our staff. We also have a list of organizations that are our partners; we want to make sure that they understand what's happening with the district at all times so that they can continue to be partners and support us. So we used to send out email, text messages, and voice messages, but initially we weren't getting a lot of feedback or responses. However, after purchasing Communicate, we have the analytics to see responses, lists for people who receive the information. I think there was just like this initial shock, and then as time went by, people would respond to us, or

> people would reach out. We created a hotline, but we provided designated phone numbers for people to call and share resources or share concerns, or ask questions. I think that also helped because prior to having that universal platform, teachers were using either email or teaching platforms to communicate with parents. It was just kind of, everybody had their own way of communicating, so by using a common communication system, we're able to really see where the questions were and what the concerns were. We were getting some feedback based on our communication. We're also really mindful of the analytics.

Superintendent C described communication that focused on developing trust:

> I think the overarching principle is any plan needs to convey the message that we as a district are committed to putting in our best effort, to do the right things every step of the way. We trust that when we do it, we get the best possible outcome. What that means is, the message conveys we are in control, we are not being led by the situation, and we are being proactive. We're doing what we can to make the best decisions. Secondly, we are hopeful because I think even though no one could tell what the outcomes might be during this pandemic, our hope is when we make the right decisions we will get the best possible outcome, no matter what that might be.

The failure of a leader to respond adequately has the potential to destroy trust and jeopardize the reputation and possible survival of the organization (Gainey, 2010). Additionally, leaders communicate to establish authority while considering the effects of rapid communication through social media and the increasing expectations that organizations respond quickly and effectively to crises (Barnard, 1938/1968; Boin et al.,

2017; Gainey, 2010). Artifacts in the communication theme included websites, newsletters, staff communique, social media, superintendents' state of the district recordings, and weekly updates.

Data sources. The third most frequent theme under the sense making critical task was data sources. The responses for the theme of data sources included 26 interview frequencies and nine artifact frequencies. Data sources had a total frequency of 35 and represented 21% of the data for sense making and 3% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 4). The overarching theme of data sources refers to how data and information are crucial for more informed decision-making processes and how the interpretation of data and information into intelligence is what leads to this concept of informed decision making to validate a course of action (Stobierski, 2019).

Table 4

Strategies for Critical Task of Sense Making and Overarching Theme of Data Sources

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Listened to diverse perspectives	4	0	13	0	13	37.0
Local health department	4	6	5	6	11	31.5
Considered local context	3	3	8	3	11	31.5
Total		9	26	9	35	100.0

Note. Total frequency of data sources = 35.

Within the overarching theme of data sources were the coded strategies used for sense making: listened to diverse perspectives, local health departments, and considered local context. Superintendents utilized the strategy of listening to diverse perspectives to

guide the development of health and safety protocols specific for their districts, working with local health departments to determine mandates that applied to their regions, and finally, considering their local context to identify issues unique and specific to their communities in their COVID-19 response measures.

Superintendent C described listening to diverse perspectives to support her leading her district:

> I have a parenting group, that includes both so-called very diverse perspectives. So, talking to them allow me to really understand the perspectives or the different interpretations of that situation of the crisis at that time. Obviously collecting all of this firsthand information really helps me to process it. So now almost on a daily basis, I hope we can, spend time on reflection. This is what I've been hearing today. There are like three different perspectives on the same situation that we're dealing with, so how can I make sense of it? What does it tell me about my community? What does it tell me about what support, what guidance, and what direction we need to take? So obviously this personal reflection, processing information, it always begins with a personal reflection, and they will always be taken to the cabinet level and then the principal level, and then the board level.

Superintendent B described collecting and analyzing data with the support of the local health department for leading his district:

> We use, any and all, tools. I think, when the crisis first hit, we were first counting on a lot of information from the media, from news outlets, TV, and even some social media, although you have to be careful about social media, and then, once

> we determine that it was going to be longer than the initial kind of wait timeout, we were told we started communicating more closely with our Los Angeles County Office of Education and with our Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, so once that started, then we redeveloped here a kind of a protocol for a pathway in terms of how we were going to get information and analyze it. I had to explain to people that the Center for Disease Control would release information, and that would be interpreted by the State Department of Public Health and then by our County Department of Public Health, and that was ultimately the guidance that we tapped into for how we were going to respond.

Superintendent A described initial stages of the crisis and available data sources to make sense of the pandemic:

> So initially everything was reactionary. I don't think there were very clear channels for information. It was just a matter of looking everywhere, and connecting with people but I think that very quickly the County Department of Public Health became a north star, but it wasn't easy to get information; that came later. I do appreciate, the Los Angeles County Office of Education; they started to really, trying to establish themselves as it became organized. At the very beginning we were just hearing the news, watching news conferences. We were getting information just as the rest of the world, the rest of the state, and the rest of the region were getting information and then trying to create plans.

Superintendent D described filtering through data to make sense of what was occurring locally in his district:

> Well, collecting information wasn't that difficult because we were getting stuff just bombarded, you know, emails, regular mail. So, collecting wasn't that difficult, but I think disaggregating and making sure what needed to be in the "save" file versus the "dump out" file, that was a challenge. Just trying to keep those right and then also the unspoken or unwritten news, which was the news that when we all got together to start talking in terms of superintendents in job-alike meetings. We ask each other things like, how you aligning new information with the hard copy stuff that you'd receive? So, it was really filing stuff and determining which things just has to be taken care of right away, what could wait, and this stuff is going to in the trash.

Within the literature, during a crisis, superintendents must deal with the immediate threats being presented, emotions, and uncertainty (Boin et al., 2017). At the same time, superintendent leaders must respond during times of crisis with self-efficacy, decisiveness, and flexibility (Moilanen, 2015; Van Wart, 2011). Artifacts in the data source theme included school district COVID-19 dashboards, myths versus facts handouts provided by the school district, school and district websites, and school reopening plans. To reiterate, some of the artifact descriptions are general to protect the participants' anonymity.

The overall frequency and major coded themes that surfaced from the semistructured interviews and coded artifacts for the sense making critical task were developing plans with 42%, communication at 31%, and data sources at 21%. The superintendents' responses for sense making demonstrate the three major themes when leading during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders listen to diverse perspectives through

shared leadership approach, multiple perspectives are drawn upon, and collaboration is an essential feature because it fosters the development of ways to plan, implement, and even celebrate working across traditional organizational lines and boundaries. As Holcombe and Kezar (2017) pointed out,

> Shared leadership also recognizes the importance of leaders in positions of authority, but focuses on how those in positions of power can delegate authority, capitalize on expertise within the organization, and create infrastructure so that organizations can capitalize on the leadership of multiple people. (p. 3)

Research Question 2

How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use decision making and coordination crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?

Research Question 2 sought to identify and describe the leadership and management practices using decision making and coordination, one of the five CTSCL framework. For this study, decision making and coordination was defined as the process of making well-informed decisions that delineate a clear course of action through analysis, planning, communication, collaboration, and cooperation between partners and the expected value to mitigate the crisis response (Boin et al., 2017; Crowe, 2013; FEMA, 2010; T. Johnson, 2018).

A series of three questions was asked to gather data for the decision making and coordination critical task variable. Interview questions were asked of each superintendent to collect data for Research Question 2. The data were clustered into four overarching theses for decision making and coordination based on urban elementary K–8

superintendent's responses along with 229 frequencies and 52 artifacts. Figure 6 illustrates the frequency of the themes for decision making and coordination.

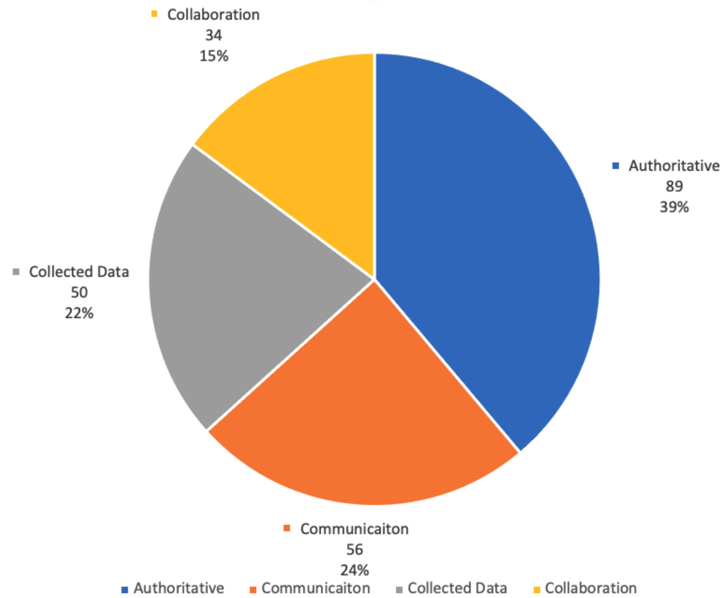

Figure 6. Frequency of coded entries for decision making and coordination.

Authoritative. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the theme with the highest frequency under the decision making and coordination critical task was authoritative. The responses for the theme of authoritative included 68 interview frequencies and 21 artifact frequencies. Authoritative had a total frequency of 89 and represented 39% of the data for decision making and coordination and 8% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 5).

Within the overarching theme of authoritative, being trusted to provide accurate and reliable information were the coded strategies used for decision making and coordination: transparent, considered local context, considered people's feelings, and followed experts. Superintendents utilized the strategy of being transparent, making decisions, and coordinating response efforts in a manner that was inclusive of shared

leadership and to ensure the community was aware of the decision-making process and thinking behind the decision. Considering the local context of their districts was a strategy used in the decision-making and coordinating process develop plans aligned with those of neighboring districts and considering the impact of the crisis from the perspectives and actual experiences of staff, students, and families. Another strategy used by superintendents was to create opportunities to hear concerns and frustrations and consider people's feelings when making and communicating decisions and coordinated response efforts. Finally, superintendents used the strategy of flowing experts from public health agencies and professional teams to make community decisions concerning safety and educational programs.

Table 5

Strategies for Critical Task of Decision Making and Coordination Overarching Theme of Authoritative

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Transparent	5	7	20	7	27	30
Considered local context	5	6	18	6	24	27
Considered people's feelings	4	2	20	2	22	25
Followed experts	4	6	10	6	16	18
Total		21	68	21	89	100

Note. Total frequency of authoritative = 89.

The results were consistent with Boin et al. (2017) because the exemplary superintendents interviewed expressed the importance of developing plans to make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 to lead their urban elementary K–8 school districts. Decision making and coordination themes were found to be in alignment to the crisis

leadership literature by Boin et al. In the face of crisis, the key leader the school district and community look to is the superintendent, who is expected to provide strategic leadership to effectively navigate the impact of the crisis on their organization (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Williams, 2014). According to Boin et al. (2017), "In a crisis, leaders are expected to reduce uncertainty by providing an authoritative account of what is going on, why it is happening, and what needs to be done" (p. 17). Urban elementary K–8 superintendents expressed that leading with authority outlined a clear course of action in the best interest of their district community based on the best information available.

Superintendent A described making decisions based on being transparent through shared leadership with parents to determine what families needed and were facing:

> I think many districts, us one of them, had established parent leadership groups throughout the district. We have key communicators, which are parents. So, we have these established groups that we really rely on to just kind of help us guide the district, and this is before the pandemic. So, we were checking in with these parents and kind of getting dipstick of where they were. What was happening and how we can support them? They were very helpful. These parent leaders reached out to other families, some of them on their own, to help us figure out what was needed. They were just really willing to be partners and help us with the planning and the analysis.

Superintendent A described how she considered the local context of her district community to make decisions and coordinate efforts in response to state and county mandates and recommendations in a letter to her community:

Last week, Los Angeles County lifted their indoor mask requirements for most indoor facilities. The county and state also announced that indoor masking requirements for K–12 schools will be lifted on March 11, 2022, at 11:59 p.m. According to both the county and state, these decisions were made based on the continued decline of COVID-19 cases and the CDC's COVID-19 Community Level Matrix.

Since the beginning of this pandemic, we have always made decisions based on what best serves our school communities. Although the county and state have lifted indoor masking policies, both agencies still strongly recommend the use of masks indoors, and we will follow that recommendation. We will continue to require wearing masks indoors at all district sites. While we will continue indoor masking, we do have other changes that will go into effect on Monday, March 14, 2022:

The use of desk shields in classrooms is no longer required. Over the next few weeks, our facilities team will assist in the removal of shields from student desks.

The use of medical-grade HEPA filters will still be required in all classrooms and indoor spaces.

Outdoor masking: We believe the data is strong enough to start relaxing those requirements. Starting March 14, 2022, we will expand our mask-free zones to the majority of outdoor spaces. Masks will still be required in high traffic areas like lunch lines, hallways, and entrances and exits.

Your child's school will be sharing more detailed information regarding specific identified areas on their campus. The decision to expand mask-free zones is based on declining case rates and the success of our current mask-free zones scattered across all district schools. However, if staff or students would like to continue wearing masks outdoors, we will support their decision to do so.

Despite these changes, we still recommend wearing masks as often as possible since it is the best defense against COVID-19 infection and transmission, especially for the unvaccinated.

Superintendent C described feelings on being the authoritative figure in the district:

> The district is me. The superintendent is the district. It doesn't matter how the decision was made, in a collective way or not. If there is any decision that any individual didn't care for, it was the superintendent that flopped. So, I had to cope with it, swallow my pride, put the interests of the community as my vision and my passion, and courageously and humbly continue to communicate what the decision was and why. I always gave them time to meet, even if meant they were yelling at me. The most difficult meeting that I ever had in my life was the meeting that we had when had to take action to reopen schools. I have never had over 100 teachers attending a board meeting and that meeting was essentially hijacked by all the negative sentiments. Most of which were directed against me, who dare to make a recommendation to reopen schools.

Superintendent B described the responsibility of being placed in a role of sole authority for crisis decisions and creating space to consider people's feelings in the process:

Being solely accountably, obviously, it doesn't feel good necessarily. Especially at that emergency board meeting on Friday, March 13, 2020, where we had to tell the board at the County Office and Department Public Health we're recommending that we do a 2 week kind of closure or actually we called it a dismissal … closure wasn't a goal just yet; because of the pandemic I asked my board to give me basically "god rights"—like you're giving me the rights because of an emergency order to do anything I need to do to keep schools running and to keep everyone safe, without having to come to you for approval and that was big, and I think that's when it kind of hit me like, wow. Because they had given me the right to do whatever needed to be done during a pandemic and that's a big responsibility, that I think really humbled me in terms of making sure that I was careful about doing the right thing, not just anything.

And every month, typically on a Wednesday, usually the third weekend of the month, I'd do a parent town hall. Everyone and anyone is invited; our staff members are invited as well. I have a very short agenda in terms of just updates regarding the protocols how we're responding to the protocols in our district. I'd show some of the data in terms of case rates and case numbers at our school sites and district wide, but the majority of that time is give me your questions, give me your feedback, and a lot of it was venting, which is okay, and even the questions were pointed at times in terms of you know, why are you requiring or mandating, what's your belief on vaccination, what's the word on being fully vaccinated. Although the meeting was for us, and it was intended as a communication tool for us to kind of inform and clarify, what it ended up being as well was also a maybe

> a forum for releasing stress or anxiety, kind of a venting forum for the folks who were frustrated about what was going on. Fortunately, you know it didn't become an arena for political, you know, discourse or dialogue or antagonism, as some other districts have experience, and I think, and I'm grateful for that and, and so I think that has really helped in terms of the communication, you know, we my experience arriving here is, we have a very trusting community like they're very reverent of the educational system.

Superintendent D described decision making and coordination through the lens of following experts and considering team input:

> My executive cabinet would very meet regularly, and we would throw everything around, and then I had a group of people outside of that circle of peers and professionals that I could call. Because again, I wanted there to be value in what's going out; I don't want to be just wasting somebody's time, and that's how I would do it. We look at it, consider it, go out and find more information, and come back together, see if anything had changed—go back out to the second ring and professionals—see if anything's changed after we come back together and if not, then we're good to go—let's move.

As described by Superintendents A, B, C, and D, it was their responsibility to provide strategic leadership to effectively navigate the impact of the crisis on their organization. The literature supports an authoritative leadership style during time of crisis, being trusted to provide accurate and reliable information. According to Boin et al. (2017), superintendents must deal with the immediate threats being presented, emotions, and uncertainty. In this capacity, superintendents are required to take on

complex and challenging problems regularly, including fiscal, curriculum, legal, and political challenges (Boin et al., 2017; DiPaola, 2010). As leaders, they must be able to recognize, acknowledge, interpret, and respond effectively to these challenges (Boin et al., 2017; Colvin, 2002; Lowy, 2008). Further, they must respond during times of crisis with self-efficacy, decisiveness, and flexibility (Moilanen, 2015; Van Wart, 2011).

Communication. The theme with the second highest frequency under the decision making and coordination critical task was communication. The responses for the theme of communication included 35 interview frequencies and 21 artifact frequencies. Communication had a total frequency of 56 and represented 24% of the data for decision making and coordination and 5% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 6).

Within the overarching theme of communication were the coded strategies used for decision making and coordination: conservative and intentional, transparent, and multiple modes of communication. Superintendents utilized the strategy of being conservative and intentional by waiting to communicate changes in protocols with their communities to ensure they did not have to backtrack communicated decisions because of rapidly changing information from state and county officials, ensuring the community was confident that they had a plan that was understood. Another strategy employed was being transparent in their communication of decisions and coordinated response efforts to ensure the community was aware of the decision-making process and thinking behind the decision. Lastly, within the overarching theme of communication, superintendents utilized the strategy of using multiple modes of communication to reach members of their communities, considering levels of technology access and primary languages.

Table 6

Strategies for Critical Task of Decision Making and Coordination and Overarching Theme of Communication

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Conservative and intentional	5	8	17	8	25	44
Transparent	4	8	12	8	20	36
Multiple modes of communication	4	5	6	5	11	20
Total		21	35	21	56	100

Note. Total frequency of communication = 56

Superintendent A described being conservative and intentional in updating the community regarding masking:

> Last week, Los Angeles County lifted their mask requirements for most indoor facilities. The county and state also announced that indoor masking requirements for K–12 schools will be lifted on March 11, 2022, at 11:59 p.m. According to both the county and state, these decisions were made based on the continued decline of COVID-19 cases and the CDC's COVID-19 Community Level Matrix. Since the beginning of this pandemic, we have always made decisions based on what best serves our school communities. Although the county and state have lifted indoor masking policies, both agencies still strongly recommend the use of masks indoors, and we will follow that recommendation. The District will continue to require wearing masks indoors at all district sites. While we will continue indoor masking, we do have other changes that will go into effect on Monday, March 14, 2022.

Superintendent B described being transparent in his decision making:

> One of the things that we, that I put out at the onset of the pandemic and our board did as well, was this is kind of understanding that we were not the experts. We're the experts in education; we're not the experts in health and so anything any decision that we make are going to be guided by what the experts are telling us.
>
> Every month, typically on a Wednesday, usually the 3rd week of the month, I'd do a parent town hall and everyone and anyone is invited; our staff members are invited as well. I would have a very short agenda in terms of just updates regarding the protocols, how we're responding to the protocols in our district.
>
> I'd show some of the data in terms of case rates and case numbers at our school sites and district wide, but the majority of that time is give me your questions, give me your feedback, and a lot of it was venting. Which is okay, and even the questions were pointed at times in terms of, you know, why are you requiring or mandating, what's your belief on vaccination, what's the word on being fully vaccinated. It was intended as a communication tool for us to kind of inform and clarify. What it ended up being as well was also a maybe a forum for releasing stress or anxiety, kind of a venting forum for the folks who were frustrated about what was going on. That really helped in terms of the communication.

Superintendent C described communicating through multiple opportunities and modes of communication:

> As I mentioned, my daily meeting with cabinet, weekly meeting with the principals, and during those, during the most difficult times, I had monthly meetings with my parent groups. I remember one time, I don't think I, I had the energy to do that again in the span of a week; I did 24 parent meetings. Because I want to make those groups small and by language, so because translation is very hard and I have four language groups, and I have, grouped the schools into clusters. That's why it was a killer because it was like back-to-back meetings nonstop for about 5 days.

Supported by Kitamura (2019), superintendents must be able to coordinate with community partners, communicate with local stakeholders, and understand the political environments and legal mandates that need to be addressed. Artifacts collection in the decision making and coordination theme included school and district websites, community letters, board minutes, and social media.

Data collection. The theme with the third highest frequency under the decision making and coordination critical task was data collection. The responses for the theme of data collection included 29 interview frequencies and six artifact frequencies. Data collection had a total frequency of 50 and represented 22% of the data for decision making and coordination and 5% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 7).

Within the overarching theme of data collection were the coded strategies used for decision making and coordination: multiple sources and perceptual data. Superintendents relied on multiple sources as a strategy to collect data as a foundation for their decisions to gain a broad perspective of the needs of their communities. Another strategy used by

superintendents was making decisions and coordinating responses based on the perceptual data and the gathering of opinions, comments, and recommendations from members of their community.

Table 7

Strategies for Critical Task of Decision Making and Coordination and Overarching Theme of Data Collection

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Multiple sources	5	3	25	3	28	56
Perceptual data	5	3	19	3	22	44
Total		6	29	6	50	100

Note. Total frequency of collected data = 50.

Superintendent D described a coffee with the superintendent meeting with his families and a medical doctor to answer questions on health and safety measures as a source of information for the community:

> I thought it was one of the best things we did; we did a coffee with the superintendent via Zoom. I got one of the doctors from Los Angeles County Department of Public Health and brought them in; that was one of our most well-attended coffees with the superintendent and it was solely focused on keeping your children safe, keeping your children healthy, keep your family safe and healthy, and what's going to happen with these vaccinations and because we have been putting out a lot of information. This came from talking to people and getting a lot of questions about safety and vaccinations. So finally, I just thought I want to get a professional in front of them because I'm the wrong kind of doctor for this. So, I wanted to give them an opportunity, and I tell you what, we went

for about 2 and a half hours, and we could have gone for 3 and a half, but the doctor had to go. It was a great time and we got a lot of positive feedback, and I think that's where the community kind of really said okay, this guy's really trying to help everybody, because at this point—at one point in this whole pandemic—our area really had one of the highest infectious rates in LA County. I mean it was ravaging our community totally and I said we gotta stop it. So, I have to try to educate as many members of the community as I can—whether they have kids in our district or not—so we'd invite everybody if you have friends that aren't even in the district, and they live around there tell them to tune in you know, whatever because they—people need to get this information.

Superintendent C described a meeting with staff to review safety ideas and protective equipment as a source of perceptual data collection:

> I remember that early on, we're debating whether, we should, well, plexiglass barriers. It was a popular product at that time, so we were debating, what can we do to protect people? Create a little hospitallike protective layer? So, I remember that one of my facilities administrators came up with an idea because he went to the grocery store and he saw some very creative creations using the shower rod and create that using the clear shower. He brought it in and we took a picture and I presented this idea to my parents and to my staff. In the beginning, they were open to the idea and thought it was quite a good way to do that. As we continue to talk about it, I started hearing some negative reactions to it, saying that look, doesn't look good, you cannot see through it very well. I started hearing different voices, from parents, from staff, and I knew that this is probably not a device that

would serve the purpose. We kind of put it through the test. We had a staff member sit behind the curtain to see a whiteboard but it was kind of blurry. Through a few conversations like this, with different stakeholders, we trashed that idea.

In the literature, Boin et al. (2017) and FEMA (2010) supported the idea that during a crisis, leaders are expected to make decisions and take action through analysis, planning, communication, collaboration, and cooperation between partners to mitigate the crisis response to align resources and coordinate efforts. Artifacts collection in the decision making and coordination theme included school and district websites, community letters, and school reopening plans.

Collaboration. The final theme under the decision making and coordination critical task was collaboration. The responses for the theme of collaboration included 30 interview frequencies and four artifact frequencies. Collaboration had a total frequency of 34 and represented 15% of the data for decision making and coordination and 3% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 8).

Table 8

Strategies for Critical Task of Decision Making and Coordination and Overarching Theme of Collaboration

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Internal teams	4	2	11	2	13	38
Families and community	4	1	10	1	11	32
Other partners	4	1	9	1	10	30
Total		4	30	4	34	100

Note. Total frequency of collaboration = 34.

Within the overarching theme of collaboration were the coded strategies used for decision making and coordination: internal teams, families and community, and other partners. Superintendents utilized the strategy of internal teams composed of multiple stakeholders including members of their cabinet and district staffs who would review information and confirm accuracy prior to communicating with their communities. Another strategy utilized was families and community whereby superintendents would confer with families and community partners to gather information and assess plans as part of their decision-making and coordination process prior to communicating with their communities. Finally, superintendents utilized the strategy of other partners, including local superintendent peers, nonprofit agencies, and medical providers, to support with the COVID-19 testing and vaccinations in their communities and to communicate available resources. Decision-making and coordination themes were found to be in alignment to the crisis leadership literature by Boin et al. (2017). Urban elementary K–8 superintendents expressed that collaboration during COVID-19 was fundamental in leading their school districts.

Superintendent D described decision making and coordination through collaboration with internal teams of cabinet members:

> Again, I think we didn't want to rush in anything; we want to make sure we had as much information as we can get. I had people that, my group of people in this, in my executive cabinet that would very meet regularly, and we would throw everything around. Then, I had a group of people outside of that circle that or peers and professionals, that I could call. Because again, I wanted there to be value in what's going out; I don't want to be just wasting somebody's time, and

> that's how I would do it. My executive cabinet would look at it, consider it, go out and find more information, and come back together, see if anything had changed—go back out to the second ring and professionals—see if anything's changed after we come back together and if not, then we're good to go—let's move.

Superintendent A described decision making and coordination through collaboration with family groups and community members:

> Our families did a wonderful job, especially some of these key groups of parents transitioning to virtual platforms, because we had never done these virtual meetings. There's value in them moving forward. We quickly provided them with the tools and had standing meetings with our parents, with our other groups of partner agencies, and they were part of our planning and analysis as we were making changes because we're relying on everyone's support to come together to do what was best. I think in the short story, the existing structures that we brought forth were very helpful.

Superintendent C described decision making and collaboration with outside partners:

> Now with the outside partners, I myself and the district have been really blessed with outside partners. I have never, in my superintendency have reached out to so many outside partners as much as I had in the last 2 years. I'm not bragging but I have to, tell you that these outside partners that we have established partnership with have been telling me that they love our partnership and all of them continue to have this partnership with us to this day. They have been telling us that it was just so wonderful that we have been able to keep this strong partnership. I call

> them on weekends or I text them to give them the latest update. We have two health partners that do all of our COVID testing and help us with contact tracing. They have actually become, my direct contact. I don't even give it to my assistant superintendent, because for example, we have two health partners, one doing vaccination, one doing testing; they have my direct line. They have my permission to call me 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and I have the same.

Superintendent E described decision making and collaboration with outside partners of regional peers:

> The [city] superintendents are very close and get along really well, so we were very much sharing information sharing, sharing what letters you send it out to your staff and your parents—can I see a copy—what protocols are you using? How did you do that and so on. I think the early stages of COVID really solidified our group of superintendents and that was my core group of supporters, as we got to bounce things off of each other because [city] is such a small area but we have a lot of districts. So whatever one district did had an impact on the other person's district because parents were sharing a lot of information on Facebook, so we wanted to make sure we were sharing the same message and information.

The overall frequency and major coded themes that surfaced from the semistructured interviews and coded artifacts for the decision making and coordination critical task were authoritative with 39%, communication at 24%, data collection at 22%, and collaboration at 15%. The superintendents' responses for sense making demonstrated the four major themes when leading during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question 3

How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 district in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use meaning making crisis leadership strategies during the COVID 19 pandemic of 2020?

Research Question 3 sought to identify and describe the leadership and management practices using meaning making, one of the five CTSCL framework. For this study, meaning making was defined as the communication of an account of a crisis situation to those directly affected, factually presenting a narrative that shows empathy and instills confidence in their framing of the crisis and response measures to establish sense of direction and hope to reduce fear and anxiety (Barnard, 1940; Boin et al., 2017; Boin & McConnell, 2007; Boin & Renaud, 2013; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017).

A series of three questions was asked to gather data for the meaning making critical task variable. Interview questions were asked of each superintendent to collect data for Research Question 3. The data were clustered into three overarching theses for meaning making based on urban elementary K–8 superintendent's responses along with 169 frequencies and 40 artifacts. Figure 7 illustrates the frequency of the themes for meaning making.

Common message. The theme with the highest number of frequencies under the meaning making critical task was common message. The responses for the theme of common message included 89 interview frequencies and 21 artifact frequencies. Common message had a total frequency of 110 and represented 45% of the data for meaning making and 10% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 9). Within the overarching theme for common message

were the four coded strategies of creating a sense of calm, consistent and timely communication, putting issues in local context, and developing mutual understanding of issues. Superintendents utilized the strategy of creating a sense of calm by maintaining a calm demeanor to create a sense of comfort and demonstrate that they were knowledgeable and ready to take on challenges. The strategy of providing consistent and timely communication was also utilized to reduce fear and anxiety associated with not hearing information or knowing when something would be or how it would be communicated.

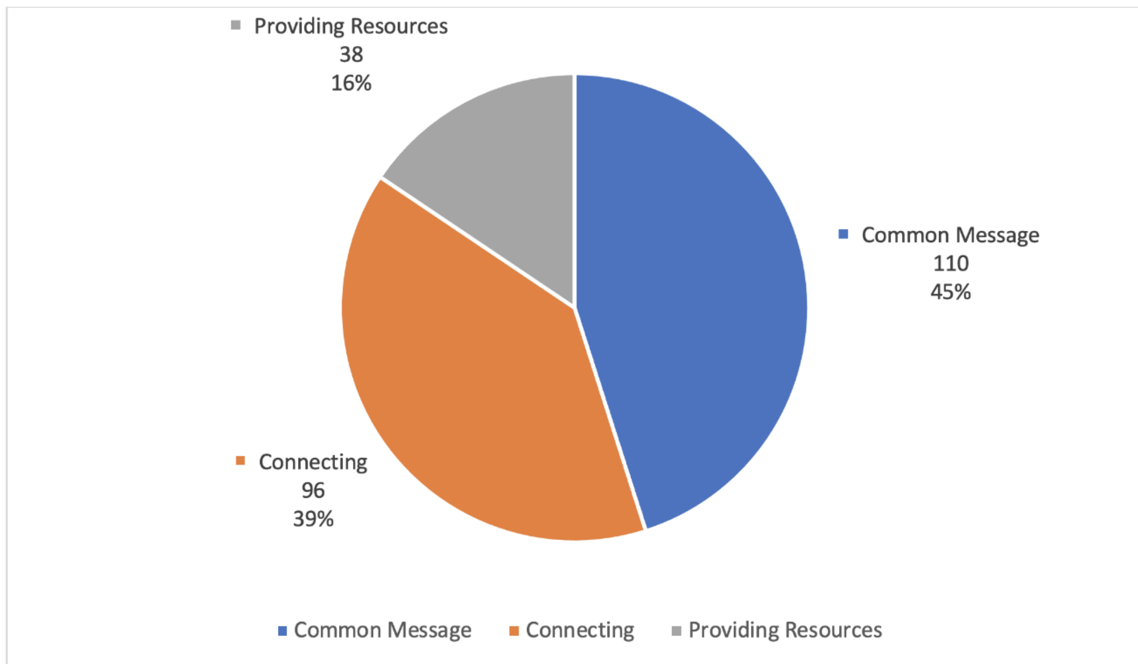

Figure 7. Frequency of coded entries for meaning making.

Table 9

Strategies for Critical Task of Meaning Making and Overarching Theme of Common Message

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Creating a sense of calm	5	4	25	4	29	26
Consistent and timely communication	5	6	22	6	28	25
Putting issues in local context	5	6	22	6	28	25
Developing mutual understanding of issues	5	5	20	5	25	24
Totals		21	89	21	110	100

Note. Total frequency of common message = 110.

Additional findings by Boin et al. (2017), Gainey (2010), and Matejic (2015) indicated that leaders now must respond quickly and effectively to crisis to frame the message and meet the public's demand for nearly instantaneous information to demonstrate they have recognized and managed threats early or face backlash for actual or perceived failures. Superintendent E described being forthright and honest in communication with staff to provide factual information from public authorities and create a sense of calm:

> I didn't sugarcoat things with my staff; I had kind of a template for my monthly state of the district addresses where we would talk … whereas the superintendent, I would say just kind of what the state is saying, here is what the county is saying, here's how we're going to interpret these dictates, and then I would switch over to my curriculum Assistant Superintendent who would then talk about this PowerPoint just to do it, so I will always go first and kind of talking calming tones. I know it's scary at this point but here is what we're going to do and what

we're doing is very similar to what everybody else is doing, reassure them by giving them information so they weren't in a vacuum.

Superintendent D described providing consistent and timely communication that could be relied on and not frequently changed due to communicating too quickly:

> Making sure that I provided the most accurate information possible, and so again, I would just go through that process of—here's the information, let's go through it, make sure it's accurate, let's see if we find anything that counters this or that makes this kind of you know forgettable. If not, if it strengthens it, then let's include that information and get it out, so I think that different levels of accurate information—in terms of looking for our staff and then out looking for our families, because our families work, I mean quite honest with you a lot of our families have worked through this whole thing.
>
> We also, again, this may sound kind of repetitive, but I think there's value in it; we weren't racing to be the first person to publish stuff unless it was our own data. When it was our own data, we put it out there and say hey—this is how it's affected us or whatever, but we didn't want to create a narrative. We did not want to create a narrative because the minute you create a narrative, then you own something, and I don't want to own something that I'm not well educated in—you know, education, I could do that, but when you start talking about pandemic—we want to make sure that the sources and the information we were using were accurate.
>
> You know, we want to make sure, at least, I wanted to make sure it was coming at the right time, and I think the timing is everything, especially when you

get districts that are—they jump on something, and then they put it out right away, and it changes and that have to change what they said, and I think that was probably one of the biggest compliments that parents did pay us and said, you know we'd like the way your information and comes out to that you don't have to rescind over and over again—that's what we were trying to stay away from—like it's changed or the schedules changed and data points changed and we didn't want it to seem that way. We want to make sure we got it right the first time if we could.

Superintendent B reflected on his communication of a factual narrative and framing the crisis within a local context aligned to neighboring district:

> There were certain norms, certain pieces of communication that I think organically came out of the pandemic that everyone was communicating. For example, the case rates, the positivity rates, the death rates. All those pieces, those are the kind of scientific statistical pieces that help people not only determine what level of spread was occurring within the community but also use it as a comparison. Where is my district and this is where district A, or district B, or district C is. We can kind of see where we are compared to others, and I think those types of pieces, like I said, organically came out of the tools and the communication that we were receiving from the public health and from our county office of education. The other pieces were the specific data that our community was asking for: keep our kids safe what … what types of PPE? How many hand sanitizers? How many hand washing stations do you have? How often are the classroom sanitize? You know what kinds of barriers you're using

> in the classroom? And so, I think that helped in terms of by them asking those questions that really created the data that we had to give them, as well, and I think the other piece in terms of kind of the factual pieces we depend heavily on making sure that anything that we shared, we had a written document to back that up.

Superintendent A described the need to communicate a common message to develop a mutual understanding of issues through a factual narrative for her community:

> Again, that evolved because, I think our approach, like I said, I think I touched on this; our approach initially it was just kind of just to regurgitate, the information that was being shared with us, but then when, and this happened within those first 2 weeks, it became very obvious that, we had to construct the narrative for our school community. It wasn't necessarily about taking these templates that Lego was providing and, and then, so, it was about us really helping our community make, not make meaning, but, but really understanding what was happening, the resources that were providing and, kind of stating that this is something we're, just kind of setting the tone for we're here for you. We're gonna, we're in this together and so forth. I don't know if I'm answering that.

During a crisis, leaders of organizations face many unknown risks yet are expected to predict, recognize, and detect issues that turn into crises and respond strategically even when information is limited (Al Saidi et al., 2020; Fortunato et al., 2017). Superintendents A, B, D, and E utilized common types of information to provide information consistent with state and local agencies to develop a mutual understanding of the crisis, framing it within the context of their districts and surrounding communities.

Connecting. The theme with the second highest number of frequencies under the meaning making critical task was connecting. The responses for the theme of connecting included 78 interview frequencies and 18 artifact frequencies. Connecting had a total frequency of 96 and represented 39% of the data for meaning making and 9% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 10). Within the overarching theme for connecting were the three coded strategies establishing trusting relationships, focusing on people, and avoiding political alignment. Superintendents used the strategy of establishing trusting relationships by providing accurate information and being available to answer questions for families and employees as a way of connecting. The strategy of focusing on people to connect and provide opportunities for meaningful dialogue to express their needs and concerns was used by superintendents to remain connected with their communities. Lastly, superintendents used the strategy of avoiding political alignment providing links to primary sources of information to ensure their communities that they were acting on information provided by reputable sources and allowing their communities to verify the information as a means of connecting and establishing trust.

Table 10

Strategies for Critical Task of Meaning Making and Overarching Theme of Connecting

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Establishing trusting relationships	5	6	30	6	36	38
Focusing on people	5	4	32	4	36	38
Avoiding political alignment	5	8	16	8	24	24
Total		18	78	18	96	100

Note. Total frequency of connecting = 96

Superintendent D shared strategies used to establish trusting relationships with frontline staff:

> We had a lot of frontline workers here from the very beginning, I mean our cafeteria people and groundskeepers and custodians they never left. They worked right through it. So, we wanted to make sure they were asking a lot of questions and just like with our families, just there was a real high need to, many of them live in our communities. We needed to win their trust over and I had to make sure that I provided the most accurate information possible.

Superintendent C described how she focused on people and their needs to meet and express their concerns and interest.

> Well, as I mentioned before, I'm going to reiterate some of the things that I have shared providing an opportunity to have a real dialogue means a lot. I have to tell you that there have been so many times individuals who have issues who emailed me and it will say, well, give me a call or come to my office, at this time, if you have, and when that happened, oftentimes they don't get their requests approved and yet they all left by thanking me: "Thank you so much for giving me an hour. I know that you're awfully busy, but just having this time to share with you makes me feel a lot better." That's really the typical response that I have. Of course, in my communication, even if, even though I have, I had to say, "No." I wanted to give them all the time that they need to share with me why they had such request, what's bothering them.

Superintendent B explained how he avoided political alignment by providing information in a nonpartisan way, citing sources to establish trust:

So, like if we shared data from the public health it was always followed by … here's a reference right like … just like a dissertation here's a reference if you don't, believe me click on the link you're going to find exactly what I'm telling you; these are the new guidelines or protocols from public health and here's the link to their Tier 1 community health protocol so you can see for yourself … here's how we have to respond to cases on campus and here's a link for the matrix right for the code response matrix and I think doing that. I think the first few times that we did that I'm sure a large percentage of our community actually click those links to verify that what we were saying was true, and I think after a while we kept doing it, we kept, including that I don't think that we're doing it as much because they believed us; it's like okay … We trust you.

Superintendent E described demonstrating his care for people in his organization by focusing on people to establish and maintain trusting relationships:

I think initially during that March through June phase when people would get sick and we know very little about it and that there was a lot of fear. Trying to share with people here are ways you can protect yourself prevaccine, wash your hands, wear a mask. You know staying socially distanced and also share with them that it's a virus that impacts people differently, and there are people on this call who have lost loved ones and kids you have at your school have lost loved ones. You know, it's real, even though, you may not be impacted or get sick and it's not impacting you that much. There are other people who have been impacted and will die, and I think that was kind of sobering but also comforting that they knew

that I was taking it seriously, you know sharing with information that will help protect them in the early stages of the pandemic.

Panda et al. (2020) wrote that superintendents faced a highly polarized environment in which the framing of the COVID-19 crisis centered around healthcare to economic impacts being the priority. Beliefs about issues such as school closures, social distancing, mask mandates, and reopening the economy increased polarization resulting at times in public ideologies falling into alignment with political parties in the United States and abroad (Panda et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020; Radwan & Radwan, 2020). Superintendents B, C, D, and E described strategies to establish and maintain trust and avoid politically aligning by connecting with people in their organizations to frame the crisis and make meaning for their communities.

Providing resources. The final theme under the meaning making critical task was providing resources. The responses for the theme of providing resources included 46 interview frequencies and 18 artifact frequencies. Providing resources had a total frequency of 64 and represented 16% of the data for meaning making and 4% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 11). Within the overarching theme for providing resources were the three coded strategies being proactive, family needs, and staff needs. Superintendents utilized the strategy of being proactive in providing resources and support structures to their communities to identify potential risks and work to minimize the impact or prevent issues from arising when possible. Another strategy utilized was focusing on family needs by providing support for families experiencing loss and impacted by the economic disparity exasperated by the pandemic, issues not generally taken on by school districts in the

scope presented. Finally, superintendents employed a strategy of focusing on staff needs and employee wellness including mental health resources.

Table 11

Strategies for Critical Task of Meaning Making and Overarching Theme of Providing Resources

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Being proactive	5	7	23	7	30	47
Family needs	5	4	15	4	19	30
Staff needs	4	7	8	7	15	23
Totals		18	46	18	64	100

Note. Total frequency of providing resources = 64.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the economic and social disparities children and families face, especially in urban areas that have impacted their ability to engage successfully and navigate educational systems and access resources (Ahram et al., 2014; C. J. Johnson, 2014; Ratcliffe et al., 2016; Schaffer et al., 2018; Seke, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; Yeung et al., 2020; Zviedrite et al., 2021). Superintendent B described being proactive by providing resources to support families and staff:

> And I think that really helped people understand like that … that we were on the same page, we were all feeling that loss, and so that building that sense of community in terms of work together in this … so how do we move forward, and I think the other piece around that was making a concerted effort to find resources to help people cope through that loss, so we partnered, for example with Foothill Family Services, with LA County Department of Mental Health Services. We got everybody the Calm APP, we contracted with Care Solace, which is an online platform for that connects individuals who are experiencing social-emotional

issues with support, either free or through their insurance provider or medical. We hired additional psychologists and therapists for our district, and so we implemented a professional development series for educators, in terms of how to support kids. Through social-emotional, in terms of emotional support virtually. How to identify signs of problems in a virtual environment … like if you're interacting with your classroom, look in the background, you know, see what the home environment looks like, does it look dingy, does it look, you know and look for signs of potential abuse or stress. And I think all those things really helped in terms of giving people on are giving the impression to our community that we were in tune to their need, and we were going to respond to them.

Superintendent D shared the emotions of focusing on family needs by providing support for families experiencing loss and impacted by the economic disparity of the pandemic:

> My empathy we had a lot of our families, they were losing family members. A lot of our families are going hungry. There was just a lot of bad stuff going on, and I will tell you. One of my greatest—I guess I'm not sure what word I'm looking for, but it didn't feel right. At least to me, that every educated people had a promised income at the end of the month, and some of our families weren't getting it. And we'd have to go out and take them, you know all the food that we were given; we actually loaded buses and drove out to their apartments, and we get into their houses, and there'd be no food, and just a lot of hungry kids, and many family members and … That was tough. That was actually really tough.

Superintendent A shared providing resources to support the high family needs in her community:

> If you need resources like counseling, school supplies, or food, you're not alone. It was important that the messaging was always just, this is what it is. Again, being nonpolitical and focusing on what was within our scope of control, which is the supports people need. There was a lot of support. I was so happy when those waivers came forward with the United States Department of Agriculture because it wasn't just about feeding kids, it was about feeding their families.

To be successful during a crisis, superintendents must be able to coordinate with community partners, communicate with local stakeholders, and understand the political environments and legal mandates that need to be addressed (Kitamura, 2019; Willis et al., 2020). Superintendents A, B, and D described being proactive to meet the needs of families and staff during the crisis.

The overall frequency and major coded themes that surfaced from the semistructured interviews and coded artifacts for the meaning making critical task were common message with 45%, connecting at 39%, and providing resources at 26%. The superintendents' responses for meaning making demonstrate the three major themes when leading during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question 4

How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use accounting crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?

Research Question 4 sought to identify and describe the leadership and management practices using accounting, one of the five CTSCL framework. For this study, accounting was defined as taking personal responsibility for identifying and

accepting a crisis and taking actions to achieve goals and answering to the community for the results (Boin, 2019; Brändström, 2016; McGrath & Whitty, 2015).

A series of three questions was asked to gather data for the accounting critical task variable. Interview questions were asked of each superintendent to collect data for Research Question 4. The data were clustered into three overarching themes for accounting based on urban elementary K-8 superintendent's responses, along with 143 frequencies and 21 artifacts. Figure 8 illustrates the frequency of the themes for accounting.

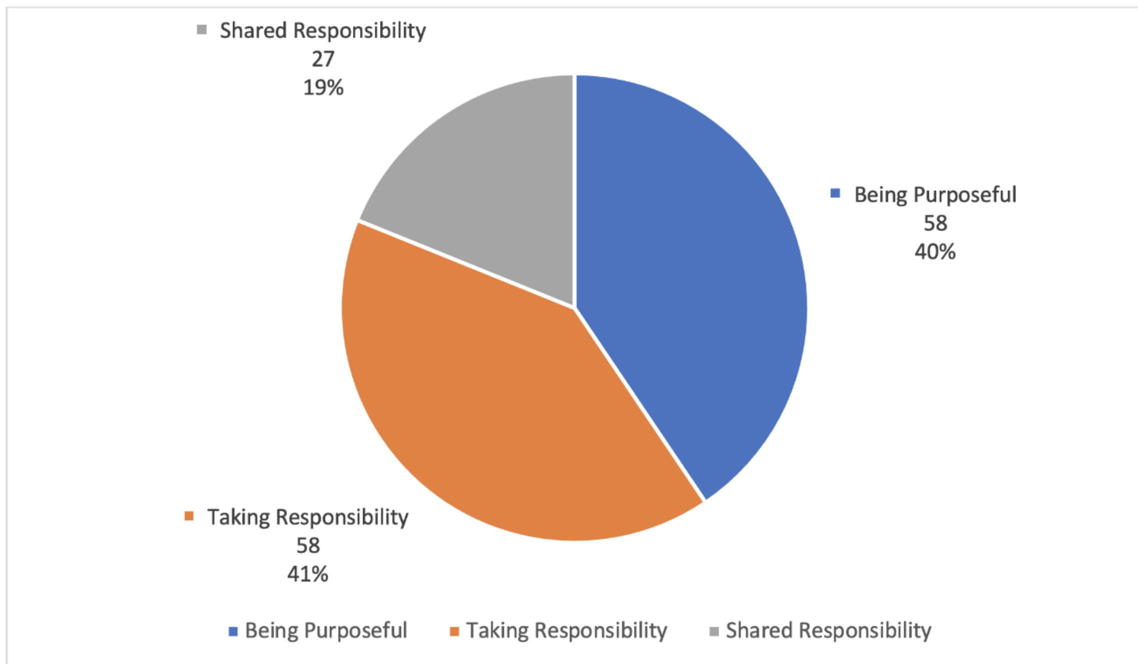

Figure 8. Frequency of coded entries for accounting.

Taking responsibility. The theme with the highest frequency count under the accounting critical task was taking responsibility. The responses for the theme of taking responsibility included 60 interview frequencies and 12 artifact frequencies. Taking responsibility had a total frequency of 68 and represented 41% of the data for accounting

and 5% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 12).

Table 12

Strategies for Critical Task of Accounting and Overarching Theme of Taking Responsibility

Coded strategy	# of interviews coded	# of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Taking ownership of the crisis	5	6	35	6	37	54
Standing by decisions	5	2	15	2	17	25
Pivoting when circumstances necessitated change	3	4	10	4	14	21
Total		12	60	12	68	100

Note. Total frequency of taking responsibility = 68.

Taking responsibility is more than accounting for a situation or event; it is a mindset in which individuals determine that they are obligated for taking action and making something happen (Zenger, 2015). Within the overarching theme for taking responsibility were three coded strategies of taking ownership of the crisis, standing by decisions, and pivoting when circumstances necessitated change. Superintendents utilized the strategy of taking ownership of the crisis with the mindset that they were obligated to take action in the districts to ensure safety and continuity of learning. These superintendents accounted for their decisions by providing rationale for their thinking and when applicable stating why they were more restrictive than public health mandates. Another strategy superintendents utilized was standing by decisions. Superintendents communicated that they made decisions with the best available information at their disposal, and whether it was determined to be a “good” or “bad” decision, they were the individual ultimately responsible for the decision being made. Lastly, superintendents

utilized the strategy of pivoting when circumstances necessitated change by changing courses of action to ensure their communities could best be served when safety measures and learning conditions changed as a result of state and local mandates.

Superintendent A shared taking ownership of the crisis and responsibility for being more restrictive than public health mandated requirements in a letter to the community:

> Last week, Los Angeles County lifted their indoor mask requirements for most indoor facilities. The county and state also announced that indoor masking requirements for K–12 schools will be lifted on March 11, 2022, at 11:59 p.m. According to both the county and state, these decisions were made based on the continued decline of COVID-19 cases and the CDC's COVID-19 Community Level Matrix.
>
> Since the beginning of this pandemic, we have always made decisions based on what best serves our school communities. Although the county and state have lifted indoor masking policies, both agencies still strongly recommend the use of masks indoors, and we will follow that recommendation. The district will continue to require wearing masks indoors at all district sites. While we will continue indoor masking, we do have other changes that will go into effect on Monday, March 14, 2022:
>
> The use of desk shields in classrooms is no longer required. Over the next few weeks, our facilities team will assist in the removal of shields from student desks. The use of medical-grade HEPA filters will still be required in all classrooms and indoor spaces.

> Outdoor masking: We believe the data is strong enough to start relaxing those requirements. Starting March 14, 2022, we will expand our mask-free zones to the majority of outdoor spaces. Masks will still be required in high traffic areas like lunch lines, hallways, and entrances and exits.
>
> Your child's school will be sharing more detailed information regarding specific identified areas on their campus. The decision to expand mask-free zones is based on declining case rates and the success of our current mask-free zones scattered across all district schools. However, if staff or students would like to continue wearing masks outdoors, we will support their decision to do so.
>
> Despite these changes, we still recommend wearing masks as often as possible since it is the best defense against COVID-19 infection and transmission, especially for the unvaccinated. If you are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine or booster, you can receive one for free from LA County or health care facilities.

Superintendent B shared his experience with coming to terms with his role and accountability for providing clear direction to lead his district:

> I think for me, the first piece was coming to the realization that, even though this isn't the work that I signed up for as a superintendent or as an educator, I didn't sign up to be a health officer, I didn't sign up to do contact tracing, or you know to manage a pandemic, but it was the work that I needed to do in order to help what I signed up for, which is educating kids, so I think that was the first piece; I had to come to terms, first with what my place was within that dynamic. And I think the second piece was you know, working with my team, working with my board on the fact that I'm going to take ownership of my role, and I'm going to

> bring to you recommendations. I'm going to bring to you options, and I'm going to help. I'm going to count on you to kind of support me when I move forward in those pieces. And I think another piece, which I mentioned earlier, is also acknowledging, and letting people know at the forefront that we're going to make mistakes, and guess what? I'm going to make mistakes and forgive me, ahead of time because, like I said I'm not a health officer; I'm not trained in that, but this is the work that that my district requires me to.

Superintendent C shared how she took responsibility for decisions and ownerships of the crisis by standing by decisions:

> Well, first of all, I don't think there's a way for me to dodge that personal responsibility, as I mentioned to if there any decision that the district made or the board made that any individual disagree with is always a superintendent spot. The finger will always be pointing at me. This is my personal philosophy, whether it's during the prices, the academic situation, or any other situation, I basically share with everybody that I'm personally responsible for all decisions made in the school district. If they are great example of, they are great decisions that people were applauding, then credits go to all of teammates. If they are something that, that are really bad decisions, I take full responsibility. So, and during the pandemic, it becomes very evident because I am the one who communicate; almost every single important communication is sent by me, even though I collect information from different groups of people, I will ask my assistant say, "Hey, do you have anything to add; I'm about to write this letter?"

Superintendent D described being accountable as the superintendent and taking ownership of the crisis:

> I think it's like no different than all the sudden you get married, here comes the kids, they're yours. You know, they're yours, and so I agreed, 5 years ago to be the superintendent of the district, whether it's a pandemic, whether it was an earthquake, and if it happens it's mine. I mean I've gone to a lot of training on emergencies, whether they're school shootings or earthquakes and whatever it might be, a natural disasters. And I will tell you, and you know this right, you don't know you're ready until you get through one. And that whole time you run around holding your breath just hoping, you can make it through the day, and that's the way it felt going through the pandemic, and of course there's support and help out there and you know where you can go and use all that. But I think the reality is, it's about your work ethic and it's about what you're truly raised to do, because I don't think that people can build a work ethic, and you have to be, you either have or you don't, and you're either going to fold or you're not, and so. You know I can remember when I first got my big first leadership gig as a high school principal, and my superintendent said, "Do you think you're ready?" and I said, "Well, I tell you what, you throw me in a deep end and I'm going to swim as far as I have to." I'm not going to drown and so she goes, "That's what I want to hear and that's good." Because then that's when you know it's just you start, you know, you fake it until you get it. You know seriously, but yeah, I just think it's you own it and you try to get as much accurate information, as you can and surround yourself with good people and just making sure everybody's

> communicating and I was lucky on all fronts. I had some really good people around me, and I had some really good information coming our way, so it was a good deal.

Superintendent E described being responsible for final decisions regarding changing standing practice as conditions warranted:

> In the early days of Zoom, there would be people who would hack the Zoom and my staff was arguing about should we use Zoom or should we use something more secure, who decided to use Zoom, and there was a lot of micromanagement if you will, especially on the teaching side, why are we doing things and so again, it was our ability and my responsibility to say we have to do things, we don't have time to decide how we're going to it, and just provide a clear direction, as well as support.

Being purposeful. The theme with the second highest frequency count under the accounting critical task was being purposeful. The responses for the theme of being purposeful included 43 interview frequencies and 15 artifact frequencies. Being purposeful had a total frequency of 58 and represented 40% of the data for accounting and 5% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 13). Within the overarching theme for being purposeful were the two coded strategies of making decisions based on best available information and clear direction. McCann and Selsky (2012) defined being purposeful as "thought and supportive action based on a clear sense of purpose and grounded in a positive self-identity and core set of values and beliefs" (p. 55). Superintendents utilized the strategy of making decisions based on best information available during turbulent times that were aligned to their

knowledge of their communities despite situations being unknown and unpredictable. Another strategy utilized was providing clear direction. Superintendents ensured members of their district communities received the same information so that they were all working in the same manner and being consistent.

Table 13

Strategies for Critical Task of Accounting and Overarching Theme of Being Purposeful

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Making decisions based on best available information	5	7	25	7	32	55
Clear direction	5	8	18	8	26	45
Total		15	43	15	58	100

Note. Total frequency of being purposeful = 58.

Superintendent A shared on communicating the direction the district was moving toward based on the best information available:

> I'm reflecting on a town hall that we have with our parents. That was very well attended, and again, we opened up a lot of meetings. Like, we host a lot of meetings at school districts, but that town hall was unlike anything we had ever seen in terms of attendance because parents had a lot of concerns about safety. Our approach kind of follows suit with that initial, like our initial decision to just be conservative and to peel off information layers in a way where we know that we could be very stable as we move forward, we continue to communicate that approach. Like, look, we're going to do things differently. We're going to be very conservative, but, ultimately, it's in our best interest to do it that way. If we feel it's safe to remove items or to do things differently, we'll get there

> eventually. When we feel like we don't have to go back. Right. That's something that we had to communicate over and over. Then, there was some pushback initially in the form of questions. A couple of folks, more staff than parents, questioned our ability to like, see through this, like, do you understand the risk that you're putting us in? And, and so we took the time to have individual conversations, right. Because at the end of the day, those are real fears that were manifesting themselves in that way. And so, I think we did okay. We did, we did good, we've had good participation. The teachers that actually remained out were teachers that were aware of, like, underlying health conditions. So, we supported them by transitioning them into the independent study program. But, there was a, I think there was a trust factor that really kicked in when the time was right. But, it was very much this sense of taking responsibility for what we were doing. We think we believe, not even like, think we believe this is the right thing. And, we believe that this plan is going to keep our community safe. We had to say that over and over.

Superintendent B described communicating the decision to remain in distance learning:

> So, from at the very beginning, it was pretty easy so that 2 week initial dismissal period. Right at the beginning of the 2nd week right, Governor Newsom basically says … hey this isn't going to happen, we're not coming back, without going to my board, without going to my bargaining units, without telling anybody. I put out the message saying we're staying in distance learning, and this is how we're going to proceed forward.

Superintendent D shared the challenge of making sure his team had the same information to make decisions and provide clear direction:

> Making sure that our leadership and by leadership, not just at the executive level, but even at the site level came across that we were all on the same team, had the same information, and we're all working in the same way. So, and that was a challenge, sometimes to make sure that everybody gave that information in the same way. The same amount, because we had always really been, we're going to stop here, and then the next time we'll pick up from here and go there. And we just wanted to make sure that everybody felt they were being treated equally. Some of our employees weren't getting more information and others and we didn't want that, we did not want.

Superintendent E described being the lead figure in the district to communicate a clear direction on health information:

> I really had to step up. As a superintendent you're tasked with handling things and being the barometer for the district, but I became more and more with regards to health-related issues, and I was the one delivering that … we didn't have to have a district nurse and our health clerks are not necessarily medical professional. They are people you know who support the kids—that have had training. I was the one who was delivering all of the health information because I was the most authoritative figure in the district, and the community needed to hear that information from me.

Bjork et al. (2018) and Kowalski and Brunner (2011) described superintendents as tasked with managing the new normal for education requiring them to navigate the

complexities of the crisis and plan, respond, and effectively navigate the impact of the crisis on their organizations. Superintendents A, B, D, and E described being purposeful in making decisions with the best information available to them and being accountable for providing clear direction.

Shared responsibility. The final theme under the accounting critical task was shared responsibility. The responses for the theme of shared responsibility included 23 interview frequencies and 27 artifact frequencies. Shared responsibility had a total frequency of 20 and represented 19% of the data for accounting and 2% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 14). Shared responsibility was an approach used to include multiple members of the district community to provide input and suggestions for decisions and courses of action to be taken. Within the overarching theme for shared responsibility were the two coded strategies of supporting staff and trusting your team. Superintendents employed the strategy of supporting staff by directly taking on their challenging issues and putting themselves as the sole person accountable for final decisions and actions. Superintendents trusted their teams by allowing team member to make or influence decisions and develop plans for the district community.

Table 14

Strategies for Critical Task of Accounting and Overarching Theme of Shared Responsibility

Coded strategy	# of interviews coded	# of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Supporting staff	5	0	10	2	10	50
Trusting your team	5	1	9	1	10	50
Total		1	19	3	20	100

Note. Total frequency of shared responsibility = 20.

Superintendent C described supporting her staff by taking on controversial issues:

> Anytime that we have any controversy, I would volunteer myself to be the one responding to the issues. There was one time during the negotiation, usually I don't facilitate the, the negotiation, right? It's my assistant superintendent human resources, but that was the time during the COVID situation. For us, I was attending in the anticipation that there will be questions asked, tough questions asked or challenges, related to the COVID situation. I can't remember exactly what that question was but, I was there listening to the question, and I was waiting to see if my assistant, I don't want to be rude. I did not want to, because I was like a guests attending the meeting. It was, it wasn't my meeting. So, but my HR assistant was very clear regarding my approach. It comes to that very tough question, and she basically said that, I think the superintendent would like to respond to that question. So immediately pass the ball to me. She did the right thing, you know? So, so that's basically tells you that has to be the new protocol. Any tough questions goes to me.

Superintendent A described trusting a committee to develop reopening plans and supporting their work when conditions changed or the plan was no longer immediately viable:

> There was this one point in the pandemic and it's hard to say like the beginning, there was a beginning. I don't know that there was an exact middle and there's no end yet. So, I will refer to it as the middle. This is after that initial surge, it was summertime and things were starting to kind of calm down, and were just all right, are we opening? Or are we not opening? We had this massive task force

that was planning for reopening. If you recall the governor just a few weeks before school opened said, schools will remain closed. It was like, oh, this work that we had done, right. For what reopening looks like. And it was intense. I think at one point I had about 80 people on this committee. I know, I know. The attempt was to bring in everyone, like there was a representation of everything in our district, right. We included parents, included organizations, associations included, different grade levels included, right, and classified staff and we didn't open. And, and so there was all this work and nobody said, oh my gosh, the governor just, like we met during the summer, no compensation. And they were looking at me like, because I said, okay, schools will remain closed. This is what we're doing, virtual learning. I could have easily been upset; the governor's making us close. But that doesn't get us anywhere. It was about framing the work, saying we did some really good work that we're going to carry forward when the time is right for us to open; for now, we're going to pivot. By the way, here's a plan, right? Because there wasn't even enough time to use that committee to talk about what, in our minds, we're going to be one of the districts that were going to reopen because we had, because of declining enrollment, we had the space and we had measured desks.

I mean, we had done it all. Again, I can't emphasize enough, how much work went into that reopening plan. And then it was shut down overnight. I had to take responsibility for the big pivot and still just really thank people. I still went forward and published, like, our reopening kind of strategy and still disseminated it to the group saying, this is it. This is the plan. We'll continue to

> meet so that when we are able to open and then, we are able to expand those learning pods. We reopened, it was a soft opening in the spring, and then gave parents the option. So, that was a really good example of all this work, all this energy, all this effort. I don't want to say for nothing because we did carry it forward, but I had to take responsibility for the quick shift.

Superintendent B described developing plans with stakeholders:

> I think I shared this a little bit before, which is unfortunate in the development of how we can respond to the pandemic, whether it was COVID-response plan or was our distance-learning plan or a hybrid-learning plan, because there was an educator partner involvement in the process in developing all of those tools; it didn't all fall on me, which was great.

Superintendent D described trusting his team:

> Surround yourself with good people and just making sure everybody's communicating, and I was lucky on all fronts; I had some really good people around me, and I had some really good information coming our way, so it was a good deal.

Superintendent E described sharing responsibility for instructional programs:

> There was also anxiety about how are we going to deliver learning to kids when we don't know how to do that. So through the efforts of our instructional department, the curriculum we created a really strong website with resources that teachers could use and helped immensely just removing anxiety for our teachers that we don't know how to do this, where they were afraid to be at home, trying to have to teach in their kitchens and discover all the resources.

The overall frequency and major coded themes that surfaced from the semistructured interviews and coded artifacts for the accounting critical task were taking responsibility with 41%, being purposeful at 40%, and shared responsibility at 19%. The superintendents' responses for accounting demonstrated the three major themes when leading during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question 5

How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use learning crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?

Research Question 5 sought to identify and describe the leadership and management practices using learning, one of the five CTSCL framework. For this study, learning was defined as determining causes, assessing the strength and weaknesses of the responses, and taking actions based on new understanding then recalibrating existing beliefs, policies, and organizational structure supporting the success of the organization (Argyris & Schön, 1997; Barnett & Pratt, 2000; Boin et al., 2017; House, 1999).

A series of three questions was asked to gather data for the learning critical task variable. Interview questions were asked of each superintendent to collect data for Research Question 5. The data were clustered into three overarching theses for learning based on urban elementary K–8 superintendent's responses, along with 93 frequencies and 10 artifacts. Figure 9 illustrates the frequency of the themes for learning.

Reflection. The theme with the highest frequency under the learning critical task was reflection. The responses for the theme of reflection included 43 interview frequencies and four artifact frequencies. Reflection had a total frequency of 47 and

represented 51% of the data for learning and 4% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 15).

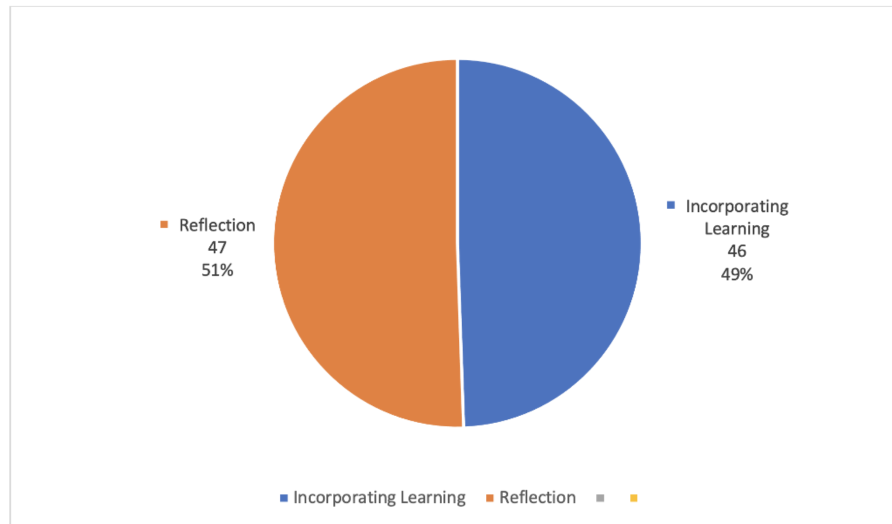

Figure 9. Frequency of coded strategies for learning.

Table 15

Strategies for Critical Task of Learning and Overarching Theme of Reflection

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Reflecting on personal leadership	5	1	28	1	29	62
Celebrate team success	4	1	8	1	9	19
Set aside time to debrief	3	2	7	2	9	19
Total		4	43	4	47	100

Note. Total frequency of reflection = 47.

Reflection is a deliberate process of examination, analysis, and mindful inquiry by an individual or organization focused on self-awareness and awareness of actions taken (Boin et al., 2017; Sherwood & Horton-Deutsch, 2015). Within the overarching theme for reflection were the three coded strategies of reflecting on personal leadership, celebrating team success, and setting aside time to debrief. The results were consistent

with Boin et al. (2017) because the exemplary superintendents interviewed shared how they reflected on their leadership, celebration of success of their teams, and the need to debrief with their teams. Superintendents used the strategy of reflecting on their personal leadership by taking stock of who they were as leaders, leading with their organizational values in mind, and demonstrating vulnerability throughout the pandemic. Another strategy superintendents utilized was celebrating the teams' success as a recognition of their work as frontline workers and the support they provided for their district communities. Finally, superintendents employed the strategy of setting aside time to debrief informally and frequently with their teams throughout the course of the pandemic to guide decisions and develop plans in the best interest of their district communities.

Superintendent B described how the pandemic helped him learn about himself as a leader:

> I think the big piece was … obviously an affirmation. I'm going to reframe the question, not in terms of another question about me, but I want to talk about the team first. I think one thing it affirmed was my belief in our district about how we can manage an emergency and how well we could do it. Because we did exceptionally well; I'm so proud of our team, everyone … from our students, our educators, and support partners and community in terms of just pulling together and how much they donated to our district and also to myself in terms of you know, no challenges too big. If you know our approach, and he puts it as a team, and I think personally what it is, is, I really learned a lot about myself as it relates to my emotional intelligence in particular.

Superintendent C shared personal reflection on herself as a leader:

> I learned that I'm just a human. I had to look at my personal fears; thank God that I actually wasn't. I wasn't thinking about my health and my safety, which I probably should, because I told people that I had people working on the front line. I need to be there also working on the front line. I learned that I'm very vulnerable. I'm subject to emotional stress as a result of seeing my group deteriorating, my team deteriorating, the once upon the time, a possible relationship with a union collapses overnight. I also learned that even though, as a leader, I'm honorable, I am subject to obviously emotional stress. There's hope again; my model for myself is continue to put in your best to do the right thing. You'll get the most, the best possible outcome. That has been my model for myself and for my team and it's working.

Superintendent E shared personal reflection on what he learned about himself as a leader:

> I always prided myself on how I handled stress and compartmentalized all the various levels of projects, anxiety, and stress that you go through as a superintendent. But this really taxed me. I had never been in a situation where almost on a daily, weekly, monthly basis, everything is changing, and it was frustrating until you just realize that this is the new normal. Because originally, they did it this way, and then he realized, okay, this is how it is and that's the new normal. You know, there are times that for me it was just overwhelming. You know, but the reality was, that my staff was looking to me for direction, and my board was looking for guidance on how best to navigate.

Superintendent A shared reflection and celebration of her team's successes in a short paragraph in her welcome back to school letter.

> When we safely reopened in Spring 2021, we felt so much joy seeing our students, families, and peers. Together, we proved that we could safely provide in-person instruction by following all the COVID-19 safety protocols. We will use the momentum of a successful spring and summer session when we welcome our students back to campus. The first day of school is Wednesday, August 25, 2021, and we will be returning full in-person instruction 5 days a week. Attached to this message, you will find our 2021–22 district calendar.

Superintendent D shared the need to set aside time to debrief, celebrate successes, and work through challenges:

> Looking at it from 360 degrees talking about you know fiscal issues, talking about technology issues. Talking about HR issues on all of those, really thinking, okay, if this ever happens again, these were our lessons. These were our concerns, these were things that we did very well, and these are the things that we didn't think we did well at all, and so we will get to that point but we haven't had the time to debrief, yet we just haven't so we have an administrators' retreat that we will debrief that.

Supported by Boin et al. (2017) and Pearson and Mitroff (1993), leaders must take crisis opportunity for learning potential lessons, contingency planning, organizational reform, policy planning, and training for future crises because what is learned from one specific crisis may be transferable to future events. Superintendents A, B, C, D, and E provided examples of strategies used to reflect on their experiences.

Incorporating learning. The final theme under the learning critical task was incorporating learning. The responses for the theme of incorporating learning included 43 interview frequencies and three artifact frequencies. Incorporating learning had a total frequency of 46 and represented 49% of the data for learning and 4% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 16). Incorporating learning analyzed the impact of an organization's response to a crisis will be critical to how successful it is in the short, intermediate, and long term. Within the overarching theme for incorporating learning were three coded strategies of better prepared of a crisis, increasing empathy and vulnerability, and greater sense of urgency. Superintendents utilized the strategy of being better prepared for crisis by continually incorporating new information about available resources, support structures, and guidelines into their practices during the pandemic and by planning for future crises. Another strategy used by superintendents was to focus on being empathetic and acknowledging their vulnerabilities as a strength. Lastly, superintendents utilized the strategy of gaining a greater sense of urgency by addressing issues in a more direct and timely manner than they may have in the past.

Table 16

Strategies for Critical Task of Learning and Overarching Theme of Incorporating Learning

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Better prepared for crisis	5	6	13	3	16	35
Increased empathy and vulnerability	4	0	16	0	16	35
Greater sense of urgency	4	0	14	0	14	30
Total		6	43	3	46	100

Note. Total frequency of incorporating learning = 46.

Superintendent E described being better prepared for a crisis by becoming aware of support structures during the time of crisis:

> I think there is a level of if a crisis were to come up again and again, we can handle it, we know, we know that there will be reference points from, the county or state for us to follow up, get the figure it out myself. I do appreciate the way that LACOE, had their monthly or weekly meeting to provide the information that things are changing so rapidly. But I feel as if, whether it be a fire or earthquake, I know who to reach out to provide support and help. And then we can figure it out so if it happened, being a superintendent in a very small district, with very few resources, and with my cabinet having to wear multiple hats all the time. You know there's really of the way everyone stepped up and really go outside of their comfort zones to meet the challenges of the crisis we were experiencing.

Superintendent C described learning about herself and her leadership characteristics:

> I learned that I'm just a human; I had to cook with my personal fears; thank God that I actually wasn't. I wasn't thinking about my health and my safety, which I probably should, because I told people that I had people working on the front line. I need to be there also working on the front line. I learned that I'm very vulnerable. I'm subject to emotional stress as a result of seeing my group deteriorating, my team, deteriorating the ones upon the time, a possible relationship with a union collapses overnight. I also learned that even though, as a leader, I'm honorable; I am subject to obviously emotional stress. There's hope again my model for myself is continue to put in your best to do the right thing.

> You'll get the most, the best possible outcome. That has been my model for myself and for my team and it's working.

Superintendent A described a greater sense of urgency:

> I've been exercising this boldness post pandemic. I think there's a way of approaching a situation. I had a leadership style before that was a very inclusive, I think back of like how I would give feedback and not that I wasn't direct, but I would soften things, like, I was very careful about how I delivered my messages, and the pandemic really helped me to reflect on, just how some things are so dire. I don't know about you, but I feel like I have the sense of urgency that I always had but now it's 10 times more, so I don't have time anymore.

According to Adely and Balcerzak (2020), superintendents, especially those serving in lower income communities, were challenged to support students with barriers to access to devices and connectivity, which became widely apparent as children could not access online learning platforms that more affluent children were able to do. Those involved in crisis response and leadership are expected to study the lessons learned and reincorporate them into organizational practices, policies, and laws (Boin et al., 2017). Superintendents A, C, and E incorporated learning throughout the crisis within the context of their district.

The overall frequency and major coded themes that surfaced from the semistructured interviews and coded artifacts for the learning critical task were reflection with 51% and incorporating learning at 49%. The superintendents' responses for learning demonstrated the two major themes when leading during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question 6

How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties describe their experiences as leaders during the time of crisis?

Research Question 6 sought to describe the urban elementary K–8 superintendents' experiences as leaders during times of crisis. For this study, crisis was defined as an unpredictable event or situation that develops rapidly, threatening the social norms and core values of an organization and requiring leaders to respond for the safety, security, health, and welfare of people and the organization (Boin & 't Hart, 2003; Boin et al., 2013; USA.gov, n.d.). Further, crisis leadership is defined as the ability of leaders to identify issues that have high levels of uncertainty and threat, process information, set priorities, and make critical decisions that influence and enable others to contribute to achievement of a common goal (Clark White et al., 2016; Harms et al., 2017).

A series of three questions was asked during the semistructured interviews to gather data for crisis leadership. Interview questions were asked of each superintendent to gather data to answer Research Question 6. The data were grouped into three overarching themes for crisis leadership based on the urban elementary K–8 superintendents' responses, along with 177 frequencies and 30 artifacts. Figure 10 illustrates the frequency of the themes for crisis leadership.

Trust. The theme with the highest frequency for crisis leadership was trust. The responses for the theme of trust included 81 interview frequencies and 18 artifact frequencies. Trust had a total frequency of 102 and represented 58% of the data for crisis leadership and 9% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the

researcher (see Table 17). Trust is an assurance that one puts in an individual or organization that lets oneself manage the level of risk in one's relationship (Evans, 2015). Moreover, leaders who are trusted have a greater control over moving initiatives forward, enhancing collaboration, and improving their ability to execute across their organization (Evans, 2015).

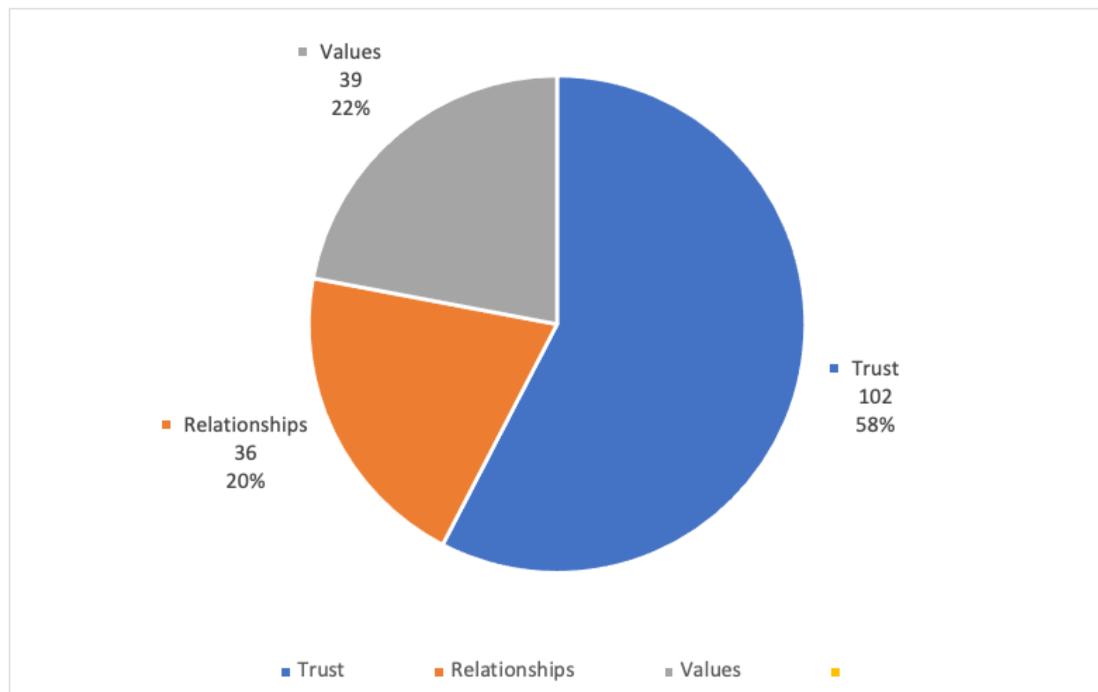

Figure 10. Frequency of coded strategies for crisis leadership.

Within the overarching theme for trust were the five coded strategies of being transparent and honest, accepting uncertainty, creating a sense of calm, first focus on health and safety, and showing vulnerability. Superintendents utilized the strategy of being transparent and honest with communicating their priorities and rationale for decisions. Another strategy used was accepting uncertainty by creating a positive climate with vulnerability and acceptance that information was limited when making decisions.

Utilizing the strategy of creating a sense of calm was employed to being deliberate when making decisions to avoid retracting decisions or giving the perception that leadership could not be trusted. Finally, superintendents used the strategy of showing vulnerability by being willing to accept and to share their own fears and to know that they did not have all the answers for their district communities. The results were supported by Kowalski (2005) who stated that the role of the superintendent has evolved a great deal over the past years becoming more extensive, complex, and demanding.

Table 17

Strategies for Crisis Leadership and Overarching Theme of Trust

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Being transparent and honest	5	7	21	7	28	27
Accepting uncertainty	5	3	20	3	23	23
Creating a sense of calm	5	3	17	3	20	20
First focus on health and safety	5	5	12	5	17	17
Showing vulnerability	5	0	14	0	14	13
Total		18	84	18	102	100

Note. Total frequency of trust = 102.

Superintendent D described creating a sense of calm and being transparent about decisions being made:

> Really, we just followed the science, to be honest with you, we weren't again I wasn't, I wasn't looking to set the standard wow Gary made this decision in the wake of this pandemic; I'm a doctor; I'm not going to do that; you know that's common sense, so I just, you know, really want to make sure I understood what data points are out there, especially the infectious rates, you know what are we

> doing, what are we not doing, how are we keeping people apart and that the very beginning.
>
> You know that was the thing, nobody comes in contact with anybody. Everybody stays apart and everybody's washing your hands this and that and so, we just made sure we did that and always was a matter of, this is for your health and safety, not for ours, but for your health and safety and again it just, we just wanted to be a broken record and repeat, you know we took those typical sound bites are talking points and we repeat them and repeat and repeat them. So, people would hear them and they go yeah you know, and after a while, they started believing them and it became a situation where, they did, they started believing us and it went right along with.

Superintendent E described being transparent and putting the health and safety of people first:

> I feel as if the way you know public safety versus my educational responsibility as a superintendent I—how they're going to hold us responsible for attendance or all these different things if you want to err on the side of caution to keep everyone safe, and you don't know what the downside of bringing everyone back to school. But at the end of the day, I think I was able to get support recognition from the stakeholders. Throughout my decision-making process, always been through the lens of responsibility to make sure everyone was safe and healthy. Once that is done then how are we going to educate in a safe and healthy environment? So, I think that was my go-to line all the time and people just understood that if I was

going to make a recommendation, it was under the guideline and unless a decision was made under how to keep people safe during a pandemic.

Superintendent A described intentionally going slow with decision making to ensure health and safety were the priority and to create a sense of calm:

> The decision, again, was slow to make decisions. We were very deliberate. When I say slow, like, I mean, not that we were taking our sweet time, but that we were very clear about what it is that we were doing and building on our actions. What the underlying concern was the safety of everyone, that was first and foremost. So, we would have these tests in our questioning as to how the things that we were doing could keep people safe and making sure that the protocols and the people that were developing those protocols, we're all that were all on the same page.

Superintendent B described accepting uncertainty and being vulnerable:

> I think a big one was creating an environment that was where it was okay to be vulnerable. Vulnerable to the fact that you didn't have all the facts, you didn't know what was going to happen, that we were acknowledging that we were in an environment where we're pivoting and responding constantly and, in some cases from day to day—one protocol was one way, one day, and the next day it shifted.

Superintendent C described balancing health and safety with organizational purpose when things were uncertain:

> I think there's two levels of understanding them, understanding what is threatening the safety, and then understanding the human side, the perspectives of the Phelps. Why do they feel that they are not safe? One of the things that I share

with my group is, when it comes to safety, there are two levels of understanding. One is the facts. This is the virus; this is what the science says. The other one is your personal feeling. You know? There's not, I share with everybody in during those days that will never be one situation that we can create a well conditions that we can create that can make everybody feel safe, because it's a subjective feeling. This condition is safe enough for me, but may not be safe enough for you. In order to make the decisions, balancing balance is the word, because we're here, we're not the public health agency. It will only the public health agency. All I care is safety. I don't need to care about the education of the children. Okay. So, but here as an educational organization, yes, we don't want anyone to be unsafe to be put in an unsafe situation. However, however, we are as an educational organization, we have quality services that we know that there are services that cannot be conducted, provided in a quality manner in an, in a virtual setting, for example, so how do we strike that optimal balance? That actually has been my guiding principles. When I share with the principal, with the leaders, as well as the past our parents. I said, parents, I want you to understand that all the decisions are based on our principal to strike the optimal balance between safety and quality. It's very hard because my balance, what I consider as balance, you may consider to be lopsided because, you put too much weight on quality or you put too much weight on safety.

During a crisis, leaders are expected to keep their citizenry safe and effectively communicate how they plan to move forward (Boin et al., 2017; Gainey, 2010). Leaders who fail to respond in a manner that meets public expectations run the potential risk of

destroying trust and jeopardizing their organization's reputation, harming their future prospects, and losing control of the situation in their eyes (Gainey, 2010; Matejic, 2015).

Values. The theme with the second highest frequency for crisis leadership was values. The responses for the theme of values included 31 interview frequencies and eight artifact frequencies. Values had a total frequency of 39 and represented 22% of the data for crisis leadership and 4% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 18).

Table 18

Strategies for Crisis Leadership and Overarching Theme of Values

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Making decisions aligned to organizational values	5	4	17	4	21	54
Keeping the focus on education	5	4	8	4	12	31
Remaining true to personal values	3	0	6	0	6	15
Total		8	31	8	39	100

Note. Total frequency of values = 39.

Within the overarching theme for values were the three coded strategies of making decisions aligned to organizational values, keeping the focus on education, and remaining true to personal values. The results were supported by multiple authors (Boin & 't Hart, 2003; Gentile, 2014; Griffin, 2006) who stated that values-driven leadership is a conscious commitment to lead with a deep sense of purpose and values such as honesty, integrity, excellence, courage, humility, trust, and care for people that connect to organizational practices that guide decision making during times of crisis.

Superintendents utilized the strategy of making decisions aligned to organizational values to meet the unique needs of their district communities. Another strategy utilized was keeping the focus on education and remaining true to personal values to make challenging decisions.

Superintendent D described making decisions aligned to organizational and personal values:

> You know I don't know if it truly ever threatened the norms and the values. I think that's what actually kept us together and kept the strong moving together. I think that again I want to refer back to our community. The community that we serve, I think when you come to our district, you have to know the people you're going to serve and not think that you're going to have to go above and beyond the normal call of duties to ensure these kids and families get what they need so. Yeah, I don't think it challenged our values; I really don't I think so. It kind of made those values, those principles, those tenets, stand out more.

Superintendent A described the high need in her community and affirmation of adhering to her values:

> I don't think they we're, I think when you work in a community like ours where 94% of our students are qualified for free and reduced lunch. The values that you have in place are not about, just simply delivering reading, writing, and math. I say that facetious man, right? Like it is, Maslow's hierarchy comes into play. Right? And, and so the things that you do to really make sure that you're supporting your school community to really, to access learning is just as important. I think our values have always been to reflect this representation of

being a strong community partner to our families, to our school community. And, the things that we do, as I said, just are not just what happens inside of the classroom, but everything to support kids to be successful in the classroom and their families.

Superintendent E shared how the crisis caused a reevaluation of his alignment to his values:

> I think we really broke a lot of our preconceived notions about what we could do we could do, we just had to do it, we had to act. We had never, we were a one-to-one district with Chromebooks, and we had never sent them home for fear that, for a small district, how are we going to keep track of all these devices, and if they went home, oh my God if they break, how are we going to replace them. And then we realized that we needed to start doing virtual learning. We said ok, then this is what we have to do, and you know within my cabinet, there are some people that said, this is what we have to do, and others saying, oh my God, why are we buying so much because the kids are going to break and we are going to lose the money. At the end of the day, it's like no, this is what we have to do so, break our preconceived notions about what we did, and what we could do, and I think that really helped us. And it freed us a little bit, just to be creative and rise to the occasion. Had we still stayed in the no we can't do this, it would have been more difficult for us to react as appropriately as we did. But I think we all realized this is a global pandemic; this is what we have to do, and we'll figure it out later.

Relationships. The final theme under for crisis leadership was relationships. The responses for the theme of relationships included 49 interview frequencies and nine artifact frequencies. Relationships had a total frequency of 36 and represented 20% of the data for crisis leadership and 3% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher (see Table 19).

Table 19

Strategies for Crisis Leadership and Overarching Theme of Relationships

Coded strategy	# Of interviews coded	# Of artifacts coded	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	% of frequency
Creating a culture of togetherness and support	5	4	19	4	23	64
Being supportive	5	5	17	5	22	
Being forgiving of self and others	4	0	13	0	13	36
Total		9	49	9	58	100

Note. Total frequency of relationships = 58.

Within the overarching theme for relationships were the three coded strategies of creating a culture of togetherness and support, being supportive, and being forgiving of self and others. The results were supported by Boin and Renaud (2013) who stated that when there is a crisis, leaders should seek to gather information and understand the underlying root of the situation and the big picture based on the available information. Superintendent B described creating a culture of togetherness and forgiveness:

> I think a big piece of this experience is acknowledging that through this, the dynamic was that there was a lot of fear and anxiety and it required people to give themselves grace and offer others grace, at the same time, you know checking in how are you doing? How's it going? What can I do for you? Is there anything I

can do to support you? You know, I think all of those things kind of came out of what we've experienced the last 3 years.

Superintendent C described understanding where people are and moving forward:

> I think the first part is understanding that we are all stressed. When we're stressed, we may not be as enjoyable as before, so we all say things that we all become really regretful. We all become less patient, more rude, more sharp tones sometimes, so all of those flaws will come out. Be understanding, be patient and try to understand why certain people feel differently about the issue and then have a dialogue, give them time again, seek to understand, even though at the end, we may still not agree. That's okay. As long as we continue to seek to understand, we continue to respect the person and we may not agree with the rationale, but we try to understand the rationale that person has for certain perspectives and provide the support and the guidance that the needs to survive through the crisis.

Superintendent D described making sure the district was supportive of families:

> We had 24-hour hotline taking calls any time of the day, and you know it's interesting I've requested hotline setup and for technology for mental health services and for just in general. There were up for about a week and I went to it guys today, so are the hotlines up and is there up I said I see the numbers everywhere, so at home, one day, I waited and I called each one of the hotline numbers and I didn't get a live response but it says, you know if you don't get a live response and we don't get back with you within 24 hours call us back, and so I called using one of my personal phones and I said hi you know, and I, I tried to change my voice a little and I just left a message can you call me back and, sure

> enough, all three of those people call me back within probably 4 hours, and I was like they're like hello is. I forgot what my name was—James—I go there, this is James and they said oh, you called about your nieces in Southwest here and how can I help you and I thought wow this is awesome and I said, you need to know this is Dr. Gonzales like what and they were a little confused. And they're like oh my God, are you, sir yeah I know but don't tell anybody else that I did this today and they're like oh no, no, no. And then, but I went back to their department heads and tell us and you guys did a great job they called us back, but they were supposed to. And I thought that was important that our families felt that they were always connected to the district, no matter what time of the day, no matter where they could get somebody call back and say how can we help.

According to Fay et al. (2020), public schools have the essential responsibility to ensure students' continued learning and support the social and emotional health of staff, students, and the community overall during the COVID-19 pandemic. Superintendents A, B, C, D, and E demonstrated strategies aligned with the crisis leadership literature during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 to lead their districts and communities.

The overall frequency and major coded themes that surfaced from the semistructured interviews and coded artifacts for the crisis leadership were trust with 58%, values at 22%, and relationships at 20%. The superintendents' responses for crisis leadership demonstrated the three major themes when leading during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 20 shows the overarching themes through the lens of the five CTSCL and crisis leadership. The data resulted in 19 overarching themes identified by 1,083

participant responses. Within the overarching themes were 56 strategies superintendents used to lead the urban elementary K–8 districts during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

Table 20

Overarching Themes Through the Lens of the Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership

Task	Overarching themes	Frequency of responses	% of responses
Sense making	Developing plans	71	7
	Communication	63	6
	Data sources	35	3
	Collaboration	28	3
Total		197	19
Decision making and coordination	Authoritative	89	8
	Communication	56	5
	Data collection	50	5
	Collaboration	34	3
Total		229	21
Meaning making	Common message	110	10
	Connecting	96	9
	Providing resources	38	4
Total		244	23
Accounting	Being purposeful	58	5
	Taking responsibility	58	5
	Shared responsibility	27	2
Total		143	12
Learning	Reflection	47	4
	Incorporating learning	46	4
Total		93	8
Crisis leadership	Trust	102	9
	Values	39	4
	Relationships	36	3
Total		177	16
Total		1,083	100

Summary

This chapter provided a review of the study's purpose, research questions, methodology, data collection process, population, sample, and a comprehensive analysis and description of the data collected. A descriptive overview of the data was presented

along with findings of the five semistructured interviews conducted with the urban elementary K–8 superintendents and the collected artifacts. The data analysis was guided by six research questions that were supported with identifying and describing strategies exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents used to lead in crisis using the five CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Boin et al., 2017) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. In addition, it was the purpose to understand and describe the experiences of exemplary leaders during a time of crisis.

CHAPTER V: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

This qualitative multiple-case study was a thematic study conducted by a research team of eight doctoral students. The thematic research team implemented Boin et al.'s (2017) five critical tasks of strategic crisis leadership (CTSCL) framework to identify and describe strategies exemplary leaders used to lead in times of crisis. The thematic study included the use of semistructured, open-ended interviews as well as artifact collection. Furthermore, the qualitative interviews focused on the five CTSCL. This study focused on exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school district who led during the COVID-19 crisis of 2020.

Chapter IV provided a summary of the assembled data. Chapter V restates the purpose statement and research questions and summarizes the research methods, population, and sample. In addition, Chapter V presents the major findings, conclusions, implications for action, recommendations for future research, and the researcher's concluding remarks and reflections.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to identify and describe strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties used to lead in crisis using the CTSCL (sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and accounting; Boin et al., 2017) during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to understand and describe the experiences of exemplary leaders during a time of crisis.

Research Questions

1. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use sense making crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
2. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use decision making and coordination crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
3. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use meaning making crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
4. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use accounting crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
5. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties use learning crisis leadership strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020?
6. How did exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties describe their experiences as leaders during the time of crisis?

Interview Process and Procedures

The primary data source for this multiple-case study included interviews conducted using semistructured, open-ended questions tied directly to the five CTSCL (sense making, meaning making, decision making and coordination, learning, and

accounting; Boin et al., 2017). The principal focus of the data collection was to provide a holistic and comprehensive description of how exemplary elementary K–8 district superintendents who led during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 used the five CTSCL. In addition, the focus of the research was to include a small sample of exemplary elementary K–8 district superintendents identified through nonprobability purposeful sampling to genuinely capture each participants' experiences in the study to increase the validity and reliability of the findings.

Potential study participants were identified from a list compiled by the researcher of eligible superintendents who were considered exemplary urban superintendents and who met the nonprobability purposeful sampling selection criteria. An expert panel of former superintendents was asked to nominate possible participants based on the study criteria and using their knowledge of superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts from the list the researcher generated. Superintendents recommended by both expert panel members were included in the pool of potential research study participants. Each potential study participant was assigned a unique number, and a random number generator was used to identify superintendents to include in the study. The random number generator provided an equal chance for each potential study participant to be selected. The researcher then used social media and district websites to confirm the criteria.

Interviews were a primary focus of this study, allowing the researcher to gather data and rely on narratives and perceptions of the lived experiences of urban elementary K–8 superintendents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to each interview, each superintendent was emailed the five CTSCL interview questions and definitions (see

Appendix B). During the interview, the researcher asked each participant the same semistructured interview questions to ensure, as much as possible, that the interviews with all participating exemplary leaders were conducted in the same manner for consistency of the interview process and to enhance reliability. In addition, predetermined probing questions were asked to provide an opportunity for the participant to elaborate and provide detailed information when necessary.

In total, 10 superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts who met the exemplary criteria for the study were identified by an expert panel. All 10 were invited to participate in the study. Each potential participant was provided emailed copies of the five CTSCL interview questions and definitions (see Appendix B), an informational letter to participate (Appendix A), UMass Global University Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix G), and an informed consent form (Appendix H). Five of the 10 invited superintendents consented to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted between March 25, 2022, and April 6, 2022. All five superintendents were interviewed using the virtual Zoom video-conferencing platform. All participant interviews were conducted remotely because of the geographical distance between the interviewer and interviewee and the COVID-19 restrictions imposed on social gatherings by the CDC and the university.

The participant interview duration ranged from 40 min to 76 min. All interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom. The researcher proofread the transcriptions, and edits such as "their" and "there," "Lego," and "so" were made. To increase the reliability of the study, interview transcriptions were individually emailed to each

participant to review for accuracy. None of the superintendents interviewed made corrections.

For this study, the researcher asked superintendents to provide artifacts they believed were examples of leading in crisis using the five CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning). Each elementary K–8 superintendent was provided a template defining the five CTSCL framework and a section to add artifact samples to provide the researcher with a deeper knowledge of crisis management (Appendix I). Additionally, the researcher collected digital content, such as school board agendas and minutes, COVID-19 reopening plans, presentations, memos, and other online content to acquire artifacts for this study. A total of 25 digital artifacts were collected, including superintendent's weekly COVID-19 messages to staff and community, surveys, board agendas, COVID-19 data dashboards, community meetings, social media Zoom recordings, and school reopening plans.

Interview transcriptions and artifacts were collected, and the researcher employed a process of inductive analysis to identify patterns and themes in the data. Themes emerged from key aspects of the interview transcriptions, documents, and artifacts without predetermined categories. Once themes were identified, the researcher used NVivo qualitative data analysis software, an electronic resource, to code the data for the study to count the number of sources and frequencies of responses. Artifacts were coded to triangulate the data where applicable. The researcher used measures of frequency and coded these data in specifically developed frequency tables to share empirical findings and present the data in a narrative form. The total coded themes answering the research questions were connected to the five CTSCL framework to identify and describe the

strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts used during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and to describe their experiences during a time of crisis.

Population

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described a study population as a group of subjects or populations who correspond to a specific set of criteria from which a sample can be drawn to generalize results. The population for this study was all 1,037 superintendents in California (California Department of Education, n.d.-a). A superintendent is the CEO of a school district who works with the school board to establish the district's goals and policies to provide vision, direction, and oversight of all aspects of district operations (Björk et al., 2018; Giannini, 2021; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Townsend et al., 2007). In addition, a superintendent oversees hiring staff, managing budgets, monitoring student success, and developing a vision for the district. Given such a challenging and multifaceted position, the superintendent is a unique leader serving in the public education sector.

Sample

A sample is a group of subjects or participants identified from the larger population from whom data are collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Identifying participants for a study can be done through either probability or nonprobability sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, the sample was selected through nonprobability purposeful sampling. Nonprobability purposeful sampling allows a researcher to identify particular elements from the population that are illustrative of the topic being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Moreover, qualitative purposeful

sampling aims to access information-rich subjects and can offer more profound insight into the central phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select relatively small samples that are information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). Although several different purposeful sampling strategies exist, criterion sampling appears to be the most commonly used in implementation and critical-incident research (Patton, 2015).

In criterion sampling, the researcher first identifies the criteria that are important to the research and then identifies cases that have that information and meet the criteria (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). Participants are selected based on their knowledge and experience with the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, the information is both in-depth and generalizable to a larger group.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), sampling is selecting a "group of subjects from whom data are collected" (p. 129). Similarly, Patton (2015) and Creswell (2012) defined a sample as a subset of the target population or sampling frame representing the whole population. There are no specific rules when determining an appropriate sample size in qualitative research (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). Qualitative sample size may best be determined by the time allotted, resources available, and study objectives (Patton, 2015). For qualitative studies, Creswell (2012) indicated that samples range from one to 40, and Morse (2000) suggested at least six. For this qualitative multiple-case study, the sample was determined to be five by a team of peer researchers with the assistance of faculty.

For this study, the criteria for identifying exemplary superintendent leaders included having a minimum of 3 years of experience in their position and having demonstrated successful leadership during crises. In addition, the exemplary leaders in this study were identified based on meeting two or more of the following delimitating characteristics:

- recognition by their peers;
- articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings;
- membership in professional associations in their field; and
- participation in workshops, training, or seminars focused on crisis leadership strategies and planning.

Major Findings

In this qualitative multiple-case study, data were analyzed and used to determine major findings. The data from the semistructured, open-ended interviews and artifacts were aligned with the literature review. Major findings are presented for each of the five CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Boin et al., 2017) along with the experiences exemplary leaders used during times of crisis.

Urban Superintendents of Elementary K-8 Districts Collaborated with Peers and Internal Teams to Make Sense Within Their Local Context

Major Finding 1: Urban Superintendent of Elementary K–8 District Prioritized the Health and Safety of Their Staffs and Overall Communities

Urban superintendents of elementary K–8 school districts made the health and safety of their employees, students, and families a priority during the pandemic. Tsipursky (2020) stated that organizations also must adapt to the new normal by implementing plans to manage employees and production impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and consider fundamentally changing their models to survive the next several years. Urban elementary superintendents fundamentally shifted the focus of their school districts during the pandemic from prioritizing teaching and learning to health and safety measures because of the life-threatening consequences of the coronavirus.

Schools in urban areas faced even more significant challenges because of the highly contagious nature of the coronavirus and the rapid spread of the disease because their schools were generally located within densely populated areas in comparison to suburban and rural school districts. According to Blake et al. (2007) and Salama (2020), in densely populated urban communities experiencing high levels of poverty and overcrowding in housing, public health guidelines for preventing and controlling the spread of the virus were often not feasible. Because of the urban settings that each of the five exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents serve, prioritizing the health and safety of their communities was a necessity to ensure the mission of educating children safely continued.

Major Finding 2: Urban Superintendent of Elementary K–8 District Relied on Health Experts and Teams to Justify Their Decisions and Coordinate Plans Aligned With COVID-19 Protocols

Superintendents were tasked with unprecedented issues to establish health and safety priorities for students, staff, and families (AASA, 2020). During interviews, exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents expressed not having the expertise to make public health decisions that could have life-threatening consequences. These superintendents collaborated with their teams and relied on information from health experts from state and local public health agencies and partnering health organizations to develop plans and implement COVID-19 protocols in their districts. Further, to ensure their communities trusted the protocols being put into place, exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents cited their sources in their plans and communications. According to Martinko and Mackey (2019), the public makes strong judgments when they believe an organization's failures are based on negligence or lack of awareness. Exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents' citing health experts provided credibility and transparency for the decisions being made.

Major Finding 3: Urban Superintendent of Elementary K–8 District Collaborated With Peers and Internal Teams to Make Sense Within Their Local Context

Because of the volatile and complex nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents were often pushed in contradictory directions, caught between the politicized mandates and faced with conflict with unions. Exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents expressed the challenges these dynamics presented when trying to make sense of the crisis to provide clear direction to the communities. As expressed by

Boin et al. (2017) and Colvin (2002), there are no set guidelines for leaders to follow when a crisis strikes; however, those affected look to their leaders and others in positions of power to respond efficiently and effectively (Boin et al., 2017; Colvin, 2002). Through formal and informal network collaboration with fellow superintendents, indicated in their responses, exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents were able to make sense of the unfolding crisis and consider implications within the context of their school districts. Further, these superintendents stated that they took into consideration the COVID-19 protocols and decisions of surrounding school districts to ensure limiting confusion and contradictory messages on what and why something was considered safe.

Major Finding 4: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 District Focused on Ensuring Their Communities Trusted Them as a Reliable Source of Information

Creating and maintaining trust was a recurring concern expressed by each of the five exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents, which led them to use strategies such as relying on expert guidance, utilizing multiple sources of data, and being transparent in their decision making. Students, staff, and the community overall look to the superintendent to address crises and restore a sense of normalcy to the school district (Smith & Riley, 2012). Superintendents expressed during their interviews that one of their primary concerns throughout the crisis was creating and maintaining an environment of trust with all stakeholders and were deliberate in their actions to do so. According to Gainey (2010), the failure of a leader to respond adequately has the potential to destroy trust and jeopardize the reputation of the organization and its possible survival.

Major Finding 5: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 District Were Committed to Providing Resources Beyond Traditional School Supplies to Ensure Students and Families Had Their Basic Needs Met

According to Fay et al. (2020), public schools have the essential responsibility to ensure students' continued learning and support the social and emotional health of staff, students, and the community. Exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents described the significant challenges of taking on the role of ensuring students had technology and school supplies when schools closed, transitioning to virtual learning. In addition, these superintendents also shared the complex tasks of providing food, vaccinations, and COVID-19 testing for students, their families, and members of the community at large during the COVID-19 crisis. Interview transcripts and artifacts demonstrated that exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents established new partnerships and had their staff members take on multiple and new roles to ensure the basic needs to students, their families, and the community were met.

Major Finding 6: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 District Made Decisions in Alignment With Their Organizational Values and Held Themselves Accountable

The superintendent is the face and chief communicator for the school district working with labor unions, community members, and staff (Kowalski, 2005). The literature by Boin et al. (2017), Gentile (2014), and Griffin (2006) described a values-driven leader as being one who is honest, has integrity, and demonstrates courage, humility, trust, and care for people and connects to organizational practices to guide decision making during times of crisis. Exemplary urban elementary K–8

superintendents described their experiences during crisis, demonstrating their deep commitments to their district and communities. In addition, these superintendents shared that the crisis strengthened and closer aligned the values of the district to their leadership during the handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

Unexpected Findings

There were three unexpected findings from this qualitative multiple-case study. First, during the COVID-19 crisis, superintendents took on many tasks on their own. Second, because of the prolonged nature of the COVID-19 crisis, superintendents did not have time to reflect and formally debrief with their teams. Third, during the COVID-19 crisis, superintendents focused on limiting conflict by aligning health and safety protocols with their neighboring districts.

Unexpected Finding 1: Exemplary Urban Elementary K–8 Superintendents Took on Multiple Roles on Their Own Within the Volatile Conditions Presented by COVID-19

It was clear with the constantly changing environment due to COVID-19, these superintendents understood the need to balance shared responsibility and take responsibility on their own to lead their districts. However, of the five interviews, shared responsibility had a 2% response rate, but taking responsibility had a 5% rate. It was clear that superintendents shared responsibility with their teams, yet it had the lowest rated frequency. In times of crisis, the decision making by leaders can be full of uncertainty with new information rapidly coming in, requiring them to be adaptive, flexible, and decisive (Al Saidi et al., 2020). Crisis management models describe approaches to crises that provide a common hierarchy within which personnel from

multiple organizations can be effective (FEMA, 2017). Though there is no guide definition for exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents to lead during COVID-19, there are structures for shared responsibility that could alleviate some of the overwhelming sense of responsibility each of the five superintendents described when interviewed.

Unexpected Finding 2: Exemplary Urban Elementary K–8 Superintendents Have Found It Challenging to Find Time to Reflect and Formally Debrief With Their Teams Because of the Prolonged Nature of the COVID-19 Crisis

There is no predefined response plan when a crisis strikes; however, those affected look to their leaders and others in positions of power to respond efficiently and effectively (Boin et al., 2017; Colvin, 2002). Moving beyond a crisis to a sense of normalcy is critical for leaders and their organizations to regain their legitimacy and return to a sense of normalcy (Boin et al., 2017). Accounting for what happened and why instills a sense of normalcy and restores confidence (Boin et al., 2017). A critical step in crisis leadership is debriefing, which has been identified as a major tool in identifying errors, improving communication, reviewing team performance, and providing emotional support following a critical event (Ugwu, Medows, Don-Pedro, & Chan, 2020). However, the lowest overall frequency of responses of the five CTSCL framework was learning at 9% of the overall total of 1,055 frequencies of all responses coded by the researcher, and of the five interviews, incorporating learning and reflection each had a 4% response rate. It was clear during the interview process that superintendents did not feel they had exited the COVID-19 crisis. One superintendent stated,

> Well, so after there was this one point in the pandemic and it's hard to say like the beginning, there was a beginning. I don't know that there was an exact middle and there's no end yet. So, I will refer to it as the middle.

However, each expressed a need to spend some time in a formal debrief with their teams to discuss what worked, what did not, and celebrate the efforts of their teams. One superintendent stated,

> Looking at it from 360 degrees, talking about you know, fiscal issues, talking about technology issues. Talking about HR issues on all of those really thinking, okay, if this ever happens again, these were our lessons. These were our concerns, these were things that we did very well, and these are the things that we didn't think we did well at all, and so we will get to that point but we haven't had the time to debrief, yet we just haven't so we have an administrators retreat that we will debrief that.

The critical task of learning presents opportunities for reform and restores public confidence by addressing the lessons from collective memory for future leaders (Boin et al., 2017). Organizations that invest time and resources in learning after a crisis to integrate back into their crisis management processes are well prepared to emerge from the crisis performing better than before the crisis occurred (Boin et al., 2017; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

Unexpected Finding 3: Urban Elementary K–8 Superintendents Focused on Limiting Conflict by Aligning Health and Safety Protocols With Neighboring Districts

Local governing boards establish goals and policies to ensure the school district meets local, state, and federal requirements to educate children (Townsend et al., 2007). Superintendents are the CEOs of a school district, hired by the local governing board, tasked with leading day-to-day operations, and ensured the governing board's goals and policies are implemented (Björk et al., 2018; Bjork & Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, 2005). Superintendents must also collaborate and build coalitions to increase support for their initiatives by building trust, focusing attention on process, and employing political savvy to ensure buy-in (ECRA Group, 2010). It was clear during the interviews that superintendents led with the mindset of making decisions based on the individual needs of their district. However, of the five interviews, data sources had a 3% response rate and common message was 10%. During the COVID-19 pandemic, superintendents aligned policy decisions primarily on health and safety with what neighboring districts were doing. One superintendent stated,

> The [city] superintendents are very close and get along really well, so we were very much sharing information sharing—sharing what letters you send it out to your staff and your parents, can I see a copy, what protocols are you using? How did you do that and so on. I think the early stages of COVID really solidified our group of superintendents and that was my core group of supporters as we got to bounce things off of each other because [city] is such a small area but we have a lot of districts. So whatever one district did had an impact on the other person's

> district because parents were sharing a lot of information on Facebook, so we wanted to make sure we were sharing the same message and information.

During the pandemic, superintendents faced a highly polarized environment in which the framing of the COVID-19 crisis centered on healthcare to economic impacts being the priority (Panda et al., 2020). Beliefs about issues such as school closures, social distancing, mask mandates, and reopening the economy increased polarization resulting at times in public ideologies falling into alignment with political parties in the United States and abroad (Panda et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020; Radwan & Radwan, 2020).

Conclusions

From the findings of this study, the following conclusions are made based on the exemplary urban elementary K–8 superintendents' responses shared during the virtual interviews and the collection of artifacts.

Conclusion 1: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 School Districts Must Hold Themselves Accountable for Making Decisions Aligned That Provides Clear Direction and Builds Trust With Their Teams

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concludes that exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts ust hold themselves accountable for decision making that provides clear direction and builds trust with their teams. This conclusion is supported by 33% of the coded results from participant interviews and artifacts. Families and the community entrust public schools and educators to protect their children during the day (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007). Moreover, during a crisis, public schools have the essential responsibility to ensure

students' continued learning and support the overall health of staff, students, and the community (Fay et al., 2020).

Conclusion 2: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 Districts Must Be Collaborative and Use Multiple Sources of Data to Be Considered Trustworthy and Reliable During Times of Crisis

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concludes that exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts who are collaborative and use multiple sources of data when communicating decisions will be considered trustworthy to provide accurate and reliable information of a crisis. This conclusion is supported by 56% of the coded results from participant interviews and artifacts. The complex and unstable nature of crisis presents situations in which every time a decision is made, new information appears and a leader's decisions are scrutinize and questioned (Ho et al., 2010). During a crisis, leaders are expected to delineate a clear course of action through analysis, planning, communication, collaboration, and cooperation between partners and the expected value to mitigate the crisis response to align resources and coordinate efforts to provide the best possible response (Boin et al., 2017; Crowe, 2013; FEMA, 2010; T. Johnson, 2018).

Conclusion 3: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 Districts Must Have Strong Collaboration Skills to Be Able to Collaborate With Multiple Stakeholders to Make Sense of a Crisis and Develop a Shared Understanding

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concludes that exemplary superintendents of elementary K–8 school districts must have strong collaboration skills to effectively collaborate with multiple stakeholders to

process, communicate, and problem solve in a manner that leads to action and develops a shared understanding of crisis events. This conclusion is supported by 40% of the coded results from participant interviews and artifacts. Key characteristics of decisive leadership include the ability to respond quickly, develop clear understandings of current threats, and determine the impacts of delaying response during critical situations (Al Saidi et al., 2020). Arriving at a collective understanding of the nature, characteristics, consequences, scope, and potential effects of a developing threat presents tremendous challenges (Boin et al., 2013). During a crisis, leaders must give meaning to the collective experience and develop plausible images to comprehend, understand, and explain the crisis at hand (Boin et al., 2017; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Weick et al., 2005).

Conclusion 4: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 Districts Must Be Reliable and Consistent Communicators to Reduce Anxiety and Fear in Their Communities

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concludes that exemplary superintendents of elementary K–8 school districts must be reliable and consistent in their communication of a crisis to reduce fear and anxiety to create a sense of calm in their communities. This conclusion is supported by 58% of the coded results from participant interviews and artifacts. As stated by Smith and Riley (2012), the community looks to the superintendent to address crises and restore a sense of normalcy to the school district. Leading during times of crisis in an unpredictable and complex world requires that superintendents have skills, strategies, and resources they need to lead their organization through the crisis in a way that minimizes personal and organizational harm to the school district (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Conclusion 5: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 Districts Must Focus on Meeting the Basic and Essential Needs of Their Communities to Effectively Lead and Build Trusting Relationships

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concludes that exemplary superintendents of elementary K–8 school districts must focus on meeting the basic and essential needs of their communities to effectively lead and build trusting relationships in their organizations. This conclusion is supported by 36% of the coded results from participant interviews and artifacts. Urban school districts often experience significant and unique challenges compared to suburban and rural areas, including serving a population often comprising a significant number of immigrant students with language diversity and working with larger racial and ethnic groups and families experiencing high levels of poverty (Ahram et al., 2014; C. J. Johnson, 2014; Ratcliffe et al., 2016; Schaffer et al., 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Conclusion 6: Urban Superintendents of Elementary K–8 Districts Must Make Decisions Aligned With Their Organizational Values and Hold Themselves Accountable for Educating Children During Times of Crisis

Based on the findings of this study and the review of the literature, the researcher concludes that exemplary superintendents of elementary K–8 school districts must be values centered to make decisions during times of crisis that are aligned to their organizational goals regarding educating children. Superintendents who made decisions aligned with organizational values and held themselves accountable remained focused on ensuring students received quality educational programs despite the challenges presented by school closures. Teachers and students alike struggled with school closure and

transitioning to distance learning (Bhamani et al., 2020; Schaefer et al., 2020). Parents, teachers, business leaders, and communities wanted schools to reopen (Bhamani et al., 2020). In the face of crisis, the key leader of the school district and community look to the superintendent, who is expected to provide strategic leadership to effectively navigate the impact of the crisis on the organization (Björk et al., 2018; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Williams, 2014). However, the COVID-19 pandemic created a highly polarized environment, and beliefs about the best way to respond to the impact on schools and society varied greatly (Panda et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020; Yeung et al., 2020). Many felt COVID-19 has exposed economic and social inequities, presenting opportunities to reimagine and realign education (Pacheco, 2020; Panda et al., 2020; Sarap et al., 2020; Seke, 2020; Xie et al., 2020). Although great uncertainty remains, one thing is for sure: when the COVID-19 pandemic is over, virtual learning is likely to remain a part of K–12 schools along with increased concerns for the social-emotional well-being of students (Superville, 2020). Superintendents are responsible for ensuring educational programs meet the needs of students and families (ECRA Group, 2010; Townsend et al., 2007).

Implications for Action

It is critical that urban elementary K–8 superintendents be able to lead during a crisis. Superintendents who are able to identify crisis leadership strategies and communicate a clear course of action and collaborate with educational partners and colleagues have a greater chance of effectively handling crisis in their school district. Researchers indicated that the role of the school superintendent is highly complex, requiring superintendents to take on complicated and challenging problems, often involving changing demographics, diversity, inequity of resources, legal, and political

issues (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Boin et al., 2017; DiPaola, 2010). During a crisis, superintendents must deal with the immediate threats, emotions, and uncertainty and respond with self-efficacy, decisiveness, and flexibility (Boin et al., 2017; Moilanen, 2015; Van Wart, 2011). The following sections discuss implications for action to support urban elementary K–8 superintendents to lead in times of crisis.

Implication 1: Educational Leadership Programs Should Emphasize Building Trust Through Accountable Leadership Practices

It is recommended that universities who offer master's degree educational leadership and administrative credentials place a greater emphasis on building trust through accountable leadership practices. Universities should specifically incorporate this research into their curriculum because many do not focus on these critical skills. There are limited resources to help site administrators and/or superintendents to lead through a crisis. Universities should include curriculum that teaches administrators about building trust through accountable leaders to lead their schools and districts. Curriculum should include effectively communicating priorities and goals, creating a culture of trust through transparency, and using the CTSCL as a framework for crisis leadership.

Implication 2: Incorporate the Use of Technology and Virtual Communication Platforms Into Standard District Communication Plans

It is recommended that superintendents update district communication plans to include the use of technology and virtual platforms to communicate to their communities on a regular basis. Stakeholder perception of how a crisis is handled or not handled has the potential to cause irreparable harm to an organization (school district). An organization's reputation is based on stakeholder perceptions of how well the

organization meets its expectations and effectively adjusts its communication to meet the needs of its communities (Coombs, 2007). Superintendents should incorporate a process of evaluation and revision of their communication plans through focus groups, roundtable discussions, community meetings, or online surveys to gain a deeper understanding of how their communities access information. Communication plans are essential to communicating an organization's goals and mission to its communities, and with the expansion of technology and virtual platforms as a major communication tool, strategies to communicate effectively in these formats are critical to ensuring a large audience has access to information quickly (Newman, 2016).

Implication 3: Include the CTSCL Framework to the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

It is recommended that educational leaders, especially superintendents, be expected to know strategies to effectively handle crisis. The complexities of leading a school district are constantly changing. The California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (CPSEL) identify specific areas of competency school and district administrators are expected to know and be able to perform, including instructional leadership and developing a shared vision. However, there is no reference to crisis management or crisis leadership. Crisis leadership requires leaders to employ strategies that allow them to identify issues that have high levels of uncertainty and threat, process information, set priorities, and make critical decisions that influence and enable others to contribute to achievement of a common goal (Clark et al., 2016; Harms et al., 2017). This includes a new standard focused on crisis planning and management aligned to the CTSCL framework and strategies identified in this study as key elements of focus areas

and indicators of how education leaders might demonstrate the element or standard within their practice.

Implication 4: County Offices of Education Should Provide Training for Superintendents on Crisis Response and Management Strategies Through the CTSCL

County offices of education should include training for superintendents that aligns to the CTSCL framework to create a common language regarding crisis response. Organizations and leaders who can detect, respond, and effectively mitigate the impact of crisis on their organizations limit harm and potential long-term damage to those they serve. The five CTSCL of sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning can provide an effective guide for superintendents to effectively lead during times of crisis. Superintendents, as crisis leaders, are expected to publicly present the details of how they handled the crisis, account for what went wrong, and restore public confidence as a sign that the crisis has ended (Boin et al., 2017). Many county offices of education currently provide training and support in the area of emergency management. Training offered by a county office of education should include support beyond management of a crisis, incorporating strategies to enhance a superintendent's crisis leadership through recovery and learning.

Implication 5: New Superintendents Should Participate in the Association of California School Administrators Superintendent Leadership Academy

It is recommended that new superintendents participate in the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) Superintendent Academy. The academy is a forum for new and aspiring superintendents to learn and develop essential skills needed

to effectively lead a California school district. Participants learn directly from current and former superintendents in a format that blends leadership and management theory with practical applications. This is also a forum for new and aspiring superintendents to network with other superintendents and potentially form peer-support networks. Considering the experiences of the participants in this study who led through the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, they will provide new superintendents with strategies useful when a crisis strikes.

Implication 6: Include a Module on Crisis Leadership and Management Using the Five CTSCL in the ACSA Superintendent Leadership Academy

It is recommended that the ACSA Superintendents Academy develop a module on crisis leadership and management based on the five CTSCL (sense making, decision making and coordination, meaning making, accounting, and learning; Boin et al., 2017). Leading a school district through crisis is a highly complex task. The academy should include a module on crisis leadership and management though the CTSCL to provide effective strategies for superintendents to use in crisis. Every superintendent interviewed for this research study commented on being underprepared to lead during a prolonged crisis. An outcome of the superintendents academy should be to provide new superintendents strategies to lead during highly volatile and unplanned events that could lead to crisis. The new module should specifically include the strategies identified in this study as examples of best practices.

Recommendations for Further Research

Recommendation 1: Phenomenological Study to Examine Values Driven Leadership

It is recommended that a phenomenological study be conducted to examine the impact of school districts with strong cultures of values driven leadership prior to a crisis and the impact on their crisis response. This study identified strategies of making decisions aligned to organizational and personal values. A future study could provide greater insight on how superintendents with a deep sense of purpose and a commitment to values, such as honesty, integrity, courage, trust, and care, respond to a crisis event.

Recommendation 2: Meta-Analysis of School District Communication Plans

It is recommended that a meta-analysis of school district communication plans be done to determine the use of technology and social media in low socioeconomic communities and to determine what is considered effective. This study focused primarily on identifying and describing strategies used during times of crisis. This study did not attempt to determine to what extent or to what degree superintendents used communication plans and their use of technology and social media to keep their communities informed and uncover lessons for developing future plans. Technology and social media are effective tools to communicate broadly and quickly to multiple audiences of information regarding a crisis but must be up and running before a crisis occurs for students, staff, and community members to become followers. Institutions must publicize the existence of the social media platforms (Agozzino & Kaiser, 2014).

Recommendation 3: Multiple Case Study of Crisis Leadership Through CTSCL

Based on the findings and limitations of the study, it is recommended that a multiple case study be conducted of school districts perceived to have successfully

managed a critical crisis and grown from the experience. This study was done from the perspective of urban elementary K–8 superintendents leading during the COVID-19 crisis of 2020. Future research will expand the understanding of crisis leadership strategies through the CTSCL with other superintendents, risk managers, board members, and principals.

Recommendation 4: Phenomenological Study on Communication Strategies

It is recommended that a phenomenological study be conducted to identify and describe effective communication strategies superintendents used to lead during a crisis. It was the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study to identify and describe strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts used to lead in crisis using Boin's (2017) five CTSCL. This study did not attempt to identify and describe effective communication strategies superintendents used to lead during a crisis. A future study could provide insight into how superintendents collected, processed, and disseminated information required to address a crisis situation.

Recommendation 5: Mixed Method

It is recommended that a study of superintendents who have positive relationships within the district with board and staff and perceived impact on successful crisis management be conducted using a mixed methods approach with both quantitative and qualitative data collection to add depth and breadth to the data collected.

Recommendation 6: Meta-Analysis

It is recommended that a meta-analysis be conducted on the combined thematic dissertations to determine similarities and differences on the strategies leaders from varying types of organizations used to lead during the COVID-19 crisis of 2020. Meta-

analysis is a quantitative design used to systematically assess the results of previous research to derive conclusions about that body of research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Concluding Remarks and Reflection

The world is increasingly interconnected, and a crisis that begins thousands of miles away has the ability to spread quickly and impact everyone on a deeply personal level. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges not seen in modern times and has left people around the world coping with loss of loved ones and fears of unknown future crises and has highlighted social and economic inequities affecting communities worldwide.

In the United States, educational leaders are coping with the enduring and changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic as they have brought students and staff back from distance virtual learning to in-person instruction. However, mask mandates and vaccination requirements have been pulled into the political area, leaving those leaders with trying to provide the best educational programs for children to address learning loss and the indelible mark that the pandemic has left on the social and emotional development of children.

The role of the urban elementary K–8 superintendent to successfully address these insurmountable issues affecting the children, staffs, and communities they serve has never been greater. Consequently, the challenges these leaders face to ensure children recover from these events to leave the public educational setting and be college and career ready are unprecedented. This study validated the fact that superintendents have been tasked with becoming crisis leaders and managers in a situation in which there is no

playbook to follow or easy answers to address the issues resulting from the pandemic and have met the demands of supporting their communities and safely returning children to schools to in-person learning. Their commitment to the values of their district and community has been extraordinary and admirable.

This qualitative multiple-case study validated the role that urban elementary K–8 superintendents played in leading in times of crisis using a wide range of crisis leadership strategies. The identified crisis leadership strategies in the study will benefit sitting superintendents and those aspiring to take on the role in the future. I am optimistic that these findings will be incorporated into future trainings for superintendents and district leaders as well as developed into standards of practice for all educational leaders. May those who read this study be inspired by the love and commitment urban elementary K–8 superintendents had for their students, families, staffs, and communities and by how they stepped up and answered the call of leadership, even when the circumstances put their lives at risk, to ensure those they served remained safe and students could continue to learn in vastly new learning environments. As a researcher and superintendent of an urban K–8 elementary school district, the insight I have learned from this study has been invaluable. The willingness of the superintendents interviewed to be open and candid in sharing their experiences had given me renewed inspiration to continue facing the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic presented to children, families, and staff. Moreover, this experience has made me a more compassionate leader, with a greater awareness of the critical role superintendents and school districts play in supporting communities during times of extreme crisis in which lives are at risk.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Invitation to Participate in Study

August 5, 2021

Dear Superintendent,

I am a doctoral candidate in University of Massachusetts's Doctorate of Education in Organizational Leadership program in the School of Education. I am part of a thematic dissertation team conducting research to identify and describe strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts l used to lead during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. You are invited to participate in this qualitative multiple case study because you are an exemplary elementary K–8 superintendent serving in an urban area. Your participation is greatly appreciated and will provide valuable insights and ideas for future leaders facing crises in their fields and bring value to the research.

Purpose: It is the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study to identify and describe strategies exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K–8 school districts used to lead in crisis using Boin's Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership.

Procedures: If you choose to participate in this study, you will be invited to participate in a 60-minute, one-on-one interview conducted on Zoom. I will ask a series of questions designed to allow you to share your experience as an urban unified district superintendent in a unified school district. The interview questions will assess specific strategies used to lead during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. The interview will be recorded for transcription purposes.

Risk, Inconveniences, and discomforts: There are no major risks to your participation in this research study. The interview will be at a time and place, which is convenient for you.

Potential Benefits: There are no major benefits to you for participating; nonetheless, a potential benefit may be that you will have an opportunity to add to the research regarding exemplary leaders' practices, policies, and experiences during a crisis. The information in the study is intended to inform researchers and leaders about what exemplary urban unified superintendents like you do to cultivate knowledge, experiences, and strategies to lead during a crisis.

Anonymity: If you agree to participate in the interview, you can be assured that it will be completely confidential. No names will be attached to any notes or records from the interview. All information will remain in locked files, accessible only to the researchers. No employer will have access to the interview information. You will be free to stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any time. You are also encouraged to ask any questions that will help you understand how this study will be performed and/or how it will affect you. Feel free to contact the principal investigator,

Raymond Andry at randry@mail.umassglobal.edu or by phone at (xxx) xxx-xxxx to answer any questions you may have. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or your rights as a participant, you may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, University of Massachusetts, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine CA 92618, 949-341-7641.

Sincerely,

Raymond Andry
Doctoral Candidate, Ed.D.

APPENDIX B

Crisis Leadership Interview Protocol

Background Questions:

1. Would you please state your name, title, and organization for the record.
2. Gender?
3. Age? 30-40 41-50 51-60, 61 and older
4. How long have you been in this position

Sense-making is the process by which leaders give meaning to their collective experiences and develop plausible images to comprehend, understand, explain and predict during a crisis. It is a way of processing, communicating and problem solving leading to actions that make sense and give meaning. (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

5. How did you go about collecting and processing information during the COVID-19 crisis?
6. How did you process and communicate information that led to actions that made sense and gave meaning to events?
7. How did you communicate the plan to your organization in a manner they could understand and helped reduce stress, fear, and anxiety?

Decision Making and Coordination

Decision Making and Coordination in crisis is the process of making well-informed decisions that delineate a clear course of action, through analysis, planning, communication, collaboration, and cooperation between partners and the expected value to mitigate the crisis response (Boin et al., 2017, Crowe, 2013, FEMA, 2010, Johnson, 2018).

8. How did you make well-informed decisions that provided a clear course of action during the pandemic?
9. How did you analyze, plan and communicate with your stakeholders?
10. How did you coordinate and collaborate with partners during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Meaning Making

Meaning Making is the communication of an authoritative account of a crisis situation to those directly affected and the population as a whole, factually presenting a narrative that shows empathy and instills confidence in framing of the crisis and response measures to establish legitimacy and provide a sense of direction and hope to reduce fear and anxiety (Barnard, 1940; Arjen Boin, Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2017; A. Boin & McConnell, 2007; Arjen Boin & Renaud, 2013; Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017).

11. How did you determine what information needed to be communicated to people in your organization that presented a factual narrative of the crisis?
12. How did you show empathy and care for your people in your organization that stilled hope?

13. How did you provide a sense of direction and hope to reduce fear and anxiety in your organization?

Accounting
Accounting is the willingness to "personally" take ownership for understanding and accepting the task, taking actions to achieve agreed-upon results and answering the results obtained, regardless of the outcome during an unexpected event that has high levels of uncertainty and threat (Boin, 2019, Brändström, A. 2016, McGrath, & Whitty, 2015, & Sharpe, & Balderson, 2005).

14. How did you take personal responsibility for understanding and accepting leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic?
15. How did you take personal responsibility for the actions and agreed upon results regardless of the outcome?
16. How did you feel about being accountable for the results of your actions in an event that was uncertain and had a high degree of threat to the personal health and safety of employees?

Learning
Learning is determining the causes of the crisis, assessing the strength and weakness of the responses, and taking actions based on new understanding. Crisis learning is recalibrating existing beliefs, policies, and organizational structure supporting the success of the organization (Argyris and Schon 1978, Boin et al., 2017, Barnett & Pratt, 2000, House, 1999).

17. How did you assess the strengths and weaknesses of your response to the COVID-19?
18. How did the COVID-19 pandemic help you learn more about yourself as a leader?
19. How has your experience from the COVID-19 crisis prepared you for future crises?

Crisis leadership
Crisis leadership is the ability of leaders to identify issues that have high levels of uncertainty and threat, process information, set priorities and make critical decisions that influence and enable others to contribute to achievement of a common goal (Clark White, Harvey, & Fox, 2016; Harms, Credé, Tynan, Leon, & Jeung, 2017)

20. How did you develop trust and care for people as the crisis threatened the organizational norms and values?
21. How did you make decisions that focused on the safety, security and health of the people in your organization?
22. How did you demonstrate honesty and courage during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Conclusion: Thank you for your time today. I will send you a transcript of your responses so you can review it for accuracy.

APPENDIX C

Field-Test Participant Feedback Questions

While conducting the interview you should take notes of their clarification request or comments about not being clear about the question. After you complete the interview ask your field test interviewee the following clarifying questions. **Try not to make it another interview; just have a friendly conversation**. Either script or record their feedback so you can compare with the other two members of your team to develop your feedback report on how to improve the interview questions.

1. How did you feel about the interview? Do you think you had ample opportunities to describe what you do as a leader when working with your team or staff?

2. Did you feel the amount of time for the interview was ok?

3. Were the questions by and large clear or were there places where you were uncertain what was being asked?

4. Can you recall any words or terms being asked about during the interview that were confusing?

5. And finally, did I appear comfortable during the interview… (I'm pretty new at this)?

APPENDIX D

Interview Feedback Reflection Questions

Thank you for observing the field test used to validate the interview questions for this multiple case study. As a valuable participant, your answers to the following questions will be used to make necessary adjustments to the Leadership Competency Protocol, the interview questions, and the interview process.

1. How long did it take to conduct the interview? Do you believe this time was appropriate or should be adjusted?

2. What were your personnel feelings while giving the interview? At what times did you feel comfortable, nervous, or confused?

3. How would you improve the clarity of the interview instructions, and how could the Leadership Competency Protocol be improved so both the interviewer and the interviewee are better prepared?

4. At what times during the interview, did you believe the process to run effectively. At what times during the interview, do you believe there were problems?

5. Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the questions, the process, or the overall experience?

APPENDIX E

National Institute of Health–Protecting Human Research Participants Certificate of Completion

APPENDIX F

Brandman University Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Ray Andry <randry@mail.umassglobal.edu>

IRB Application Approved: Raymond Andry

1 message

Institutional Review Board <my@umassglobal.edu> Sun, Mar 6, 2022 at 8:35 AM
Reply-To: webmaster@umassglobal.edu
To: randry@mail.umassglobal.edu
Cc: ddevore@umassglobal.edu, larick@umassglobal.edu, irb@umassglobal.edu

Dear Raymond Andry,

Congratulations! Your IRB application to conduct research has been approved by the UMass Global Institutional Review Board. Please keep this email for your records, as it will need to be included in your research appendix.

If you need to modify your IRB application for any reason, please fill out the "Application Modification Form" before proceeding with your research. The Modification form can be found at IRB.umassglobal.edu

Best wishes for a successful completion of your study.

Thank You,

IRB
Academic Affairs
UMass Global
16355 Laguna Canyon Road
Irvine, CA 92618
irb@umassglobal.edu
www.umassglobal.edu

This email is an automated notification. If you have questions please email us at irb@umassglobal.edu.

APPENDIX G

Research Participant's Bill of Rights

UMASS GLOBAL UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Research Participant's Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the UMASS GLOBAL Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The UMass Global Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

UMass Global IRB Adopted 2021

APPENDIX H

Informed Consent

INFORMATION ABOUT: Crisis Leadership of Exemplary Superintendents of Urban Elementary K–8 Districts During the COVID-19 Crisis of 2020

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Raymond Andry, Ed.D. Candidate

PURPOSE OF STUDY: You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Raymond Andry, a doctoral candidate from the School of Education at University of Massachusetts. I am part of a research team studying exemplary superintendents of urban elementary K-8 school districts leading during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 using Arjen Boin's Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership. This interview is to specifically investigate what exemplary urban elementary K-8 superintendents like you do to cultivate knowledge and to share experiences and strategies that you have used to lead during crisis.

The interview (s) will last approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted in a one on one interview setting.

I understand that:

a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping codes and research material in a locked file drawer that is available to the researcher.

b) I understand that the interview will be audio and visually recorded. The recording will be available only to the researcher. The audio recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue as a text document and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted, and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study, all recordings will be destroyed. All other data and consents will be securely stored for three years after completion of data collection and confidentially shredded or fully deleted.

c) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding exemplary leaders' practices, policies, and experiences during a crisis. The findings will be available to me at the conclusion of the study and will provide new insights about this study in which I participated. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.

d) Any questions I have concerning my participation in this study will be answered by Raymond Andry, Brandman University Doctoral Candidate. I understand that Mr. Andry may be contacted by email at randry@mail.brandman.edu or by phone at (xxx) xxx-xxxx, or I may contact Dr. Keith Larick (Chair Advisor) at larick@umassglobal.edu.

e) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study, and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may refuse to participate or may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.

f) I also understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be informed and my consent re-obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs, University of Massachusetts, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618 Telephone (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the "Research Participant's Bill of Rights." I have read the above and understand it and hereby voluntarily consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

______________________________ ________________________

Signature of Participant **Date**

______________________________ ________________________

Signature of Principal Investigator **Date**

APPENDIX I

Artifact Template

The Five Critical Tasks of Strategic Crisis Leadership

Dear Superintendent,

Based on the 5 areas of crisis management, I'm looking for any artifacts you might have to provide a deeper knowledge about what you do in this area. You may email me at randry@mail.umassglobal.edu or add the artifacts to the Google Drive HERE. Thank you in advance for being part of this study. – Raymond Andry, Doctoral Candidate

Critical Task	**Definition**	**Artifact Samples** e.g., board agendas, newspaper articles, strategic plan
Sense Making	The process by which leaders give meaning to their collective experiences and develop plausible images to comprehend, understand, explain and predict during a crisis. It is a way of processing, communicating and problem solving, leading to actions that make sense and give meaning.	
Decision Making and Coordination	The process of making well-informed decisions that delineate a clear course of action, through analysis, planning, communication, collaboration, and cooperation between partners and the expected value to mitigate the crisis response.	
Meaning Making	The communication of an account of a crisis situation to those directly affected, factually presenting a narrative that shows empathy and instills confidence in their framing of the crisis and response measures to establish sense of direction and hope to reduce fear and anxiety.	
Accounting	The willingness to "personally" take ownership for understanding and accepting the task, taking actions to achieve agreed-upon results and answering the results obtained, regardless of the outcome during	

	an unexpected event that has high levels of uncertainty and threat.	
Learning	Determining the causes of the crisis, assessing the strength and weakness of the responses, and taking actions based on new understanding. Crisis learning is recalibrating existing beliefs, policies, and organizational structure supporting the success of the organization.	