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Adaptive Leadership: A Phenomenological Study on the Strategies Used by Special Education Directors to Build Adaptive Capacity

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A Dissertation by

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I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

—Maya Angelou

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ABSTRACT

Adaptive Leadership: A Phenomenological Study on the Strategies Used by Special Education Directors to Build Adaptive Capacity

by Amber Gallagher

Purpose: The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009).

Methodology: This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of special education directors serving in unified public school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino counties in California. Purposeful, convenience sampling was used to identify the 10 participants who met the study's criteria. The semistructured, open-ended interview protocol was developed by a thematic research team of nine peer researchers and three faculty advisors. Data collected from interviews and artifacts were analyzed to identify themes related to the study's research questions.

Findings: Analysis of the data collected from interviews and artifacts resulted in 520 frequencies across 22 major themes and nine key findings. From the themes and key findings, seven major findings emerged.

Conclusions: Six conclusions were drawn based on the major findings and supporting literature. Special education directors build organizational adaptive capacity by (a) establishing trust through psychological and physical safety, (b) sharing work with input and feedback, (c) giving autonomy and authority for decision making,

(d) encouraging growth through mentorship and coaching, (e) modeling practices for reflection and learning, and (f) building strong relationships to endure challenges.

Recommendations: The researcher recommends that county offices of education, Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs), and districts develop a plan that communicates common leadership strategies aligned to Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics of adaptive leadership. Administrative credentialing programs need to provide professional learning standards specific to special education and address the key characteristics significant to building adaptive capacity. To support the success of special education directors, county offices of education, SELPAs, and districts need to provide access to mentorship and training on how to become an effective coach. Relationship building should be encouraged through collaborative networks established by county offices of education and SELPAs to support the learning and reflection of special education directors and through the expectations of district leaders to create a quarterly connection among team members.

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PREFACE

Following collaborative discussions regarding adaptive leadership during times of great change and opportunity, nine doctoral students, in collaboration with faculty researchers, developed a common interest in investigating how organizational leaders build an adaptive capacity. This resulted in a thematic study conducted by the research team. This exploratory phenomenological methods study focused on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. The purpose of the study was to identify and describe the strategies used by organizational leaders to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. as perceived by special education directors in California unified public schools.

Participants were selected by each member of the thematic research team from various organizations to examine what strategies leaders use to build an organization's adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics. The five key characteristics are making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning. Next, I interviewed 10 special education directors to determine what leadership strategies were used to build an organization's adaptive capacity. The team cocreated the purpose statement, research questions, definitions, interview questions, survey, and study procedures to ensure thematic consistency and reliability. Throughout the study, the term *peer researchers* was used to refer to the other researchers who conducted this thematic study. Each peer researcher studied a different organization with populations in middle

school public school principals, community-based nonprofit leaders, public school special education directors, small school district superintendents, community emergency response team (CERT) program managers, navy command senior enlisted leaders (CSEL), public school district superintendents, nurse executives, and on-site multifamily rental property management leaders.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Crisis, challenge, and change are concepts well known to organizations and their leaders. Throughout time, organizational leaders have been tasked to respond to events of varying scale, intensity, uncertainty, and origin. Examples of these events include terrorism, economic uncertainty, political turbulence, racial tension and causal violence, natural disasters, and mass shootings (Roth, 2022; Turner, 2022; Urick et al., 2021). Although a leader's approach to such situations and events varies, the effectiveness of leadership has common characteristics. Research studies have indicated that effective leadership influences individuals within a group to work toward a common purpose and goal (Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2016). The ability of leaders to navigate during a crisis is a key feature of an organization's success (Roth, 2022). By understanding the characteristics and skills of effective leadership, organizations can proactively prepare for future challenges (James & Wooten, 2004). The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified the need for effective organizational leaders during times of crisis, challenge, and change.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged causing global disruption and chaos (Tarkar, 2020). Although many industries and organizations quickly collapsed under shutdown regulations, many survived, and others thrived (Roth, 2022). The rapidity of change and subsequent response generated the concepts of "pivot" and "new normal" (Roth, 2022; Urick et al., 2021). Educational organizations were subject to rapid change when they instituted comprehensive lockdowns and physically closed schools (Hoofman & Secord, 2021; Tarkar, 2020). Equity came to the forefront of conversations as instructional delivery models shifted to virtual platforms and extracurricular activities were canceled (Turner, 2022; Urick et al., 2021). Socioeconomic disparities were

magnified, parents had to juggle childcare, and mental wellness became of concern (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). These issues along with others created insurmountable stress for school leaders (Fraker Bonow, 2022; Urick et al., 2021) and tested leadership limits (Turner, 2022).

Postpandemic, these issues and others continue to plague educational leaders. During the 2022–2023 school year, California educational leaders were challenged by destructive wildfires (Lambert, 2022b) and flooding (Peele et al., 2023). Political division between legislative party members concerning race, gender, sexual orientation, and women's rights created tension and civil unrest that bled into the instructional environments (Lambert, 2022a). Retention and recruitment of qualified staff, stress-fueled burnout, mental health and wellness of adults and students, chronic absenteeism, declining enrollment, complex learning gaps, inadequate systems of support, and increased regulations and compliance have contributed to leadership challenges and have shaped a new genre of education (Turner, 2022). This new genre has included technical and adaptive challenges that require educational leaders to rapidly flex practices into new, more effective skills and strategies (Leitzke, 2022; Shaw, 2022; Urick et al., 2021). Unlike technical challenges, adaptive challenges require a change in self and others (Heifetz et al., 2009). Using this modern concept of leadership, the adaptive leader leverages relationships to navigate complex challenges and change. The leader brings people together during trying times to address situations and find practical solutions (Kohman, 2022). This school leadership evolution, in response to unimagined crises, has led to the embracing of adaptive leadership within school systems (Shaw, 2022). As the world emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, the educational landscape continued to

evolve and school leaders recognized the significance of the implications. There is a magnified need to understand the school leader as an effective leader of adaptation and change (Shaw, 2022).

Background

Given the complex reality of today's world, leadership models built upon traditional structures and hierarchies are becoming antiquated (Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021). Further, leadership during times of stability is becoming a rarity. The global economy, natural disasters, political landscapes, health pandemics, and widespread violence have all nurtured instability and uncertainty (Roth, 2022; Turner, 2022; Urick et al., 2021). Challenges and crisis situations present opportunities for leaders to adapt and negotiate conditions to create organizational sustainability (Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021). According to Heifetz (1994), adaptive leadership provides a framework to navigate uncertainties, employ innovative solutions, and contribute to successful outcomes. Leaders, including those in education, can employ adaptive leadership characteristics to endure the ever-changing environments in which their organizations operate (Roth, 2022; Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021).

In response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational leaders were forced to transform their leadership to the changing circumstances across their school and district communities (Shaw, 2022). In particular, special education directors had to overcome insurmountable challenges to ensure students with disabilities made adequate progress (Lombardi, 2022). This global crisis necessitated organizational and departmental adaptation that required effective adaptive leadership for postpandemic success in education (Shaw, 2022).

Theoretical Foundations

Leadership theories, approaches, and dimensions have been analyzed for more than 60 years (Cannistra, 2022; Northouse, 2016). Despite varying definitions, there is consensus that leadership is a process in which leaders use their influence to achieve a goal by either changing circumstances or changing others and involves process, behavior, and relationships (Bass, 2008; Beerel, 2009; Northouse, 2016). Influential theories to the development of adaptive leadership and those that have contributed to effective leadership during times of challenge are reviewed in this study.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership has influenced the conceptualization of the adaptive leadership theory (Cojocar, 2008). Transformational leadership "focuses on the leader in relation to his followers" (Glover, Rainwater, et al., 2002, p.18). Introduced by Burns (1978), it means that the leader aims to intrinsically motivate followers to contribute to the greater good of all (Bass, 1990). Results within this model are obtained when the leader influences, inspires, connects, and motivates individuals toward transformation (Bass, 1990; Cannistra, 2022; Hess, 2016). These leaders understand the individual and group needs and can adapt to stay oriented to the intended outcomes, especially during times of uncertainty (Hess, 2016; Northouse, 2016).

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership, founded by Greenleaf (1977), focuses on the awareness of the leader to understand and respond to the followers' needs (Hess, 2016; Northouse, 2016). Using this framework, the leader places others as the highest priority and focuses on well-being and development over personal self-interest (Hess, 2016; Northouse, 2016).

According to Spears and Lawrence (2002), the 10 characteristics defining the servant leader are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. These characteristics support a servant leader in demonstrating a balance between virtue and action (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2017).

Complexity Leadership

Complexity leadership theory responds to the complex process of adaptive change in systems through an approach that emphasizes learning, creativity, and adaptation (Northouse, 2016). It is grounded in a complex and dynamic process that occurs from networked interactions within and between organizational members (Sweetman, 2010). The complexity leadership theory emerged to describe 21st-century organizations that focused on knowledge rather than only production efficiency (Northouse, 2016). The two main processes are administrative and adaptive functioning. Although the former speaks to traditional leadership, the adaptive functioning of the complexity leadership theory focuses on collective processes to support individual and organizational outcomes through responsiveness to environmental inputs (Sweetman, 2010).

Situational Leadership

The situational leadership approach posits that a leader's style is based on the competence and commitment of followers (Northouse, 2016). With both directive and supportive elements, situational leadership is applied uniquely to the circumstances in which it is presented (Northouse, 2016). Developed by Blanchard and Hersey (Hersey, 1985, as cited in Hess, 2016), leadership occurs when the leader can analyze the situation, assess the needs of followers, and respond with an appropriate reaction. Effectiveness or

efficiency is not critical for every leadership response; rather, the balance between the behavior of task and the relationship is most important (Hess, 2016). Because of the need for fluidity and adaptability, situational leaders are adept at responding to challenges (Northouse, 2016).

Leadership Models During Times of Crisis, Challenge, and Change

Challenges and changes caused by crises are well documented (Roth, 2022). Different types of disasters affect organizational leaders because the need for discernible leadership is critical to creating comfort among chaos (Koehn, 2020; Tisdale, 2022). A study conducted by Roth (2022) found that when faced with an unprecedented crisis, leaders used a variety of skills, attitudes, and behaviors to effectively lead. Several leadership concepts support leading through crisis. These include authentic leadership, crisis leadership, and adaptive leadership (Roth, 2022).

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leaders are genuine, relational, and continually developing (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Northouse, 2016). With roots in positive psychology and transformational leadership, authentic leaders are aware of themselves, others, and the context in which they exist. They strive to foster positivity, self-growth, and trust (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Hess, 2016; Northouse, 2016). Studies synthesized by Roth (2022) indicated that authentic characteristics are the qualities most desired in leaders when enduring a crisis. Authentic leadership generated interest during times of instability after the attacks of 9/11 (Northouse, 2016). Since that time, numerous other events have occurred in which authentic leaders provided compassionate and purposeful guidance, solidifying authentic

leadership as an effective leadership style during challenging times (Northouse, 2016; Roth, 2022).

Crisis Leadership

Crisis leadership extends beyond public relations activities and situational management (James & Wooten, 2004). It is adaptive with a focus on serving those impacted through the establishment of trust (Tisdale, 2022). When trust is established, a foundation for preparation and adaptation to change caused by crisis exists and can be leveraged by the leader (James & Wooten, 2004). Several studies have defined crisis leadership by characteristics such as flexibility, communication, transparency, sensemaking, and recovery (Leitzke, 2022; Tisdale, 2022) as well as by the values and ethics of the leader (Urick et al., 2021). Although there is no proven theoretical framework associated with crisis leadership (Tisdale, 2022), over time crisis leadership has been associated with the adaptive leadership theory of Heifetz (Leitzke, 2022), and Heifetz et al. (2009) confirmed the need for adaptive leaders during crises.

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership was developed "from efforts to understand in practical ways the relationship among leadership, adaptation, systems, and change" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 13). Crisis events cause complexity within organizations that can be the catalyst for change. If leaders can classify the type of challenge, they are better able to mobilize people with a purpose for action (Heifetz et al., 2009). Adaptive challenges require investigation, diagnosis, and new learning (Heifetz et al., 2009). Adaptive leadership presents a flexible approach to facing challenges head-on while connecting with and empowering others to problem solve toward an effective outcome (Kohman, 2022).

Adaptive leadership is built from transformational, situational, and complexity leadership theories (Cojocar, 2008; Hess, 2016). The adaptive leadership theory highlights the relationship between the leader and the follower as well as the relationship between the leader and the environment (Glover, Friedman, & Jones, 2002). It embraces collective connection, learning, response, and progress (Heifetz et al., 2009). It focuses less on the individual leader and more on developing a diagnostic understanding to overcome challenges (Cojocar, 2008; Heifetz et al., 2009). In 1994, Heifetz authored the approach of the adaptive leadership theory in his original work, and future publications by Heifetz and Laurie (1997), Heifetz and Linksy (2002), and Heifetz et al. (2009) further defined and refined the framework and constructs of the adaptive leadership model (Cojocar, 2008; Heifetz et al., 2009; Hess, 2016).

Several other researchers have contributed to the adaptive leadership theory. Owens and Valesky (2011) challenged historical leadership perspectives and introduced change, complexity, and uncertainty as dominant characteristics facing leaders as they sought to find alternative approaches to leading during unstable times. Kouzes and Posner (2017) spoke to complex and changing dynamics and the need to be adaptive to thrive. From an organizational perspective, Yukl and Lepsinger (2002) concluded that organizational performance can be enhanced through flexible, adaptive leadership using reliability, adaptation, and relations (Cojocar, 2008). These contributors, past and present, continue to push the understanding, application, and relevance of the adaptive leadership theory in today's complex world.

Theoretical Framework

The practice of adaptive leadership can be understood using Heifetz's (1994) framework. Two main concepts are foundational to his model. The first concept is distinguishing leadership and authority (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Hess, 2016). Heifetz et al. (2009) posited that authority given by role does not equate to leadership. Leadership is derived from seeing, listening, understanding, diagnosing, and acting. The second of Heifetz's (1994) adaptive leadership concepts is differentiating technical and adaptive challenges (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Hess, 2016). Based on these two concepts, Heifetz et al. (2009) proposed five key adaptive leadership characteristics as qualities of an adaptive organization: making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning. These five characteristics represent the framework for this study.

Making Naming Elephants in the Room the Norm

Baker (2004) described the core foundation of the conversational learning theory as the acceptance and understanding of varying perspectives in a conversation. With an intentional interest to discover the widest range of perspectives, the greatest common learning occurs. Despite this idea, undiscussables plague educational and organizational settings (Baker, 2004). Undiscussables are created by fear, embarrassment, judgment, and perceived incompetence (Baker, 2004; Klonsky, 2010). In alignment, Heifetz et al. (2009) explained internal conversation as a type of dialogue that occurs when difficult issues are thought of but not addressed. This is the elephant in the room. Within an adaptive organization, leaders intentionally and openly discuss topics and address

questions that may be uncomfortable or controversial (Heifetz et al., 2009; Klonsky, 2010). Consequently, an organizational culture of openness, trust, and respect is developed (Heifetz et al., 2009; Klonsky, 2010).

Nurturing a Shared Responsibility for the Organization

Coordinated, collaborative, and collective sharing that spans the delineation of labor are essential elements of shared leadership (Sweetman, 2010; Tremblay et al., 2016). This sharing requires processes that promote flexible boundaries, distribution of authority, and a clear understanding of responsibilities. By dismantling boundaries between job roles and functions, organizations can adapt more readily to change as territorialism is diminished (Heifetz et al., 2009). Heifetz et al. (2009) described an adaptive organization as having employees who take ownership and accountability of the future in addition to understanding their role and function. There are shared conversations, problem solving, and decision making, all of which are oriented toward the organization's success.

Encouraging Independent Judgment

Organizations that promote and value individual contribution to decision making have a high adaptive capacity (Gyuroka, 2010; Heifetz & Linksy, 2002; Heifetz et al., 2009). When decision making is extended beyond top leaders, employees have a greater likelihood to share thoughts, ask questions, and contribute ideas in the promotion of the organization's success (Gyuroka, 2010). Independent judgment and thinking provide a variety of expertise and experiences by which outcomes can be influenced (Heifetz et al., 2009). Therefore, when challenges arise and there is an established organizational culture

of seeking independent judgment, employees contribute to decision making without hesitation (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Developing Leadership Capacity

Leaders who invest in the development of their employees by creating a talent pipeline understand the importance of capacity building for an organization's success (Heifetz et al., 2009). Harris (2011) reviewed capacity building through the lens of several research contributors and surmised that capacity building involves organizational and individual commitment to continual improvement and collaboration. Organizational adaptive capacity is built when there is a recognition of maximizing potential and contribution impact. Heifetz et al. (2009) identified succession planning as an established metric for building leadership capacity. Succession planning is a long-term and personal investment that provides everyday support to developing the skills and capacity of future leaders (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Institutionalizing Reflection and Continuous Learning

Foundational to an organization's adaptive capacity is the establishment of continuous learning (Cojocar, 2008; Heifetz et al., 2009; Hess, 2016). Through the promotion of continuous learning, leaders counteract the stagnancy of systems and structures. As employees build capacity through reflection and learning, the organization is better able to adapt with cultural responsiveness, the inclusion of perspective, and risk taking (Heifetz et al., 2009). Mistakes are accepted, decisions are shared, collaboration and communication are intentional, and reflection and coaching are encouraged (Heifetz et al., 2009; Ramalingam et al., 2020). New ways of learning and responding to change

occur when an adaptive leader creates a cultural expectation of continuous learning and reflection (Northouse, 2016).

Organizational Adaptation in Public Education

Public education systems are complex organizations in constant states of evolution influenced by local pressures, mandates, legislative reform, and innovative advancements while being further impacted by the chaos of crisis (Shaw, 2022; Turner, 2022). Throughout the years, public school systems have been pressured by reform measures to change practices for the assurance of student success (Bogotch, 2005; Thattai, 2017). According to Bogotch (2005), the foundation on which public education was built has been challenged because of changing environmental and political influences. Consequently, organizational adaptation has become a critical element of public education sustainability and success (Bogotch, 2005).

The strength of public educational systems has been continually challenged in recent years. Plagued with budget uncertainties, staffing vacancies and shallow employment pools, declining enrollment and chronic absenteeism, damage from natural disasters, political conflict, and unprecedented rates of violence, the system is under duress (Lambert, 2022a). In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic posed additional challenges. Schools took a variety of approaches to ongoing operations during the physical closures of the pandemic. They modified plans; used innovation to provide unprecedented support; and created structures and systems to better respond to the physical, psychological, and safety needs of the community (Dykstra-Lathrop, 2022; Morris, 2022; Turner, 2022). According to Heifetz et al. (2009), organizational adaptation occurs over time when leaders and followers reimagine states of existence as a response

to challenges to achieve lasting change. During the height of the pandemic, school leaders were engaged in organizational adaptation with a focus on instructional delivery, resource availability, safety, and equity (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). Today, this adaptation continues as the face of education has changed and schools are responding to the impact of learning loss as well as new ways of student learning (Dykstra-Lathrop, 2022; Shaw, 2022).

Adaptive Leaders in Public Education

Leaders in public schools range from the district office to site administration and encompass the teacher leader. School leaders have formal and informal influence and hold an essential role in responding to organizational challenges (Shaw, 2022; Turner, 2022). An adaptive approach to school leadership promotes shared responsibility, collaborative decision making, and relational trust (Noble, 2021). School leaders support the organization through a transformation of changing values and beliefs in alignment with structural and cultural change (Noble, 2021).

The complexity of the school leader's role was transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic as they were asked to pivot readily to the challenges presented (Bogans et al., 2022). Shaw (2022) found that adaptive and enabling leadership practices fostered trust, connection, and collaboration among principals and teachers in the early days of the pandemic. Turner (2022) identified connection, collaboration, coordination, communication, acknowledgment, and sustainable practices as critical adaptive skills of curriculum leaders in response to the pandemic. Crane's (2022) study on high school principals suggested that a successful approach to adaptive leadership during complex challenges was through the engagement of expertise of those within and outside of the

school in decision making. Further, Fraker Bonow (2022) determined that a distributed leadership style was most used by site principals experiencing the pandemic to build staff capacity toward a common vision and mission. Recent literature has revealed that adaptive leadership behaviors were implemented across educational leadership positions as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hale, 2022; Shaw, 2022) and were necessary for success (Crane, 2022).

Adaptive leadership in public education extended beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Kitamura (2019) found that meaning making, decision making, coordination, and preparation were essential skills needed by superintendents who were responding to wildfire events during the 2017–2018 school year. Kitamura learned that flexibility, trust, mobilized support, common sense, and visibility led to cultural shifts in hope, trust, and inspiration. In a study conducted by Hartmann (2023), district leaders found that adaptive leadership, albeit difficult, was necessary to respond to equity-based challenges to address mindset changes and engage a model of sustainability and system improvement of public education. These studies revealed the critical aspects of adaptive leadership in public education and the importance of the adaptive leadership role.

Special Education Directors as Adaptive Leaders

Within the public school system, the special education director serves to ensure that students with disabilities receive legally compliant equitable access to their education (Veale, 2010). According to national data from 2018 to 2019, over 7 million students between the ages of 3 and 22 received special education services. Of the 7 million students, 11% resided in California (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Despite trends in declining public school enrollment in California, the number of special

education students continues to disproportionately rise (Ondrasek et al., 2020), highlighting the importance of special education leadership in school systems to meet the growing demands of students with disabilities.

Minimal research exists on the leadership characteristics of special education directors apart from studies that have addressed teacher retention (Lombardi, 2022). Veale (2010) concluded that a collaborative leadership style of special education directors embodied the characteristics needed to lead a good program. Weaver et al. (2003) examined the behaviors of successful special education administrators, which included communication, collaboration, knowledge of processes to address change, and problem-solving skills. In 2022, Lombardi explored the sense making of special education directors as state and federal mandates were imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lombardi's (2022) study examined leadership experiences that influenced decision making. Results revealed that communication, collaboration, and support were critical influential factors of leadership success (Lombardi, 2022). Though these studies focused on differing leadership skills, they suggest that adapting to challenges through changes in practice and decision making was essential across participants (Lombardi, 2022; Veale, 2010). These characteristics are foundational to adaptive leadership.

Statement of the Research Problem

Public organizations exist in conditions of uncertainty and change (Hale, 2022). Public school systems are complex public organizations and are an example of systems under constant pressure for change. Public schools were made available to all students by the end of the 19th century to ensure free educational opportunities (Thattai, 2017). Over time, various social, legal, cultural, and political factors have influenced and shaped the

current system (Thattai, 2017). Having endured decades of criticism for the underperformance of students, public education has seen a plethora of reform initiatives for both general education and special education (Crane, 2022). Examples of such reform include *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 dismantling racial segregation, the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975 ensuring a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities (Moore, 2023), the release of the *A Nation at Risk* publication in 1983 exposing the problems with the American educational system (Gardner et al., 1983), and the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015 reauthorizing the commitment to student success (Crane, 2022). These reform measures have aimed to increase accountability and oversight at the local, state, and federal levels and consequently transformed the role of the educational leader (Crane, 2022).

Educational leaders have weathered issues of equality and discrimination (Thattai, 2017) to more modern-day struggles of technology, equity, and survival during a global pandemic (Urick et al., 2021). Regardless of the passing of time, the educational leaders' role to lead through the complexities of public education evolution remains constant (Bogotch, 2005). They are called to be responsive to a variety of stakeholders as well as to the organization itself (Crane, 2022; Shaw, 2022). This responsiveness is aligned with Heifetz et al.'s (2009) characteristics of adaptive leadership. Although the influence of adaptive leadership on organizations has been well studied, the primary industries of focus have been health care, commercial, and higher education (Kohman, 2022; Leitzke, 2022; Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, interest in scholarly research has focused on adaptive leadership implementation and leadership qualities within the K–12 public

education system. Connection, collaboration, coordination, communication, recognition, and decision making were all found to be effective leadership characteristics across a variety of K–12 educational leaders (Crane, 2022; Shaw, 2022; Turner, 2022). These studies have revealed that adaptive leadership skills were essential aspects of effective leadership during the pandemic (Crane, 2022; Shaw, 2022; Turner, 2022). Despite a growing body of research publications postpandemic, there is still a discernable gap in understanding the role of the special education director as an adaptive leader.

Special education is a federal directive and a required obligation of public education systems. Since the inception of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975, there have been mandates for public schools to uphold the provision of free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for all eligible students with disabilities (Moore, 2023). Irrespective of this charge, special education has endured a long history of financial, legal, and operational challenges that have plagued school systems and, most critically, the successful outcomes of students (Hussey et al., 2019; Veale, 2010). Special education directors have a unique leadership role that is positioned to oversee the implementation of the special education program and compliance mandates within a school district (Lombardi, 2022; Moore, 2023). They are the bridge between general education and special education, and they must navigate technical and adaptive challenges daily (Hussey et al., 2019; Veale, 2010). Despite the critical importance of this position, many states do not have specific support systems and training programs to ensure leadership success (Moore, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented circumstances for public organizations and had a significant impact on K–12 public education and, most critically,

students with disabilities (Lombardi 2022; Morris, 2022). Since the pandemic, numerous researchers and journalists have provided insight into the challenges of educating students with disabilities from the perspectives of students, parents, and staff (Hoofman & Secord, 2021; Lombardi, 2022). The disruptive effects experienced because of the lack of access to special education were well documented (Hoofman & Secord, 2021; Lombardi, 2022). Despite the multitude of these types of publications, little was known about the experience of special education directors during the pandemic (Fraker Bonow, 2022; Turner, 2022). Moreover, a generalized gap exists in the literature demonstrating the effective leadership of special education directors, and researchers have agreed that further understanding is needed (Lombardi, 2022; Veale, 2010). This study sought to understand the application of adaptive leadership strategies that special education directors use to build the adaptive capacity within public school districts.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What strategies do special education directors use to build an organization's adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics (making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the

organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning)?

Research Subquestions

1. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through making naming elephants in the room the norm?
2. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization?
3. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through encouraging independent judgment?
4. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through developing leadership capacity?
5. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning?

Significance of the Study

Given the rapidly changing circumstances of today's complex world, traditional leadership strategies are not sufficient (Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021). Effective leadership is responsive to new realities caused by environmental changes and trends (Beerel, 2009; Heifetz, 1994; Northouse, 2016). Failure to recognize the need for change based on new realities can have a detrimental impact on an organization's relevancy and success (Beerel, 2009; Hale, 2022). Responding to change with technical fixes can mask the underlying adaptive work needed for behavioral and cultural transformation (Beerel, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2016). Without adaptive work, an organization is vulnerable to defeat (Beerel, 2009). As rapid change continues to impose itself on current

times, as seen by the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, new realities have come to exist in which leaders and organizations are called to respond with an adaptive approach to thrive (Haron et al., 2022; Roth, 2022; Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021; Turner, 2022; Urick et al., 2021).

Adaptive leadership embodies the skills needed to navigate unknown and uncertain circumstances and pursue adaptive solutions that contribute to organizational success (Heifetz et al., 2009). Leaders play an essential role in organizational change, and their ability to understand the context and analyze a situation to make informed decisions is critical (Hale, 2022). Expanding research in health care and higher education has shown significance in positive organizational influences and outcomes with the use of adaptive leadership (Hess, 2016; Kohman, 2022; Leitzke, 2022; Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021). Consequently, adaptive leadership is becoming of more interest as a leadership style for modern-day leaders (Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021).

The adaptive leadership framework can be valuable to educational institutes (Heifetz, 1994). There has been an increase in exploring the significance of adaptive leadership in the K–12 educational system postpandemic (Crane, 2022; Fraker Bonow, 2022; Haron et al., 2022; Shaw, 2022; Turner, 2022). However, focus on the role of the special education director is largely absent despite the growing demand for adaptive leadership responses within special education (Lombardi, 2022). Special education has proved dynamic and multifaceted since the inception of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1975 (Moore, 2023). Issues concerning inclusion and equity, litigation, compliance, funding shortages, staffing shortages, and legislative reform plague special education systems (Ondrasek et al., 2020) and have been exasperated by the COVID-19

pandemic (Hoofman & Secord, 2021). With an increase of special education students across school districts in California and higher educational outcome expectations for students with disabilities by the California Department of Education (Ondrasek et al., 2020), special education directors are leading under exceptional circumstances.

This study contributes to the literature on adaptive leadership theory, K–12 educational leadership, and most critically, effective special education director leadership. It explored the special education director's use of Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five adaptive leadership characteristics to build adaptive capacity, a connection currently absent from literature. Special education directors, current and future, will gain valuable resources and insight into adaptive strategies impactful for effective leadership and capacity building. Leaders, who are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and strategies to effectively lead, are positioned to have a more significant influence on those they serve (Hussey et al., 2019; Veale, 2010). This study also aimed to contribute to universities and professional organizations that provide administrative credential programs and specialized professional development tracks for special education administrators. When leaders feel prepared through education and experience, they are more likely to sustain themselves in their positions, respond appropriately to challenges, mitigate conflict and crisis, and focus on student success (Hussey et al., 2019; Taylor, 2020). Beerel (2009) stated, "Adaptive people and adaptive organizations can embrace the future with greater confidence and an enhanced sense of autonomy" (p. 14). For special education directors, this means navigating complex systems of change effectively to ensure students with disabilities achieve positive educational outcomes.

Definitions

Key variables relevant to the study are defined in this section to provide a clear understanding of their intended meaning (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Theoretical Definitions

A theoretical definition provides the meaning of a term as a construct in a theoretical context (Ngo Ndjama, 2020). These definitions are created using other research studies and publications and can provide an understanding for operational definitions (Ngo Ndjama, 2020).

Adaptive Capacity. "Adaptive capacity is an organization's ability to adapt and thrive over time by identifying and addressing the challenges they are currently facing" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 11).

Adaptive Leadership. "Adaptive leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14).

Developing Leadership Capacity. The systemic focus on expanding competencies and resources and intentionally motivating groups or individuals to increase leadership potential proactively (Eade, 1997, 2007; Elmore, 2003; Eyben et al., 2006; Harris, 2011; Heifetz et al., 2009; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009).

Encouraging Independent Judgment. A leader's capacity to provide an opportunity for team members to make choices based on personal and professional experience regardless of the position held within the organization (Casavant et al., 1995; Heifetz et al., 2009; Shanbhag, 2002).

Institutionalizing Reflection and Continuous Learning. Providing a culture conducive to the safe exploration of new ideas and sharing of lessons learned both from

an individual and an organizational perspective and creating a sustainable learning culture driven by a willingness to overcome engrained mental models across all levels of the organization (Cojocar, 2008; Pearson & Smith, 1986; Ramalingam et al., 2020; Senge et al., 2015; Veldsman & Johnson, 2016; Vera & Crossan, 2004).

Making Naming Elephants in the Room the Norm. The act of openly addressing sensitive underlying issues, or undiscussables, to resolve potential barriers that interfere with an organization realizing its full potential (Baker, 2004; Heifetz et al., 2009; Toegel & Barsoux, 2019).

Nurturing a Shared Responsibility for the Organization. The collective ownership across team member roles for the decision making of operational goals and outcomes of the organization's future (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Heiftez et al., 2009; Northouse, 2016; Tremblay et al., 2016).

Operational Definitions

Operational definitions define the key terms of the study based on how the researcher has determined to measure a concept. Given the research study purpose, these definitions convey the logic, ideas, and perspectives of the variables to avoid misinterpretation of intended meaning (Ngo Ndjama, 2020).

Building an Organization's Adaptive Capacity. For this study, building an organization's adaptive capacity refers to the ability of the special education director to respond to crisis, challenge, and change productively so that the special education department and school district continue to maintain focus on the organization's vision and positive student outcomes.

Constructive Conflict. The deliberate engagement of understanding differing viewpoints, attitudes, or beliefs to creatively work toward a solution or resolution through dialogue, curiosity, and collaboration (Schlaerth et al., 2013).

California Public School Districts. According to the California Department of Education (n.d.-b), there are three typical configurations of school districts. These include an elementary school district (Grades K–8), a high school district (Grades 9–12), and a unified school district (Grades K–12). Unified school districts provide for a range of students including those with disabilities receiving special education services. These school districts may also include transitional kindergarten classes as well as adult services for students with disabilities ages 18–22.

Special Education Director. For the purposes of this study, the special education director is defined as the educational administrator who is responsible and accountable for the special education department and the provision of special education services for students with disabilities within a unified public school district.

Students With Disabilities. Students, ages 0–22, who have met the federal requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and have been found eligible to receive special education services and support within a public school.

Delimitations

Delimitation is a narrowed boundary for a study (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This phenomenological study was delimited to include 10 special education directors serving in unified public school districts within Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino counties in California who did not simultaneously hold the title or duties of a SELPA

director. In addition, the special education directors have met four of the following six criteria:

1. They have shown evidence of successful relationships with stakeholders.
2. They have shown evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success.
3. They have had 5 or more years of experience in the profession or field.
4. They have had articles written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings.
5. They have been recognized by their peers.
6. They have held memberships in associations or groups focused on their field.

Organization of the Study

This study is composed of five chapters and corresponding references and appendices. Chapter I introduced the adaptive leadership theory, the foundation on which this study was conducted, as well as identified the relevancy of conducting research on the use of adaptive strategies by special education directors to build organizational adaptive capacity in light of crisis, challenges, and change. In addition, Chapter I revealed the problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, definition of key terms, and the study delimitations. Chapter II gives an in-depth review of the literature discussed in Chapter I. This includes seminal authors and works of adaptive leadership theory as well as more recent and related findings and trends as they relate to adaptive leadership; leadership during crisis, challenge, and change; K–12 educational leadership; special education director leadership; and organizational adaptive capacity building. Chapter III reviews the methodological approach used to conduct the study and identifies

the reasoning to the phenomenological design as well as data collection processes and procedures. Chapter IV describes the data collected and summarizes the key findings through identified themes. Finally, Chapter V provides a conclusion for the study by synthesizing the findings, identifying conclusions, reviewing implications for action, and outlining recommendations for future research studies.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter II provides a literature review of the theoretical foundations, framework, and concepts that contribute to the exploration and description of the strategies used by special education directors to build organizational adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) key characteristic of adaptive leadership. According to Roberts and Hyatt (2019), the literature review is a thorough analysis on the topic of study. It is an essential aspect of the research process that supports the need for the study and can inform the research design and ensure significant outcomes.

This literature review begins with a background on the broad perspective of challenges and changes endured within educational school systems such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public educational institutes. It reviews the theoretical foundations of transformational leadership, servant leadership, complexity leadership, and situational leadership theories and their contributions to leadership development. This section is followed by a review of effective leadership models during times of crisis, challenge, and change. These models include authentic leadership, crisis leadership, and adaptive leadership. An in-depth understanding of adaptive leadership is developed as the foundation to the theoretical framework. Characteristics, historical perspectives, and contributions to adaptive leadership concepts are detailed. The next section of the literature review outlines the theoretical framework and details the five key characteristics identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). The last section explores organizational adaptation in public education systems, the role of the adaptive leader in public education systems, and special education directors as adaptive leaders. The chapter concludes with a summary and substantiates the need for the study.

Background

Educational leaders of the 21st century have endured significant tragic events, such as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the Columbine and Uvalde shootings. Missing from that list are challenges that plague leadership outside of tragedy. Chronic absenteeism, labor shortages, legislative reform, and funding deficits all contribute to the complexity of an educational leader's role (Lambert, 2022a). In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic created further unprecedented circumstances that changed the landscape of education (Shaw, 2022). As schools closed, educational leaders had to rapidly shift to an online world of schooling that exacerbated systemic inequities and challenged parents and educators alike to provide continuity of instruction to students virtually (Hoofman & Secord, 2021; Shaw, 2022; Tarkar, 2020). Although some students thrived, many students such as those with disabilities suffered greatly from academic learning loss, behavioral dysregulation, and stagnated social development (Hoofman & Secord, 2021; Tarkar, 2020).

These challenges have significant implications for the sustainability of educational organizations, and the leader's ability to effectively navigate them is critical (Roth, 2022). Research studies that have examined leadership effectiveness have found that successful leaders have vision, charisma, and understanding of organizational behavior and are able to motivate others to work toward shared outcomes (Northouse, 2016; Owens & Valesky, 2011). To create organizational stability during times of chaos, leaders must adapt to the changing circumstances by negotiating the environment and mobilizing others to engage in shared problem solving and solution seeking (Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021). The adaptive leadership model provides such a framework

for educational leaders to use so that long-term organizational success can be sustained (Heifetz et al., 2009; Shaw, 2022).

Theoretical Foundations

Leadership has been widely researched over time and continues to garner interest and attention across fields of study and industries (Northouse, 2016). To explain and understand the complexities of leadership, researchers and theorists have developed numerous theoretical approaches to conceptualize leadership and its accompanying traits and characteristics over the past 60 years (Beerel, 2009; Northouse, 2016). Definitions have ranged from the perspective of a group, personality, behavior, process, power, relationships, skills, and more. Northouse (2016) summarized leadership as a phenomenon that engages others, influences, and promotes common goals. Beerel (2009) broadly defined leadership as an activity that leads followers to obtain a goal. Bass (2008) addressed leadership in relation to followers through the influence of behaviors, values, and beliefs. Early on, Burns (1978) described leadership as the collective relationship between the leader and follower in which one is not better than the other. The variation within leadership definitions, theories, and models demonstrates the ever-changing and complex nature of the concept. This study sought to contribute to the literature on leadership by exploring the adaptive leadership theory and key characteristics as identified by Heifetz et al. (2009).

In this study, four leadership theories have been identified as supportive to the development of the adaptive leadership theory. These leadership theories include transformational leadership, servant leadership, complexity leadership, and situational leadership. The next section outlines the importance of each leadership theory as a

theoretical foundation to understand where adaptive leadership fits within other established leadership theories.

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978) introduced transformational leadership in his seminal work *Leadership*. Since its development, transformational leadership has been one of the most used and predominant leadership frameworks (Hess, 2016; Taylor, 2020). Burns (1978) described transformational leadership as "a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents" (p. 4). Major leadership assumptions from Burns's model include providing attention to followers, the ability to challenge intellectual assumptions of followers, inspiration and motivation of goal attainment for the organization and followers, and the display of ethical and moral behavior.

Bass (1990) stated that transformational leaders "stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group" (p. 21). Transformational leaders consider the objective and goals of the leader, group, and organization subsequent to the need of followers (Northouse, 2016). Leaders use charisma and intellectual stimulation with followers (Bass, 1990) as well as relationships, engagement, and motivation to reach mutual higher moral standings through modeled behavior (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Hess, 2016). Followers are empowered to achieve high levels of performance and experience personal satisfaction (Hess, 2016).

Bass and Riggio (2006) identified four critical components of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspiration and motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These components center on the relationship between the

leader and followers by which the leader is the essential source to achieve outcomes based on the leader's ability to engage with followers on the four identified components. The behaviors and goals of the followers connect with the broader vision of the leader and organization (Hess, 2016).

Burns (1978) differentiated transformational leadership from transactional leadership by indicating that "transforming leadership, while more complex, is more potent" (p. 4). A transactional leader is driven by actions, exchanges, and outcomes with little concern for the genuine need of followers. According to Burns, transactional leadership is common when relationships are less critical than the transaction. Bass (1990) indicated that transactional leadership is more prevalent in stable circumstances and organizations. However, in a complex world with rapid change, researchers have shifted away from transactional leadership to leadership models that are more responsive to followers, problem solving, innovation, and capacity building (Beerel, 2009).

Servant Leadership

First published in 1970, *The Servant as Leader* represents the seminal work of servant leadership authored by Robert Greenleaf (Hess, 2016; Northouse, 2016; Van Dierendonck, 2011). Greenleaf (1977) theorized that the servant leader is overtly focused on serving the followers and does so by going beyond self-interest. In comparison to servitude, the servant leader displays ownership and initiative while accepting risks (Sousa & Van Dierendonck, 2017). Servant leadership is unlike other leadership theories that place emphasis on the success of the leader or the organization but less on the actual people (Van Dierendonck, 2011). The servant leader embodies stewardship and uses trust and relationships to obtain organizational outcomes through individual growth (Beerel,

2009; Hess, 2016; Northouse, 2016). Motivation is driven through the need to serve others by being attentive, supportive, and nurturing (Beerel, 2009; Northouse, 2016). Followers are empowered to maximize their potential by being of priority to leaders who display moral and ethical behavior. Van Dierendonck (2011) indicated, "Being a servant allows a person to lead; being a leader implies a person serves" (p. 1231).

Despite Greenleaf's significant contribution to the theory of servant leadership, he did not create an empirical definition (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Researchers for the past several decades have contributed various interpretations, leading to a range of behaviors and models (Northouse, 2016). Spears (1995) identified 10 characteristics that have been accepted as essential aspects of servant leadership. These characteristics are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Although these characteristics provided an early model conceptualized from Greenleaf's work (Northouse, 2016), Spears did not fully operationalize his work for empirical outcomes (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Regardless, the 10 servant leadership characteristics are widely used to this day as foundational to the theory (Northouse, 2016).

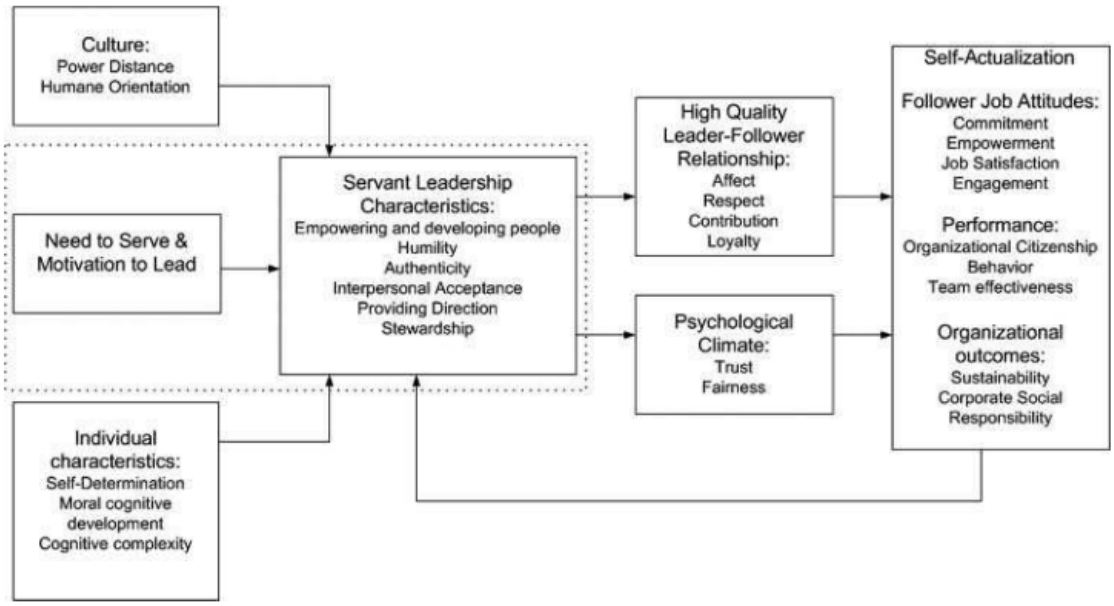
Adding to the research on servant leadership was Laub (1999), who identified six clusters of servant leadership characteristics. These include developing people, sharing leadership, displaying authenticity, valuing people, providing leadership, and building community (Laub, 1999). Russell and Gregory Stone (2002) also created a servant leadership model composed of nine functional characteristics and 11 accompanying characteristics. However, in this model the behavioral differences between the types of characteristics were not well defined (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Patterson (2003) further

contributed to well-known models of servant leadership and detailed seven value-based constructs of servant leadership. Her work emphasized the role of virtues in leadership success and bridged the gap between transformational leadership and servant leadership.

Van Dierendonck (2011) synthesized the various models, contributions, and empirical research for servant leadership and provided six characteristics recognized by key researchers as depicted in Figure 1. These include empowering and developing people, humility, authenticity, interpersonal acceptance, providing direction, and stewardship.

Figure 1

A Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership



Note. From "Servant Leadership: A Review and Synthesis," by D. Van Dierendonck, 2011, *Journal of Management*, *37*(4), p. 1233.

Servant leadership demonstrates alignment with transformational leadership and authentic leadership, both addressed within this study. Although both transformational

leadership and servant leadership focus on the follower, transformational leaders are committed to the organization whereas servant leaders have primary allegiance to the followers (Beerel, 2009; Northouse, 2016). Through a focus on followers, servant leaders promote well-being, shared vision, and personal accountability and acceptance, all characteristics that can indirectly influence organizational outcomes (Van Dierendonck, 2011). Van Dierendonck (2011) identified two key characteristics of servant leadership that directly correlate to the essence of authentic leadership traits: humility and authenticity. Servant leaders demonstrate stewardship and empowerment and provide guidance to others while embodying genuineness and vulnerability toward followers to establish relationships of trust. Thus, being authentic is at the core of a servant leader (Van Dierendonck, 2011).

Complexity Leadership

The complexity leadership theory was developed by Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) in response to the rapid technological and globalization changes within the Knowledge Era. Because the changing world requires leaders and organizations to be knowledgeable and innovative for survival, Uhl-Bien et al. developed a framework that displayed relevancy for the more contemporary 21st-century times. The complexity leadership theory is rooted in complexity science in which complex adaptive systems are networked together to interact with common goals and outcomes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Through networking, units can contribute individual knowledge to the collective change effort to produce qualitatively different results than just the sum of individual contributions (Sweetman, 2010). The interactive and dynamic nature of the complex adaptive systems mirror the structures and systems within organizations in which people are connected to

creatively solve problems, learn, and adapt to changing environments (Northouse, 2016; Sweetman, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). According to Uhl-Bien et al. (2007), "In complex adaptive systems, agents, events, and ideas bump into each other in somewhat unpredictable fashion, and change emerges from this dynamic interactive process" (p. 302). Through this nonlinear interaction, emergent behavior change occurs. Tension among people because of divergent ideas creates the opportunity for creativity and learning, two attributes of the dynamic complexity leadership theory (Northouse, 2016; Sweetman, 2010).

The complexity leadership theory emphasizes learning, creativity, and adaptability within the complex adaptive systems of organizations (Northouse, 2016; Sweetman, 2010). Leadership is both interactive and dynamic and focuses on the process in which organizational networked interactions take place among people (Sweetman, 2010). Using the actions of individuals, organizational innovation is achieved through shared leadership and collective creativity (Sweetman, 2010).

Sweetman (2010) examined collective creativity and shared leadership among nonprofit organizations, and his findings revealed a positive correlation with innovation, a trait highly related to adaptability. Sweetman stated that "leadership, creativity, and innovation are needed to sustain organizations confronted with the need to adapt to changing environments" (p. 65). Using the complexity leadership theory as a framework, Sweetman explored the relationship between the innovation and the adaptable function of complexity leadership. Innovation was found to be an effort of the organization and not the work of select individuals. Differences in job role, function, experiences, and

perspectives influenced innovative outcomes and thus contributed to the novelty of adaptable and creative solutions to problems identified (Sweetman, 2010).

The core leadership components of the complexity leadership theory are administrative, enabling, and adaptive function (Camby, 2021; Northouse, 2016; Sweetman 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In alignment with more traditional leadership approaches, the administrative function oversees resource management and employs hierarchical structures for efficiency (Sweetman, 2010). The adaptive function defines the process of collective leadership and creative outcomes that are born from the interactions of people as they explore and adapt to surrounding circumstances (Northouse, 2016; Sweetman, 2010). According to Sweetman (2010), the adaptive function is composed of "distributed leadership, creative interaction, and innovation" (p. 10). Enabling leadership provides the conditions for the administrative and adaptive leadership aspects to function collectively. Through a dynamic process, the three integrated leadership components serve to support the complexity that exists within changing organizations to achieve outcomes (Northouse, 2016; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Situational Leadership Approach

The situational leadership approach, a type of contingency theory, was first authored by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969 and has since become a widely used approach for organizational leadership development (Hess, 2016; Northouse, 2016; Rajbhandari, 2015). Based on Reddin's (1967) three-dimensional theory of leadership effectiveness, situational leadership focuses on the circumstances affecting leaders (Northouse, 2016). According to Reddin, the three elements of leadership effectiveness are the tasks, the relationship with the people who complete the tasks, and the situation surrounding the

task and people. The situation and the leader's ability to adjust to the situation is an impactful variable for effective leadership (Cairns, 1996). Reddin (1967) suggested that effective leadership was based on responding appropriately to changing situations.

Hersey and Blanchard (1969) built upon Reddin's (1967) foundation of leadership and developed a leadership model based on task behavior, relationship behavior, and the readiness level of followers. Hersey and Blanchard (1969) extended emphasis from the situation to the impact of the leader's behavior on the followers given the influence of a situation. This approach signifies the importance of organizational relationships and the application of directive and supportive leadership in the context of a situation (Northouse, 2016). Effective leaders can assess the commitment and competence of followers and adapt their style of support based on the changing needs of the followers and the situation (Hess, 2016). The Situational Leadership II is the highly used model developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969), that considers leadership style and development level of the followers as dynamic dimensions of situational leadership measurement.

In Situational Leadership II, there are two types of leadership styles classified into four behavioral categories (Northouse, 2016). Directive leadership behaviors provide one-way communication for structure, guidance, and clarity of goal achievement. Supportive leadership behaviors provide social–emotional connection and response using two-way communication (Northouse, 2016). The varied combination of these two styles leads to categories of leadership, which are directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating (Cairns, 1996; Northouse, 2016). The developmental level of followers is an additional aspect of the model that examines the readiness of the follower to achieve an outcome given commitment, skill, and attitude (Northouse, 2016). The model assumes

that leaders must recognize the readiness of followers given situations and adapt their leadership style along a continuum to be effective (Hess, 2016; Northouse, 2016). Thus, situational leadership is rooted in flexibility and adaptability.

The situational leadership approach requires adaptation to the changing needs of followers in response to situations and thus has common characteristics with the adaptive leadership theory (Northouse, 2016). Despite a lack of empirical evidence for situational leadership as a theory and inconclusive study results over time, it remains relevant as an adaptable leadership approach because of the guidance and direction it provides for practical leadership in complex times (Northouse, 2016; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). The situational leadership approach has been used over time in Fortune 500 companies and has a reputation of effectiveness for leadership training (Hess, 2016). It is practical and prescriptive yet adaptable and responsive.

Leadership Models During Times of Crisis, Challenge, and Change

Natural disasters, economic turbulence, health crises, and human-caused devastation have become common occurrences requiring leadership response (Roth, 2022). Educational leaders have endured these events and more over the past 2 decades as they have infiltrated into school settings (Turner, 2022; Urick et al., 2021). Leaders are often ill-equipped to manage a situation, let alone lead an organization through a transformational experience toward positive outcomes (James & Wooten, 2004; S. M. Wilson, 2021). Roth (2022) stated that "in such times of crisis and ambiguity, the need for leadership becomes visible and leadership matters" (p. 16). Hayashi and Soo (2012) contended that "leadership is a combination of the right knowledge, the right person or people, the right behavior, and also the right actions" (p. 80). Klann (2003)

contributed that a crisis can "differentiate influential leaders from ineffective leaders" (p. 17). In response to internal and external risks, leadership must be flexible and resilient with effective communication and collaboration (Hayashi & Soo, 2012). Many studies focusing on leadership through the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed awareness, decision making, communication, empathy, adaptiveness, and presence as key characteristics of effectiveness (Roth, 2022). Authentic leadership, crisis leadership, and adaptive leadership models have characteristics that support leaders to effectively navigate challenges and change. The next sections explore these leadership models and their connection to this study's theoretical framework.

Authentic Leadership

In response to turbulent times in the world, researchers have concurred there is interest and need to explore leadership strategies that are grounded in genuine authenticity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Northouse, 2016). According to Northouse (2016), authentic leaders provide trust, hope, certainty, security, and morality needed during times of uncertainty, such as those experienced with tragedy, corruption, scandal, and struggle. Authentic leadership is built from models of positive psychology, positive organizational behavior, and moral perspective taking (Aiken, 2021; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). It further has roots in transformational, charismatic, servant, and spiritual leadership theories (Akin, 2021; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). As a newer 21st-century leadership theory, empirical research findings have continued to shape the development of authentic leadership (Aiken, 2021; Northouse, 2016). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, several research studies have examined the use of authentic leadership in response to the challenges endured during and after the pandemic across educational, healthcare, and

private sector industries (Aiken, 2021). Northouse (2016) suggested that authentic leadership fills a void of trust that has been created by ineffective leaders during times of challenge through the demonstration of "self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency" (p. 206).

There is no one accepted definition for authentic leadership (Aiken, 2021; Northouse, 2016). Avolio and Gardner (2005) contended that authentic leaders have a true focus on the self by which they are self-aware, demonstrate self-regulation, and obtain self-knowledge. This delineated focus differentiates authentic leadership from transformational leadership and other models in which purposeful attention is given to followers (Aiken, 2021). According to Shamir and Eilam (2005), authentic leaders focus on being their best self and creating positive impact and influence exemplified by personal conviction, values, and life experiences. Avolio et al. (2004) indicated that authentic leaders have deep awareness of how they are perceived by others. George (2016) described authentic leaders as having purpose, passion, values, relationships, and self-discipline. Northouse (2016) identified the differing perspectives for which authentic leadership has been defined. The intrapersonal perspective considers the leader as an authentic being with experiences that influence their awareness, regulation, and concept (Northouse, 2016; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). The interpersonal perspective focuses on the reciprocal relationship created between leader and follower in which authenticity occurs (Northouse, 2016). The developmental perspective sees authenticity as a characteristic that can be grown and developed in leaders and followers and activated by times of challenge or change (Aiken, 2021; Northouse, 2016).

Throughout the research, authentic leaders have been identified as those who deeply understand their strengths and weaknesses, trust themselves, have a foundational anchor to morality and ethics, recognize their impact on others, consider all perspectives, communicate with transparency, and engage with real presence (Aiken, 2021; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Northouse, 2016). Roth's (2022) analysis of research studies found that authentic leadership characteristics were evident during the COVID-19 pandemic as an effective style to navigate the challenges encountered and maintain organizational order. The authentic leadership approach met a societal need for trusted and positive leadership during the chaotic times endured because of the pandemic (Roth, 2022).

Crisis Leadership

James and Wooten (2004) stated that "the best crisis leaders are those that build a foundation of trust not only within their organization, but throughout the supply chain" (p. 4). The authors suggested that the foundation provides the support for organizational change as a response to enduring the crisis event, not just surviving it. Crisis events elicit emotional reactions and threaten the current state of being for people, places, or things (James & Wooten, 2004; S. M. Wilson, 2021). Crisis leadership, unlike crisis management, requires the leader to "address safety, psychological stress, a plan for stability as well as restoration, and work laterally with the community" (Urick et al., 2021, p. 2). Communication, shared values, and shared vision provide reassurance and address the psychological and relational needs of people during a crisis simultaneous to mitigation measures through crisis management strategies (Urick et al., 2021). Effective crisis leaders manage high levels of stress without cognitive or emotional incapacitation (S. M. Wilson, 2021). They can perceive information accurately and use sensemaking to

engage in supportive actions and decision making (S. M. Wilson, 2021). Crisis leadership uses a nonlinear approach to engage, communicate, reassure, and heal an organization in response to the crisis and the surrounding environment (Urick et al., 2021; S. M. Wilson, 2021).

Emphasizing the nonlinear nature of crisis events, Smith and Riley (2012) identified attributes for school-based crisis leadership that reflect the uniqueness and differing circumstances of each event. These attributes are intuition, flexibility, creativity, critical thinking, optimism, emotional intelligence, synthesizing skills, empathy and respect, and communication skills. James and Wooten (2004) identified crisis phases to depict the behaviors, activities, and impact of crisis events within a business setting. These are signal detection, preparation/prevention, containment/damage control, business recovery, and learning. James and Wooten contended that leadership competency is built to sustain challenging times when the phases of crisis are recognized and understood. They went on to identify leadership competencies of building trust, expanding mindset, identifying and responding to vulnerabilities, providing thoughtful and decisive decision making, showing responsible risk-taking, and learning reflectively as core tenets of effective leadership during a crisis (James & Wooten, 2004). An organization's ability to survive and thrive postcrisis is dependent on using crisis leadership, not crisis management (James & Wooten, 2004).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant amount of new research has been conducted on crisis leadership in efforts to understand the distinctive attributes required to navigate complex situations and achieve organizational success (Riggio & Newstead, 2023). With limited insulation from crisis events because of the

interconnected and interdependent world, leaders are being confronted with a plethora of opportunities to respond to crisis. Riggio and Newstead (2023) suggested that this creates a need for leaders who are adaptable and responsive to the changing circumstances imposed on them.

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership embodies concepts from the perspectives of systems, biology, service orientation, and psychotherapy (Northouse, 2016). Unlike other leadership models, adaptive leadership is largely focused on the followers (Heifetz et al., 2009), those "closest to the problems within the system" (Nelson & Squires, 2017, p. 119). An adaptive leader motivates and mobilizes people to tackle problems by recognizing and providing opportunities for new learning and ways of being to fundamentally change attitude, beliefs, and behaviors to uncover sustainable solutions (Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2016). Adaptive leaders engage in shared leadership through collaborative problem solving and distribution of decision making in a crisis (Roth, 2022). According to Hayashi and Soo (2012), with shared accountability for actions and decisions, crisis response is efficient, and risks are minimized. How a leader supports people through required changes in response to changing situations is the essence of adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership provides a nonlinear and collaborative approach to sustainably solve problems that arise from challenges and crises endured in the complex world.

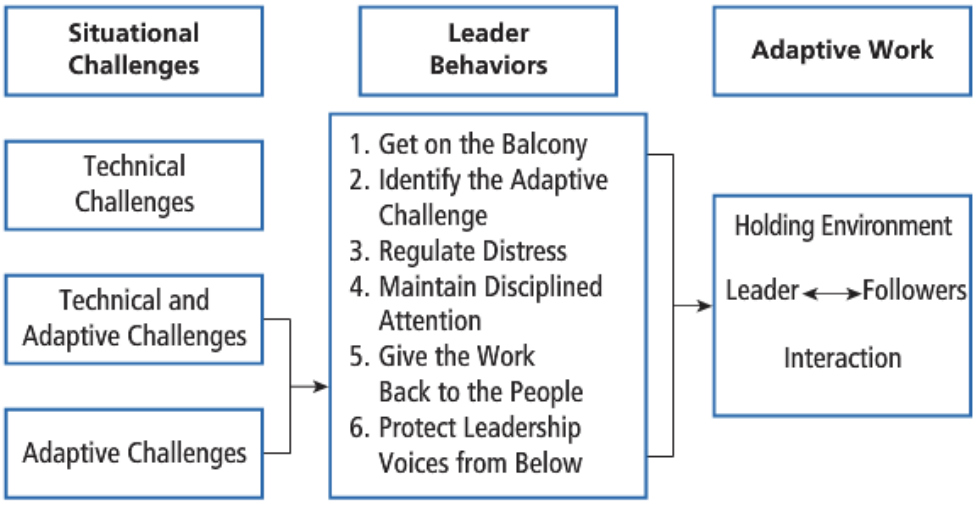
History of Adaptive Leadership

In his seminal work *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Heifetz (1994) called for "leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple, painless

solutions—problems that require us to learn new ways" (p. 2). Using key ideas of adaptation and authority, Heifetz developed the concept of adaptive leadership by specifying criteria necessary for leaders to maintain authority and navigate technical and adaptive challenges to remain responsible, oriented, and effective. In 1997, Heifetz and Laurie suggested six characteristics of adaptive leadership. Although prescriptive, these characteristics can be demonstrated simultaneously to support the changes required of others in adaptive work (Northouse, 2016). Figure 2 depicts the key components of adaptive leadership as developed by Heifetz and Laurie (1997). These components include accurately diagnosing the situational challenge; the leader's ability to mobilize followers to engage in finding innovative solutions that require a change in behavior, attitudes, and beliefs; and the space in which those interactions occur (Northouse, 2016).

Figure 2

Model of Adaptive Leadership



Note. From *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (7th ed.), by P. Northouse, 2016, p. 261, SAGE Publications.

Heifetz et al. (2002) further analyzed leadership when faced with technical versus adaptive problems and determined that leaders should create the conditions for followers to problem solve using more adaptable solutions given politics, culture, and experiences. This new approach, straying from traditional leadership models in which the leaders know the answers, was formalized as adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2002). Heifetz et al. stated that adaptive leaders mobilize people to do adaptive work by "directing attention, creating a holding environment, framing the issues, and orchestrating multi-party conflict" (pp. 10–11).

Yukl and Lepsinger (2002) described the need for adaptation and flexibility among leaders to remain competitive and relevant in the workplace. Using leadership theories on organizational effectiveness, change, and management, the authors developed a model built from empirical research that promotes flexibility. Innovation and relationships are at the foundation of organizational efficiency and improvement (Yukl & Lepsinger, 2002). Kouzes and Posner (2002) similarly discussed the critical importance of adaptive leadership in the changing world. To respond to the demands of stakeholders, leaders required a less prescriptive model of problem solving and solution finding. Improved performance was found with an increase in leadership discretion (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Glover, Friedman, and Jones (2002) proposed a framework to analyze the dynamic relationship between leaders and followers using Piagetian concepts of assimilation and accommodation. Their adaptive leadership theory extends the traditional model of leader–follower to include the relationships in the context of environments. Glover, Friedman, and Jones described the model as flexible to time, space, situation, and

context. It affords the creativity of leaders to discover solutions to problems that are available and unimagined.

Owens and Valesky (2007) contributed to adaptive leadership by proposing that leaders and educators need to be adaptable, sensitive, and responsive to organizational changes. Their research stressed the critical elements of changing leadership because of highly variable and unstable environments. Owens and Valesky suggested that adaptive problems must be navigated through a collaboration of relationships with shared interest, values, and commitment to problem solving. This collaboration called for teamwork "between and among many individuals over time in an iterative process" (Owens & Valesky, 2011, p. 200).

Though there have been considerable contributions to the adaptive leadership theory, it is not without critique. Minimal empirical research exists to test the adaptive leadership theory as developed by Heifetz (Northouse, 2016). Cojocar (2008) examined whether adaptive leadership was perceived as an emerging theory or derived from a recognized theory and found that it was a widely accepted leadership approach across multi-industry participants. There was mixed consensus, however, about whether adaptive leadership was considered a developing theory or a derivative of a leadership theory. According to Northouse (2016), the adaptive leadership theory lacks a direct moral dimension and behavioral definition, which could lead to different interpretations and applications. Despite skepticism, adaptive leadership continues to be studied and applied within organizations across industries (Cojocar, 2008) with the most widely conducted research in health care (Hess, 2016; Northouse, 2016).

Key Concepts Within Adaptive Leadership

Fundamental to the adaptive leadership theory is the distinction between leader and authority. A leader is not defined by role but rather the engagement of work by self and others (Heifetz et al., 2009). In contrast, authority speaks to the contribution of power and influence from the leader onto the followers (Heifetz et al., 2009). Heifetz et al. (2009) indicated that adaptive leadership "is dangerous" because an adaptive leader creates friction and widely accepted expectations and states of being for followers (p. 26). Managing conflict in this space and motivating followers to engage in adaptive work through direction, protection, and order creates organizational change and differentiates an adaptive leader from a leader of authority (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Another key concept in adaptive leadership is distinguishing between situational challenges that are either technical or adaptive (Heifetz et al., 2009). According to Heifetz et al. (2009), "The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems" (p. 19). Technical challenges have known solutions that a leader can solve using authority, expertise, and organizational processes (Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2016). Adaptive challenges are complex, real world, hard to identify, and harder to problem solve (Beerel, 2009; Northouse, 2016). According to Heifetz et al. (2009), adaptive challenges often elicit resistance because of the experience of accepting loss or the need for change. They require fundamental changes in assumptions and behaviors (Cojocar, 2008; Heifetz et al., 2009; Hess, 2016). Adaptive challenges must be addressed through the mobilization of followers to engage in problem solving to discover effective solutions (Northouse, 2016) and address the impact of loss (Heifetz et al., 2009).

In addition, a key concept of adaptive leadership is adaptive work. According to Northouse (2016), adaptive work "is the process toward which adaptive leaders direct their work" (p. 273). It is the work needed to establish a new reality while addressing the associated change and loss of the old (Beerel, 2009). Adaptive work is a shared commitment by leaders and followers (Heifetz et al., 2009) and occurs in a space where safety is established to explore changing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Northouse, 2016). Without the creation of this delicate environment, adaptive work and effective leadership are vulnerable (Beerel, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the theory or construct of the research problem through the connection of key variables (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The framework outlines the scope in which the study takes place and details the parameters for decision making. In this thematic study, the strategies used by leaders to build organizational adaptive capacity were explored through a theoretical framework authored by Heifetz et al. (2009) in their book *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*. Five key adaptive leadership characteristics were identified as necessary contributors to thriving adaptive organizations. The characteristics are making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning (Heifetz et al., 2009). These characteristics represent the framework for this study and present an opportunity to explore the influence of adaptive leadership in unified public school systems.

Making Naming Elephants in the Room the Norm

Making naming elephants in the room a norm is an influential adaptive leadership characteristic for building organizational capacity (Heifetz et al., 2009). Heifetz et al. (2009) described four types of concurrent organizational meetings. There are scheduled meetings with explicit conversation and informal meetings that occur with a selected group. There are those that take place internally examining observations, reflections, interpretations, assumptions, and naming the unmentioned elephants in the room and those that take place after the formal meeting that provides for an exchange of emotions and unsaid input. Organizations that are adaptive provide the environment, leadership, and safety to promote addressing all issues openly and formally despite the sensitivity of issues (Heifetz et al., 2009; Klonsky, 2010).

Undiscussables

Baker (2004) discussed the premise of conversational learning which is "achieved through the interplay of opposites and contradictions" (p. 694). In the conversational learning approach, differing perspectives are resources that create substantive topics for discussion in a safe and nurturing space that holds value for each participant. Baker suggested that conversational learning is critical in educational settings. Undiscussables are those things that are not mentioned during conversational learning and are often the result of fear, embarrassment, and protection (Baker, 2004; Klonsky, 2010; Zigarmi & Diamond, 2023). They are the "things we think but don't say, things we say but don't mean, things we feel but can't name, and things we do but don't realize" (Sterling, 2020, p. 13). Undiscussables can lead to unresolved conflict, an imbalance of participation,

interaction disengagement (Toegel & Barsoux, 2019), and morale and motivation fatigue (Zigarmi & Diamond, 2023).

Undiscussables support avoidant behavior and exemplify skill gaps in framing (Zigarmi & Diamond, 2023). Framing provides the structure to reflect, organize, and act on a certain issue (Zigarmi & Diamond, 2023). If not addressed, undiscussables inhibit constructive conversations about controversial issues and can paralyze an organization leading to strained relationships, inflexibility, and limited problem solving (Klonsky, 2010; Toegel & Barsoux, 2019). Furthermore, they can destroy leader confidence, loyalty, and retention (Klonsky, 2010). Through skill development, assumptions can be surfaced in safe and meaningful ways that maintain the integrity of a leader's ego, relationships (Baker, 2004; Toegel & Barsoux, 2019), and organizational productivity (Zigarmi & Diamond, 2023).

Klonsky (2010) summarized that organizational silence was addressed through interventions, such as establishing safe environments, engaging in low stakes conversations, inquiring on assumptions, exploring misalignment of perceptions, listening, and effectively facilitating. Leaders were found to navigate undiscussables within their organizations through self-awareness and emotional competence. These skills allowed them to take risks and create a trusting environment (Klonsky, 2010).

Constructive Controversy

Constructive controversy skills can support leaders in recognizing undiscussables, surfacing perceived assumptions, and effectively engaging in conflict. Baker (2004) outlined receptive conversational spaces and leadership preparation as two essential elements of constructive controversy. Psychological safety provides assurances of trust

and respect and allows for risk taking and vulnerability (Baker, 2004). Encouraging inquiry, creating boundaries, collaboratively developing norms, and listening to learn are additional elements of setting the space for receptive conversations (Baker, 2004). The learning process occurs with deliberate leadership actions to preserve a safe environment, affording vulnerability without consequence (Baker, 2004). Leaders themselves should reflect on their own assumptions and bring value to the conversation because their behavior influences the learning behaviors of others and can impact the effectiveness of addressing topics damaging to the organization (Baker, 2004). Heifetz et al. (2009) concurred that an organizational leader's ability to model the act of addressing sensitive issues by protecting the voice of all employees creates a behavioral norm of transparency, trust, and respect.

Constructive Conflict Management

Constructive conflict management is the engagement of "functional confrontation with employees and groups" (Schlaerth et al., 2013, p. 127). Like Baker's (2004) concept of constructive controversy, constructive conflict management focuses on creating a positive safe physical and psychological environment and emphasizes the importance of individual facilitation skills in self-management and solution finding (Schlaerth et al., 2013). Additional dimensions of importance to constructive conflict management are communication styles through collaboration, confrontation, problem solving, compromising, and accommodating. Schlaerth et al.'s (2013) meta-analysis study revealed a high correlation between emotional intelligence and constructive conflict management skills in leaders as well as in nonleaders, thus emphasizing the need for collective learning and skill development among personnel in organizations. In

comparison to Baker's (2004) constructive controversy framework, skills for nonleaders are deemed most critical to create organizational environments that are open, trusting, and motivating and readily address sensitive issues (Schlaerth et al., 2013).

Nurturing a Shared Responsibility for the Organization

Another adaptive leadership characteristic identified by Heifetz et al. (2009) that is supportive of building organizational capacity is nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization. Organizations are built upon systems and structures with defined roles and responsibilities. Although defined roles and job identities are necessary for efficiency, they can hinder the flexibility and adaptability required during times of change (Heifetz et al., 2009). Siloed operations can create competition, unidirectional communication flow, and task dependence (Tremblay et al., 2016). Collective action, in comparison, demonstrates coordinated dialogue and alignment to shared goals (Ramalingam et al., 2020). Shared responsibility within an organization supports flexibility, growth, increased collaboration, and positive outcomes (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Senge et al., 2015). Heifetz et al. (2009) indicated that in a highly adaptable organization, the future of the organization is shared among team members regardless of role or function.

Shared Decision Making

Shared responsibility in an organization involves collaborative problem solving and decision making. Selart (2010) identified that decision making is a critical aspect of leadership, and knowing when to involve others in creative solutions to complex problems is essential. Selart stated that "the organization's key resource in the creation of strategy is heterogeneity in the knowledge that employees possess" (p. 26). Thus,

involving employees in collective decision making provides a more thorough analysis given the contributing knowledge and commitment shared (Selart, 2010). A top-down, decision-making approach is limited by leader knowledge, experience, and influence (Selart, 2010). Yukl (2006) stated that "important decisions about what to do and how to do it are made through the use of an interactive process involving many different people who influence each other" (p. 4).

Shared Leadership

Beerel (2009) stated that with the changing world, organizational hierarchical structures have flattened, and everybody within the organization should "see themselves as a change agent" (p. 136). With identified components, such as shared purpose, voice, and social support, shared leadership is a team dynamic in which responsibilities and influence are dispersed across a collective body (Kocolowski, 2010). There is growing interest within the healthcare oncology industry in leadership among teams. To avoid a breakdown in patient care, shared team leadership is developed to achieve a common goal by leveraging the strengths and expertise of individual members toward mutual influence and shared responsibility of outcomes (Hess, 2016; Tremblay et al., 2016). Shared leadership requires collaborative and coordinated sharing across fluid organizational and professional divisions of responsibility through effective partnership (Kocolowski, 2010). It further requires collective sharing, which assumes the interests and views of all contributors (Tremblay et al., 2016). Shared leadership and responsibility are necessary to improve patient care quality considering barriers with attitudes, knowledge, and professional organizational boundaries (Hess, 2016; Tremblay et al., 2016). Within the field of education, Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) examined shared

leadership between the roles of principal and teacher. Findings revealed that a networked community of trust and shared responsibility had a greater impact on teacher practices than the leadership of the principal alone.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership is often interchanged for shared leadership though Spillane (2005) and Harris (2008) contended that it differs based on the emphasis of interaction and the entity of ownership, the organization. It presents a lateral structure of leadership in which the interactions between individuals and situations guide decision making, not the leaders themselves (Beerel, 2009; Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2005). In distributed leadership, there is a presumption that each member has something to contribute (Harris, 2008). Spillane (2005) explained that in U.S. school systems, leadership was commonly distributed among the roles and function of several people, making the concept of distributed leadership a top leadership strategy for school reform. The distribution of leadership demonstrated shared responsibility and interdependency of educators with a common goal of promoting student achievement. In agreement, Harris (2008) reviewed several instances in which distributed leadership in education increased organizational outcomes because members felt shared ownership and collaboration. Harris also described studies that warn of the negative implications of distributing leadership, such as conflicting priorities, incoherence, and boundary management. Distributed leadership demonstrates the need to nurture shared responsibility and move from a "person solo" to a "person plus" leadership model (Harris, 2008, p. 183).

Encouraging Independent Judgment

Encouraging independent judgment, as identified by Heifetz et al. (2009), is displayed when leaders invite members to voice opinions and provide input regarding challenges and problems to be solved. Leaders in adaptive cultures recognize the value of others making decisions and leverage the knowledge and expertise of members to engage in adaptive work and solve problems (Heifetz et al., 2009). According to Beerel (2009), adaptive organizations promote employees to initiate dialogue among one another to generate and test ideas to address the challenges faced. Work is given back to the people using this concept. Heifetz et al. (2009) recognized that adaptive challenges can be overcome when the leader engages the followers in problem solving and solution seeking (see also Northouse, 2016). Because adaptive challenges are complex and require changes in behavior, transformation will only occur when the followers presume shared commitment to the change (Beerel, 2009). Through calibration and feedback, leaders can monitor and develop critical thinking and decision-making skills of their followers (Heifetz et al, 2009). When leaders encourage and provide their followers with the opportunity to exercise their judgment, their followers' commitment evolves and the leaders become dispensable (Heifetz et al., 2009). Thus, leadership becomes distributed as followers are encouraged to take initiative and contribute beyond their role and function. Distributed leadership, which promotes shared responsibility and interdependence, also supports individual contribution and decision making (Beerel, 2009; Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2005).

Many scholarly articles have provided support for independent judgment being a key factor in positive organizational outcomes. Kouzes and Posner (2017) used concepts

of self-determination and competence and confidence as skills built by leaders to encourage independent decision making and mobilization of resources. They suggested that when provided genuine choice and latitude, people show a greater willingness to contribute (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Similarly, Ahakwa et al. (2021) found that job autonomy, which was described as a state of independence, was a significant contributing factor to organizational commitment among a group of 300 municipal employees. Ahakwa et al. concluded that employee autonomy increases commitment to the organization and thus should be considered by all organizational leaders. Owens and Valesky (2011) concurred with the importance of autonomy and independent judgment but stressed that people need to be taught how to participate effectively. Heifetz et al. (2009) addressed this concern by recognizing that a leader's responsibility in giving the work back to the people was to also provide feedback.

Kurvers et al.'s (2016) study explored the impact of collective intelligence among doctors when considering medical diagnosis. The combined independent judgment among multiple doctors outperformed a singular best doctor in the field when results were similar indicating that variation in opinion, expertise, and experience can lead to substantially greater outcomes of diagnosis and accuracy. Collective intelligence supports decision accuracy by considering the input of a group and not a single decision maker. Though little is known about this concept in real-world application, the premise supports the value placed on independent judgment and how collective independent judgment, when similar, can benefit decision making and outcomes (Kurvers et al., 2016).

Developing Leadership Capacity

Heifetz et al. (2009) identified developing leadership capacity as a key adaptive leadership characteristic for building organizational capacity. They contended that long-term organizational success is built on the development of a leadership pipeline in the organization as well as by promoting the individual development of each employee. According to Heifetz et al., "Getting the right people in the right roles doing the right jobs" is a critical responsibility for leaders and the organization's future (p. 104). People in the organization can contribute meaningfully when their potential is maximized through the support of a leader (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Foundations of Building Leadership Capacity

Organizations with highly developed systems and structures that support leadership capacity building have advantages in the modern, competitive world (Beerel, 2009). Weiss and Molinaro (2010) outlined a model that identifies four aspects that contribute to a potential leadership gap if not addressed. They are talent, capability, development, and values. Talent requires organizations to develop and retain potential leaders while fostering the capability to inspire and motivate others to perform (Weiss & Molinaro, 2010). Inadequate leadership development strategies leave potential candidates unmotivated and uninterested in growing. Development needs to be focused on useful approaches to navigate the complex environment in which the organization exists (Weiss & Molinaro, 2010). Value identification is critical to support leadership capacity in organizations, especially when the values of employees may vary with gender, age, ethnicity, position, and life circumstance. According to Weiss and Molinaro (2010),

bridging the potential leadership capacity gap is critical to sustaining organizations into the future and optimizing performance outcomes.

Succession Plans

Heifetz et al. (2009) indicated that succession plans are a metric to determine the effectiveness of building leadership capacity. Succession plans detail the process by which organizations mentor up-and-coming leaders through personal and professional development (Heifetz et al., 2009) to foster sustainable organizational performance in a rapidly changing environment (Hunte-Cox, 2004; Tillson, 2022). According to Hunte-Cox (2004), planning for leadership continuity is vital to an organization's future success and long-term adaptive capacity.

Hunte-Cox (2004) conducted a study that had a high correlation between succession planning and organizational learning when sampling business executives. Both Tillson (2022) and Bryant (2016) studied the use of succession planning in the K–12 school environment and found high value in building leadership in the organizations. These research studies demonstrate the practical application of succession planning when building organizational capacity for future leadership. Through intentional actions of teaching, modeling, mentoring, and shadowing, leadership capacity can be built and contribute to increased organization outcomes and sustainability (Heifetz et al., 2009; Hunte-Cox, 2004; Weiss & Molinaro, 2010).

Institutionalizing Reflection and Continuous Learning

The last characteristic supportive of building an adaptive culture within organizations, as identified by Heifetz et al. (2009), is institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning. When employees of all roles and titles recognize the importance of

learning and reflection as an aspect of change and growth, the organization thrives (Heifetz et al., 2009; Senge et al., 2015). Ahakwa et al. (2021) contended that "organizational learning is considered the best recommendation in today's unpredictable environment to improve institutional performance" (p. 2101). Heifetz et al. (2009) identified the essential aspects of building an organizational mindset of continuous learning that are learning from mistakes; involving voices from within; creating intentional structures for connection, communication, and collaboration; debriefing incidents; encouraging life balance; promoting reflective questioning; and providing coaching.

Institutionalizing Organizational Learning

According to Beerel (2009), "Transformation is always accompanied by learning" (p. 222) and "learning enhances one's adaptive capacity" (p. 222). Learning provides the foundation to cultivate new mindsets and reimagine states of being (Senge et al., 2015). Leaders memorialize learning as a core tenant and engage employees, even when resistant, in being stewards of their own growth and development (Senge et al., 2015) by providing opportunities for reflection, innovation, and creativity (Beerel, 2009). By attaining, distributing, sharing, and reinforcing continuous learning, an organization can effectively respond to external factors and maintain a competitive edge (Ahakwa et al., 2021). Ahakwa et al. (2021) reported that organizations are at risk of reduced productivity, irrelevance, and employee attrition without continuous learning.

Senge (1990) described a learning organization that motivates participants to explore the tension between vision and reality by gaining new knowledge within this tension gap for goal attainment. For an individual, learning generates new behaviors,

mindset, and beliefs. Within a team, learning changes the systems and structures by which individuals interact. For an organization, learning impacts the overall vision and strategic plan (Sessa & London, 2015). Wheatley (2005) surmised that "organizations that have learned to think together and that know themselves are filled with intelligent action" (p. 70). Senge (1990) concurred that "unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn" (p. 10). By developing at all organization levels, new skills are acquired to respond to future challenges and change (Senge, 1990).

Although the act of continuous learning provides risk for an organization, risk-taking among participants promotes learning (Senge et al., 2015). Risks, small or large, can lead to innovative changes in an organization that can influence productivity and outcomes (Beerel, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009; Sessa & London, 2015). When people are encouraged to take risks and engage in experimentation, their contribution and sense of value to the organization increases (Heifetz et al., 2009; Senge, 1990). Organizations that promote continuous learning value risk-taking, critical thinking, and disequilibrium (Senge, 1990). However, when people in the organization are not expecting change, have not prepared for change, or lack value in learning, organizational failure may be imminent (Sessa & London, 2015). Thus, researchers have concurred that adopting a culture of continuous learning is essential (Beerel, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009; Senge et al., 2015; Sessa & London, 2015).

Elder (2007) found that a culture of continuous learning was valued by senior executives in public service both as individuals and as an organization and that it contributed to organizational sustainability. Elder concluded that resources must be allocated to protect accessibility to continuous learning with an organization. Moore

(2023) discovered that continuous learning was a core tenet of special education directors when examining grit. Holding space and delegating resources to create a culture of learning supported the development of growth mindset and organizational goal attainment. Ahakwa et al. (2021) examined the contribution of organizational learning in a survey of 315 participants and found that it was fundamental to organizational commitment of the participants surveyed. Organizations that focused on training, knowledge attainment, and shared learning had increased employee commitment and organizational efficiency.

Institutionalizing Reflection

According to Senge et al. (2015), reflection is a core capability of a systems leader. Reflection involves "thinking about our thinking, holding up the mirror to see the taken-for-granted assumptions we carry … and appreciating how our mental models may limit us" (Senge et al., 2015, p. 28). Jordan et al. (2009) defined reflection as "engaging in comparison, considering alternatives, seeing things from various perspectives, and drawing inferences" (p. 466). Senge et al. (2015) linked reflection to establishing trust and creativity, and through the understanding of differing points of view, appreciation can be built for the tension and conflict that exists with unique perspectives and experiences. Similarly, Jordan et al. (2009) called out the value in perspective taking and denoted reflection to be an essential element in learning.

John Dewey and Donald Schön are seminal authors of the work on reflection. Dewey postulated that reflection was necessary to "solve problems faced in habitual ways of action" (Miettinen, 2000, p. 61). Dewey (1910/1997) explained that reflection creates awareness of what is observed and that once aware, an individual can make meaning of

the past and present given environmental context. He defined reflection as a consequence of thought, with each supporting the next, that is brought about by "a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt; and an act of search or investigation directed toward bringing to light further facts" (Dewey, 1910/1997, p. 9). Dewey presented phases of reflective learning to be disturbance and uncertainty, intellectualization, studying the conditions of the situation, reasoning, and acting (Miettinen, 2000). According to Dewey, reflection leads to two outcomes: the resolution of the problem and the attainment of knowledge to apply to future problems (Miettinen, 2000). Dewey (1910/1997) warned of the distress caused by reflective thinking when one is caught between past experiences and new knowledge.

Building on Dewey's work, Schön (1983) developed the concept of reflective practice, which links thought and action (see also Kinsella, 2004). Schön (1983) identified reflective practice, reflection in action, and reflection on action as three constructs. The former refers to in the moment reflection and the latter occurs after an action and informs the future (Schön, 1983). According to Kinsella (2004), although Dewey (1910/1997) and Schön (1983) identified the connection between thought and action, Schön drew specific attention to the in-the-moment possibilities of reflection as well as the integral and inseparable dynamic of action and thought.

Jordan et al. (2009) suggested that there is a connection between reflection and mindfulness. Unlike literature that has examined organization reflection on practices, routines, and structures through a reflection-on-action approach, Jordan et al. suggested that reflection in action is necessary to create a reflective culture of ongoing, real-time operations. Jordan et al. proposed that an integrated approach could be beneficial given the similarities in reflective routines but cautioned that if organizations become

overroutined using any model of reflection, the significance and meaning of reflection can become diluted.

Summary of the Adaptive Leadership Theory as a Theoretical Framework

Heifetz (1994) introduced a model of leadership in response to the changing world. Heifetz contended that traditional leadership approaches were not sufficient to achieve organizational stability and success. The adaptive leadership theory presents a dynamic approach in which leaders mobilize others to engage in work necessary to address contextual adaptive challenges through an in-depth behavioral change effort (Cojocar, 2008; Heifetz et al., 2009; Hess, 2016). Using the five key characteristics of an adaptive organization and other key concepts of adaptive leadership, Heifetz (1994), as well as other theorists and empirical researchers, determined the significance of adaptive leadership in building organizational success and positive outcomes in the face of change.

Organizational Adaptation in Public Education

Educational systems are large organizations under constant change that require new learning and innovation (Orlich, 2019). To maintain relevance and compliance with state and federal regulations, they must adapt to the impending internal and external pressures and influences (Shaw, 2022; Turner, 2022), whether these be emergent or planned (Hale, 2022). According to Glover, Freidman, and Jones (2002), "Unless leaders are able to develop abilities that enable them to lead adaptively in complex and rapidly changing situations, their organizations will be unable to effectively meet the challenges dictated by the modern world" (p. 16). Foundational to organizational change are the cultural values and behavioral norms that sustain the organization and the people in it (Tinker & Latta, 2020). The leader is a key contributor to guiding an organization and its

followers through change (Heifetz et al., 2009). Hale (2022) found that there is a reciprocal relationship between leadership and environmental context so that they each influence the other and that the choice of leadership style a leader commits to during times of organizational adaptation impacts performance and outcomes. The influence of context, as identified by Hale, is aligned to Heifetz et al.'s (2009) adaptive leadership model in such a way that the leader is responsive to the changing environment and situational challenges in which an innovative solution is discovered through adaptive work to improve organizational outcomes.

History of Public Education

Although public education has foundational roots starting in the 1600s, it was not until the 19th century that free education was available to all elementary school students in the United States (Thattai, 2017). Compulsory education laws of the 20th century provided for the addition of secondary education (Thattai, 2017). Since that time, significant cultural and political events have left their impact on the educational system that is known today. Landmark legislation during the 1950s and 1960s attempted to address educational inequities by providing attention to underserved children and subject matter with the National Defense Education Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Bogotch, 2005; Taylor, 2020; Thattai, 2017). The unanimous supreme court vote to end segregation in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 provided the law to combat racial discrimination in education. Title IX of 1972 addressed discrimination on the basis of gender within educational institutes. In 1983, the federal report *A Nation at Risk* by Gardner et al. lambasted the American education system as one that was grossly underperforming in academic achievement relative to international

counterparts. The results led to reformation of the testing structures as well as curricular mandates (Thattai, 2017).

Despite the long history of public education and the positive transformation that has been achieved over time, many of the embattled issues of the past remain relevant and pervasive today. Owens and Valesky (2011) emphasized the impact caused by the tension between traditional and progressive philosophies within public educational systems. An adaptive system finds balance between these two approaches and under the guise of continual improvement stays focused on the outcomes of students amid an ever-changing paradigm shift (Owens & Valesky, 2011). According to Heifetz and Laurie (2001, as cited in Nelson & Squires, 2017), the solutions to the adaptive problems within the educational system are found "in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels, who need to use one another as resources, often across boundaries, and learn their way to those solutions" (p. 58). Without rewriting the past, the American public education system needs to use history coupled with modern-day advancements and innovation in technology, leadership, and infrastructure to respond to today's challenges with greater success (Bogotch, 2005; Orlich, 2019; Thattai, 2017).

Response to Crisis Events Within Public Education

School-related crises and emergencies have proven disruptive to public education. Whether natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, and wildfires), human-caused (gun violence, terrorism, political conflict, and legislative reform), or a world health pandemic, educational institutes have endured unimaginable circumstances so that without effective leadership, recovery and survival are bleak (Dykstra-Lathrop, 2022; Lambert, 2022a; Turner, 2022). In each of these instances, educational disparities were magnified because

educational systems tried to respond to the varying needs of individuals, groups, and communities (Turner, 2022). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, chronic absenteeism, mental health needs, technological inequities, and substantial learning loss plagued public schools and educational leaders (Dykstra-Lathrop, 2022; Morris, 2022; Shaw, 2022; Tarkar, 2020; Turner, 2022). Although the manifestation of these disparities in public schools were not novel to the pandemic, they were exacerbated in a stressed system (Hoofman & Secord, 2021).

To slow the spread of COVID-19, schools experienced physical closures and were tasked to adapt to the rapidly changing circumstances (Fraker Bonow, 2022; Haron et al., 2022; Tarkar, 2020). While schools pivoted to online learning, staff, students, and families navigated the physical and psychological stressors associated with a global shutdown (Tarkar, 2020; Turner, 2022). Schools had to adapt and create the infrastructure necessary to provide continuity of instruction to students from afar (Haron et al., 2022). The dynamic situation posed unprecedented and unknown challenges to public schools. Dykstra-Lathrop (2022) found that, although catastrophic, the pandemic created a catalyst for organizational changes at the high school level that included shifts in grading practices, weekly schedules, meeting protocols, and a renewed focus on relevant work. Haron et al. (2022) suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic provided the backdrop for adaptation to be a fundamental trait for leaders and students in schools to work through complex situations and "seize unexpected outcomes" (p. 46). Dykstra-Lathrop (2022) and Shaw (2022) concurred that adaptation continues to be a necessary component of educational leadership to adjust to the postpandemic needs of students and ensure that lasting organizational change is achieved in this newly imagined reality of education.

Adaptive Leaders in Public Education

Educational leaders operate in a dynamic environment influenced by both internal and external factors (Owens & Valesky, 2011). Societal changes, political pressures, and demands for improved student outcomes impact the educational leader's ability to effectively perform daily (Orlich, 2019). In response to rapidly changing and emergent situations, educational leaders are tasked with school reformation that involves reframing current cultural and political systems and structures, problem solving through adversity, and managing stakeholders, all while ensuring students have access to high-quality instruction and rigorous learning standards (Nelson & Squires, 2017; Noble, 2021; Turner, 2022). According to Nelson and Squires (2017), unstable and chaotic societal conditions pose greater threats than ever on the success of educational leadership, and thus the need for creativity, innovation, and adaptation is essential. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) contended that adaptive leadership is an effective model for educational organizations:

> Leadership in education means mobilizing schools, families, and communities to deal with some difficult issues—issues that people often prefer to sweep under the rug. The challenges of student achievement, health, and civic development generate real but thorny opportunities for each of us to demonstrate leadership every day in our roles as parents, teachers, administrators, or citizens in the community. (p. 7)

Leadership Roles in Public Education

Educational leaders take on a variety of roles, titles, and responsibilities while projecting influence on organizational change (Shaw, 2022; Turner, 2022). These

positions may include superintendent, chief business officer, assistant superintendent, executive director, director, principal, assistant principal, coordinator, and even teacher leader. According to Owens and Valesky (2011), regardless of educational leadership title, the role is "embedded in controversy, conflict, and contention" (p. 35). Leaders must be confident, self-assured, knowledgeable, authentic, consistent, and flexible (Owens & Valesky, 2011). Noble (2021) added that they must distribute responsibility, engage in shared decision making, and establish trust. Noble stated that "the role of the leader is to guide the organization in ongoing reflection and revision of shared norms and values" (p. 4). Hayashi and Soo (2012) stated that "great leadership capability endures over time and can evolve to ensure it adapts to the changing environment" (p. 80).

Characteristics of Adaptive Leaders in Public Education

Adaptive leadership has been studied in public education across leadership roles and within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Noble (2021) stated that adaptive leadership defines the tension between administrative and instructional duties of a principal and offers strategies for navigating the responsibilities successfully, such as engaging in conflict, sharing authority, and encouraging collaboration. Morris (2022) found that innovation was required of educational leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic, and preparation in adaptive leadership led to an inclusive and innovative mindset. Crane (2022) conducted a study that examined the adaptive leadership strategies used by high school principals during the pandemic. Findings revealed qualities of adaptive leadership that prepared leaders for navigating complex challenges and contributed to developing shared leadership throughout the organization.

In alignment to research findings demonstrating a connection between educational leaders and adaptive leadership characteristics in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, additional studies have shown the importance of adaptive leadership qualities for educational leaders working to respond to change and contribute to systems improvement (Hartmann, 2023; Kitamura, 2019; Wool, 2014). Despite recent contributions, Hale (2022) found that there remains a lack of substantial research regarding adaptive leadership behavior and the role of the principal though researchers have recognized the flexibility required of educational leaders in the face of organizational change. Educational leaders are of greatest influence in creating the vision, mission, and culture of a school and thus must have the necessary skills to lead in this modern-day era using "more democratic, interpersonal, developmental, and nuanced approaches" (Crane, 2022, p. 6).

Special Education Directors as Adaptive Leaders

Local, state, and federal regulations outline the required obligations of educational leaders in providing programs and opportunities to students. Special education administrators uphold these requirements for students with disabilities to ensure that they have equal opportunities and access to rigorous educational experiences and postsecondary successes (Lombardi, 2022; Moore, 2023). Over time, the role of the special education administrator has shifted to be more inclusive of the vast responsibilities that include compliance and program monitoring, best practices in instructional delivery, financial oversight, and early intervention services (Moore, 2023). As a result of the changing role, the position requires distinctive knowledge and skills to positively impact the outcomes of students with disabilities (Hussey et al., 2019).

History of Special Education

The first significant movement toward protecting those with disabilities within the school systems occurred with the passage of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 (Lombardi, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). In 1975, Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was authorized by President Ford and proclaimed that all students with disabilities shall be afforded a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Under reauthorization in 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act name was born, eligibility categories were added, and transition planning was required. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was reauthorized in 1997 to include increased standards for the individualization of educational programs to meet the unique and complex needs of each student (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Another iteration of revision occurred in 2004 subsequent to the creation of the No Child Left Behind Act in which schools were held to high accountability standards across every grade, student ethnicity group, and student demographic (Moore, 2023). While educators await a long overdue reauthorization, state and federal agencies, such as State Boards of Education and the Office of Special Education Programs, provide periodic interpretations and recommendations of the law for practitioners to use (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). In addition, significant court cases such as *Diana v. State Board of Education* in 1970, *Larry P. v. Riles* in 1971, the *Board of Education of the Hendrick-Hudson Central School District v. Rowley* in 1982, and *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* in 2017 continue to shape the landscape of special education and guide the practical implementation of the law (Lombardi, 2022; Moore, 2023).

Special Education in California

In response to the passage of Public Law 94-142, California created a master plan for special education in 1980, which included due process rights for students with disabilities, individualized programming, and child find obligations (California Department of Education, n.d.-a; Moore, 2023). Unique to California, Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPAs) were created in 1977 to ensure school districts within defined geographical areas provided the necessary special education services and support to all students in need (Moore, 2023). During the 2022–2023 school year, there were 136 SELPAs that supported the implementation of special education to the 813,528 identified students with disabilities across the state (California Department of Education, n.d.-c). Of the 136 SELPAs, 44 were single school district SELPAs, and 82 were multiple school district SELPAs. SELPAs function to support accountability, program evaluation, and alternative dispute resolution for the school districts and families of students with disabilities (California Department of Education, n.d.-a). They further provide technical assistance to school districts and educational leaders who need improvement with noncompliant performance or compliance indicators as determined by the State Board of Education (California Department of Education, n.d.-a). Each SELPA has a presiding administrative leader who oversees the organization's operations. In a single-district SELPA, the SELPA administrator may also be the special education director for the school district depending on the district's size, structure, and resource allocation. Through this work, in partnership with school districts and families, there is a unified vision to ensure all students with disabilities enrolled in California public schools have access to equitable and individualized education for positive outcomes.

Leadership in Special Education

The configuration of special education leadership has changed over time because policies, regulations, and funding have supported a more intentional approach to administrative oversight of special education since the passing of Public Law 94-142 (Hussey et al., 2019; Lombardi, 2022; Moore, 2023). In public school districts, there are various models of special education leadership. In smaller school districts, the special education administrator often has simultaneous duties and may hold the title of principal or assistant superintendent. In unified school districts, which is the setting of the focus for this study, the special education administrator frequently holds the title of director and has limited other responsibilities because of the size and complexity of the school district. Regardless of title, leaders of special education in a public school system are tasked with addressing the complex needs of serving and supporting students with disabilities while upholding the goals and vision of their school district (Taylor, 2020).

The complexity of educating students with disabilities has often fallen solely on special education leaders, which has led to division in accountability for student success over time (Lombardi, 2022; Taylor, 2020) despite laws and regulations that promote a more inclusive experience (Hussey et al., 2019; Veale, 2010). Because of a lack of adequate preparation in administrative credential programs and the fear of legal concerns, general education leaders lack the knowledge, skill, and confidence to support special education programs (Lombardi, 2022; Taylor, 2020). Effective special education administrators are uniquely positioned to advocate on behalf of students with disabilities through their knowledge of law, expertise in individualizing instruction, innate interpersonal skills, decision making, organization, political responsiveness, and

leadership qualities (Hussey et al., 2019; Lombardi, 2022; Moore, 2023; Taylor, 2020). According to Lombardi (2022), the changing landscape of public education continues to increase the list of competencies that a successful special education administrator requires.

In a study conducted by Veale (2010), a collaborative leadership approach by special education administrators was found to be supportive of increased productivity and working relationships. Weaver et al. (2003) concluded that a structure for communicative opposition, collaboration on shared vision and values for inclusion, and effective problem solving were supportive behaviors of special education supervisors. Veale (2010) further added that the leadership approach of the supervisor could impact the quality of services a student receives and advocated for a more adaptable, distributed, and relational approach to the work. Taylor (2020) summarized research findings on special education leaders and found that ethics, respect, and communication were valued highest as leadership traits in the field. Taylor also found that the behavior of special education leaders was aligned to the distribution leadership theory. Moore (2023) conducted a study that examined how special education directors used principals of grit. Moore's findings suggested courage, conscientiousness and goal-orientation, optimism, and growth mindset are leadership traits that contribute to extraordinary outcomes. Additional research has explored the preparation of special education directors for the role and the effectiveness of their job competencies in the position, but minimal research has considered the effective leadership qualities, styles, or strategies of these unique and critical positions within public education.

Summary

Leaders are under constant pressure to adapt to the changing complexities of today's world (Bogotch, 2005; Fraker Bonow 2022; Haron et al., 2022; Shaw, 2022; Urick et al., 2021). Unprecedented and unforeseen events have turned into common-day occurrences. Damaging weather, political chaos, tragic violence, and health crises, coupled with rapid advancements in technology and infrastructure, have prompted leadership reform (Shaw, 2022). In the educational system, declining enrollment, inequities and disparities among student populations, increased compliance regulations, legislative reform, and funding instability add layers of challenges (Lambert, 2022a) that call for effective and adaptive leadership (Shaw, 2022). Adaptive leadership provides the framework to respond to dynamic complex challenges with innovative solutions for organizational success (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Chapter II literature review explored theoretical leadership foundations seminal to the adaptive leadership theory. It further examined leadership models supportive of navigating complex changes and challenges. The adaptive leadership theory, key contributors, and concepts were reviewed along with the theoretical framework by Heifetz et al. (2009). Organizational adaptation in the public school systems was explored along with the role of adaptive leaders in public education. Last, in alignment with the population of the study, literature on the role of special education directors in public schools was examined.

There is a discernable gap in the literature addressing effective leadership styles and strategies that contribute to the success of special education directors. Through this study, contributions can be made to the field to better understand how special education

directors build organizational adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics of adaptive leaders. Given the complexity of delivering special education services and considering the challenges most recently endured, supporting the role of the special education director in the public school system is vital.

Synthesis Matrix

A synthesis matrix is a common tool used by doctoral students to organize research by variable. Generally constructed as a chart, a synthesis matrix documents sources by theme, arguments, and main ideas to easily compare collected literature (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). I used a synthesis matrix (Appendix A) to organize and display the identified research according to the study's variables. This process allowed me to have an overview of collected literature and to consider the relationships among the sources that were used in the study.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

Research is the systematic approach to purposefully analyzing data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten & Newhart, 2018). This approach, called research methodology, is organized and intentional to investigate a specific problem, make decisions, and achieve credible and valid outcomes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Educational research has common characteristics that describe the quality and nature of research being conducted. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), these are objectivity, precision, verification, parsimonious explanation, empiricism, logical reasoning, and skepticism. Using a systematic process to conduct a qualitative phenomenological study, this thematic research study was implemented based on the interest of three faculty and nine peer researchers to identify and describe how leaders build organizational adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). In particular, I explored special education directors in California unified public schools.

Chapter III describes the research methods and procedures used to conduct the study. Starting with the purpose statement, the central research question, and research subquestions, the research design and rationale are detailed to understand the selection of the research framework. The population, sampling frame, and sample are reviewed along with the study instrumentation. In addition, the actions to address the study's validity and reliability are detailed, and a description of the field-testing process is provided. The chapter outlines the data collection and data analysis process and addresses the limitations of the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What strategies do special education directors use to build an organization's adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics (making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning)?

Research Subquestions

1. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through making naming elephants in the room the norm?
2. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization?
3. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through encouraging independent judgment?
4. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through developing leadership capacity?
5. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning?

Research Design

The methodology of a research study describes the techniques used to address the study's purpose and research questions through data collection and analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The research design of a study outlines the plan, which includes the procedures and processes necessary to obtain empirical evidence to answer the research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The research method and design are critical in substantiating the conclusions of a study as valid and credible (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten & Newhart, 2018). According to McMillian and Schumacher (2010), there are four major categories of research designs, which include analytic, mixed methods, quantitative, and qualitative. The latter two are the most widely used research designs. Quantitative research uses numbers and statistics to describe phenomena (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten & Newhart, 2018) with an emphasis on deduction, objectivity, and generality (Morgan, 2014). In comparison, qualitative research uses an emergent approach to understanding naturally occurring phenomena through induction, subjectivity, and context (Morgan, 2014). Data collected are in the form of words and themes (Patton, 2015). This study aimed to employ a qualitative research design to identify and understand the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics of adaptive leadership.

Qualitative methods provide depth and detail of research inquiries into the unknown (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Unlike a quantitative approach, a qualitative design focuses on a smaller number of respondents and uses a flexible structure to gather information in an exploratory way (Patton, 2015). The researcher is the instrument of

data collection and uses open-ended interviews, direct observations, and written communication as sources of understanding (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten & Newhart, 2018; Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015), a qualitative method underscores 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).

Several different qualitative research design frameworks aid in answering research questions. This study used a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological study explores the essence of an individual's experience (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Patton (2015) described phenomenology as "the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people" (p. 98). Through the investigation of experience, the researcher seeks to understand the deeper human facets that create meaning and interpretation for the individual within the context of the individual's situation (A. Wilson, 2015). This type of research is typically conducted through interviews directed at obtaining experiential perspectives of the phenomenon being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). Phenomenological inquiry is reliant on research interview questions that represent curiosity and remain focused on "what it is like for a person to have a particular experience" (A. Wilson, 2015, p. 41).

Method Rationale

Qualitative research is intimate, intending to hear interpretations of experiences lived by each participant studied (Patton, 2015). Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that differs from other qualitative research methods because of the strong focus on experience and perception (A. Wilson, 2015). A phenomenological design was chosen

for this study by the peer research team because it affords a systemic opportunity to identify and understand the individual experiences and meaning making of participants as proposed by the research questions (Patton, 2015). Through open-ended interviews with participants, the peer researchers gained insight into the phenomenon being studied of the strategies that different leader populations used to build organizational adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five adaptive leadership characteristics. According to Selvi (2008), phenomenology has significance in the development of education and social sciences because it includes the real objective world, targets the unique knowledge of an individual through experience, and seeks perception from perspective. The results of this study provided a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of special education directors through their interpretation of building organizational adaptive capacity. With this rationalization, a phenomenological design was appropriate to address the study's purpose and research questions.

Population

McMillian and Schumacher (2010) described a population as the "total group to which results can be generalized" (p. 129). The group of greatest interest to the researcher is the population (Patten & Newhart, 2018). The population for this study was special education directors serving public school districts in California. A special education director is an educational administrator in a public school district who primarily oversees special education programming, services, and support to promote positive outcomes for students with disabilities. In addition, a special education director ensures compliance with state and federal regulations set forth by state agencies and the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (Lombardi, 2022). The National Center for Education

Statistics (2022) reported that there were 19,269 public school districts within the United States during the 2021–2022 school year, each of which had a responsible leader over special education, which logically leads to approximately 19,269 special education directors in the United States. Because of the vast region and feasibility of conducting a national research study, the population was narrowed to California. The California Department of Education (n.d.-b) reported that there were 1,018 public school districts during the 2022–2023 school year. Of the 1,018 public school districts, 517 were elementary, 76 were high school, 80 were considered other, and 345 were unified serving Grades K–12. To address the large number of public school districts in California, the population was narrowed to 345 special education directors serving and supporting the special education needs within the unified public school districts in California.

Sampling Frame

A sampling frame uses common characteristics to create a sampling list for the study from the larger population and provides the basis for the sample, which further identifies certain elements of feasibility (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). The sampling frame represents the population of interest for the researcher because it has the characteristics and attributes that are relevant to the study and overall population (Patten & Newhart, 2018). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) noted that it is critical "to carefully and completely define both the target population and the sampling frame" (p. 129). For this study, the sampling frame comprised special education directors serving unified public school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino counties in California. These three counties are geographic neighbors and mirrored the statewide demographics within California public schools. According to Education Data Partnership

(2022), there were 48 unified school districts in Los Angeles County, 12 unified school districts in Orange County, and 20 unified school districts in San Bernardino County, totaling 80 unified school districts within the three counties. The student enrollment within the 80 unified school districts ranged from 134 students to 548,338 in the 2021–2022 school year. Forty-five percent of the unified school districts had enrollment between 0 and 9,999 students, 27.5% had enrollment between 10,000 and 19,999 students, and 27.5% had enrollment greater than 20,000 students (Educational Data Partnership, 2022). Assuming that each of the 80 unified public school districts had a special education director, the sampling frame for the study was identified as 80 special education directors serving in the California unified public school systems within Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino counties. The convenience and feasibility of conducting this study using all special education directors within the sampling frame was determined to be unpractical. Therefore, a representative sample was used.

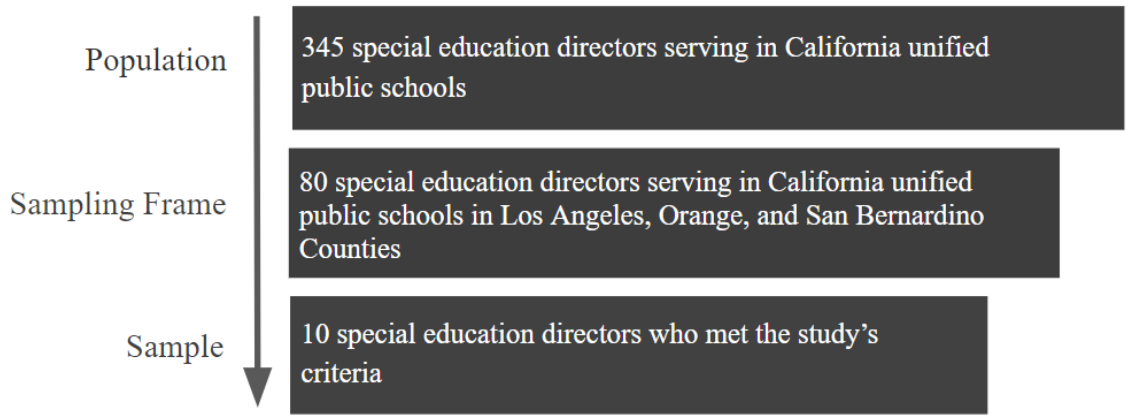
Sample

A sample is a subset of the population that is studied to draw conclusions about the larger population or interest. Results obtained using the sample can be generalized to the larger population (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). From the sampling frame, I used purposeful and convenience sampling to select 10 special education directors who met the study's criteria to compose the sample for the study. The sample included participants who served as a special education director in either Los Angeles, Orange, or San Bernardino counties; who did not have the title or duties of a SELPA administrator; and who met four of the six delimitation criteria.

Patton (2015) stated, “Determining your final sample size is a matter of intellectual judgment based on the logic of making meaningful comparisons, developing and testing your explanations” (p. 311). McMillian and Schumacher (2010) agreed that “there are only guidelines for qualitative sample size, not quantitative; qualitative samples can range from 1 to 40 or more” (p. 328). Qualitative research allows for variation within the sample size based on purpose, credibility, and feasibility of the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). The depth of data collected and significance of information learned are more important than the number of participants sampled (Patton, 2015). The sample size of 10 was determined appropriate among the peer researchers to gain a collection of rich data necessary for analysis and meaningful outcomes and findings from the phenomenological study. Figure 1 represents the population, sampling frame, and sample progression of special education directors for this research study.

Figure 3

Population, Sampling Frame, and the Sample



Purposeful Sampling

In qualitative research, the aim is to represent the experiences, outcomes, and behaviors of the group being studied and not necessarily generalize the results to a larger population (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Because of the unique interest of qualitative researchers, probability sampling is not always possible (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). This study used nonprobability purposeful sampling to identify special education directors with adaptive leadership characteristics and capacity. Nonprobability sampling is common in educational research and involves a nonrandom selection of participants who meet the criteria of interest. In purposeful sampling, researchers use their judgment about what participant elements of interest will be best aligned with the research purpose and questions (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). According to Patton (2015), practical purposeful sampling should be "flexible and emergent" and provide an adequate size for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (p. 14).

For this study, purposeful sampling allowed for a selection of participants with rich and robust lived experiences to guarantee credible and thorough research findings. Using criterion-based case selection, specific criteria were selected by the peer researcher team as delimitations to identify the study's sample. Criterion-based sampling is a type of purposeful sampling that uses specific criteria of importance to the researcher to establish quality assurance (Patton, 2015). For this study, the participants had to serve as a special education director in either Los Angeles, Orange, or San Bernardino counties; to not hold the title or duties of a SELPA administrator; and to meet four of the following six delimitation criteria to participate:

1. They have shown evidence of successful relationships with stakeholders.

2. They have shown evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success.
3. They have had 5 or more years of experience in the profession or field.
4. They have had articles written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings.
5. They have been recognized by their peers.
6. They have held memberships in associations or groups focused on their field.

Convenience Sampling

According to Patton (2015), "Convenience sampling is defined as a sample in which research participants are selected based on their ease and availability" (p. 309). Patton (2002) also stated that it is "neither purposeful nor strategic" (p. 242). Despite being a widely used sampling strategy, it demands caution to use as the sole criterion for sampling (Patton, 2015; Suri, 2011). In this study, I used the Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) Administrators of California email listserv to seek and search for special education directors who met the criteria and had interest in participating in the study. This was a privately subscribed listserv for current and retired SELPA administrators of which I was a member. This listserv was used because the recipient SELPA directors are considered experts in special education, have ready access to special education directors across California, and because it provided an entry into the field. Convenience sampling was used to address availability of eligible participants and their willingness to be a part of the study (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). The use of convenience sampling addressed the practical constraints of participant accessibility and

availability and ensured the feasibility of implementation of the study (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010).

Sample Selection

Sample selection took place upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). I used a group of established experts within the field of special education to seek participants for the study. According to Patton (2015), experts are individuals with significant knowledge and experience within a field of study who can provide input and suggestions to the participant selection. In this study, the experts were the 164 current and retired SELPA administrators within California who were active members on the SELPA Administrators of California email listserv. As a member of the listserv, I was able to use the platform to communicate by email with the identified experts about the study and desired participants (Appendix B). I sought nominations and requested the experts to forward the email to special education directors whom they knew met the delimitation criteria. Using email, I contacted each nominee and interested special education director about their participation in the research study and eligibility status based on the study's criteria. The first 10 special education directors who met the eligibility were selected as the participants. Upon selection and agreement, I provided the following information to each participant:

a. invitation to participate letter (Appendix C)
b. informed consent form (Appendix D)
c. Research Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix E)
d. inquiry about availability to schedule the virtual interview

Following the confirmation of the interview, the 10 participants were provided the following additional communication 1 week prior to the scheduled interview:

a. the purpose of the study and the interview date and time
b. a list of interview questions and definitions for the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009; Appendix F)

Last, I sought verbal consent for the study at the start of the interview while using the Zoom recording and transcription features.

Instrumentation

Qualitative phenomenological studies demonstrate interest in people's experience and how they interpret the world (Patton, 2015). Observations and in-depth interviews "aligned to the nature and purpose of the investigation" are used by the researcher to understand these experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 103). According to Patton (2015), "The essence or nature of an experience has been adequately described in language if the description reawakens or shows us the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller and deeper manner" (p. 116).

The nine peer researchers, in consultation and collaboration with three faculty advisors, worked in pairs to develop semistructured, open-ended interview questions for each of Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics of adaptive leadership. These adaptive leadership characteristics included making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning. Open-ended questions provide the opportunity for the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of perspectives and perceptions of the participants as they

share their lived experiences (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). Semistructured, open-ended questions provide for individual responses and the flexibility to temporarily adjust the interview protocol to obtain useful data (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010; Patten & Newhart, 2018). The peer researchers and faculty met over two meetings to finalize the developed interview questions (Appendix F) and associated probing questions. An alignment table was created to ensure direct alignment with the purpose statement, the research questions, variables, definitions, interview questions, and probing questions (Appendix G). General probing questions were also identified for gathering additional information as necessary during the interview process.

An interview protocol (Appendix H) was developed to be used by all peer researchers in the thematic research study. This protocol included a script that outlined the purpose of the study and reviewed informed consent for the participant. The peer researchers used the interview protocol during the field test with participants who met the delimitations of the sample. Feedback was obtained by the field-test participants and observers on the clarity of the interview questions and was used to make necessary adjustments.

Researcher as Instrument of the Study

In qualitative studies, "The researcher is the instrument of inquiry" (Patton, 2015, p. 3). The researcher conducts the interviews, gathers data, analyzes the collected data, and identifies themes and findings. According to Patton (2015), "Qualitative inquiry provides a point of intersection between personal and professional" (p. 33). In efforts to establish credibility and trustworthiness of the study results, I used a research methodology that accounted for validity and reliability and reduced the introduction of

"selective perception, personal biases, and theoretical predispositions" (Patton, 2015, p. 59). These methodologies included conducting a field-test process of the test instrument, establishing rigorous data collection procedures, and collaborating with the nine peer researchers and three faculty advisors. Through these efforts, I worked to "aim for balance, fairness, and neutrality" (Patton, 2015, p. 58).

Validity

The credibility of a qualitative research study is enhanced when there is "systematic, in-depth fieldwork, systematic and conscientious analysis of data, credibility of the inquirer, and readers' and users' philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquire" (Patton, 2015, p. 653). A myriad of research procedures must be used to establish the validity of a research instrument and to ensure credible and trustworthy results, such as triangulating data, using peer feedback, using mechanically recorded data, conducting field observations, and using member checking (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Validity is established when an instrument measures what it is intended to measure (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008). It is "situation-specific" and influenced by the purpose, population, and variables surrounding a study (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010, p. 173). According to Kimberlin and Winterstein (2008), "Because there is no statistical test to determine whether a measure adequately covers a content area or adequately represents a construct, content validity usually depends on the judgment of experts in the field" (p. 2279). Patton (2015) agreed that the researcher must use judgment about the appropriateness and proficiency of the instrument content being used. The credibility and trustworthiness of a study is reliant upon the validity of the test instrument (Patton, 2015).

The nine peer researchers, in collaboration with the three faculty advisors, developed the interview protocol, interview questions, and corresponding probe questions to increase the validity of the study. The researchers evaluated each question to ensure alignment to the purpose statement, research questions, research variables, and definitions. The faculty advisors, considered research experts, provided feedback about the interview questions. The interview protocol and questions were field-tested by the peer researchers using a participant who met the delimitations of the study. An expert observer provided neutral feedback about the interview protocol and process. Feedback obtained from the field tests about the appropriateness and alignment of the interview questions and process was summarized and reviewed by the nine peer researchers and three faculty advisors. In addition, the nine peer researchers provided input about the interview process and accuracy of alignment to the study's purpose of understanding how leaders build organizational adaptive capacity using adaptive leadership characteristics from Heifetz et al. (2009). The thematic peer researchers used the interview protocol revised from the field test to ensure validity of the study, which included conducting a recorded and transcribed virtual 60-min interview and providing the transcription to each participant for consensus of data collection accuracy prior to the analysis of data. The peer researcher team ensured that validity was additionally addressed by using multiple methods, including collaborative planning and development of instruments, use of interviews, and collection of artifacts (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010).

Reliability

The consistency of results defines test reliability (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010; Patten & Newhart, 2018). An instrument is noted to be reliable if results are

consistent over time and across participants (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) noted that reliability encompasses the consistency of both data collection and data analysis. To increase the reliability of this study, a field test was conducted to assess for the identification of source error within the measurement process (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008). A field test is used to determine "utility and acceptability" (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007, p. 8). This study used a consistent interview protocol across participants. Each interview was recorded for transcription purposes. At the conclusion of each interview, the transcriptions were made available to the respective participants to ensure accuracy of responses for data collection. This process, called member checking, is a strategy used to bolster reliability and validity of a study. It involves including participants as members of the study to verify that the data collected are an accurate representation of their lived experiences (Patten & Newhart, 2018). Member checking allows participants to review their interview transcript and relay any feedback for correction or provide additional information for clarity (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Last, I analyzed and coded the transcriptions and identified themes using Delve coding software for procedural consistency.

Field Testing

A field test allows an instrument to be tested prior to being used on a study sample (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The process of field testing provides feedback to the researcher about the interview protocol, clarity of interview questions, length of interview, accessibility of the interview process, and alignment of interview questions to responses acquired (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Field testing was conducted by the nine peer researchers. Each researcher was responsible for

the arrangements and implementation of the field test. A field-test participant was selected who met the delimitation criteria of each study sample but who was not an actual participant of the study. The researchers used a scripted interview protocol, which included demographic, interview, and probing questions (Appendix H). An expert observer was used for each field test to provide feedback on the interview protocol, process, and atmosphere. The expert observer had a doctoral degree and experience conducting research studies. The field-test participant and observer received the interview questions via email the day prior to the interview being conducted for preparation. The field test was conducted virtually using the Zoom platform to reflect the interview environment of the research study that was conducted.

Upon completion of the field-test interview, the expert observer provided information to me using the Observer Feedback Form (Appendix I). This information, along with reflective information provided from the participant (Appendix J), was summarized into a summary field-test report (Appendix K) and provided to the three faculty advisors for review and analysis. The thematic team met to discuss the field-test results and make changes to the interview questions and protocol as appropriate. At the conclusion of the field-testing period, the final interview questions were determined and the interview protocol approved for use with 10 special education directors of unified public school districts.

Internal Reliability

Internal reliability was substantiated through the collaboration of the nine peer researchers and three faculty advisors. The three faculty advisors had extensive experience leading and conducting qualitative phenomenological research studies. The

three faculty members worked together to establish the purpose statement, central research question, research subquestions, and research design. The nine peer researchers, in collaboration with the three faculty members, established the research methodology and research protocols to ensure consistency in data collection methods. An alignment table was created to ensure that the research questions, variables, definitions, interview questions, and probing questions were aligned to the research study purpose. The interview questions were developed and field-tested using a consistent interview protocol, and variation occurred only for specific population, sample frame, and sample for individual studies. All peer researchers used the same interview and probing questions, and each conducted a field test using one participant and submitted a feedback summary report to the faculty advisors for analysis and review. A team meeting was held to discuss the field-test feedback and make necessary adjustments to improve the study instrument and test reliability.

Data Collection

This qualitative study used semistructured, open-ended interviews as the primary source of data collection. Ten special education directors in unified public school districts were interviewed to understand the lived experiences of building organizational adaptive capacity using five key adaptive leadership characteristics as identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). I adhered to all university guidelines aligned to participant confidentiality. Identifying information of the participants was not collected or used, and participant guarantees for anonymity were upheld. Data were reported in the study using a pseudonym-naming protocol of Participant 1, Participant 2, and so forth to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The electronic information I obtained from the interviews

for data collection was maintained securely on my personal computer using password protection applications. The field notes and written information I collected during the interviews were securely locked in a file cabinet in my home. Three years after the completion of the study, all digital and written information I collected from participants was destroyed.

Prior to initiating data collection, I obtained a certification indicating the completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program (Appendix L). This certification ensures proper data collection processes were used and data collection regulations were followed throughout the study. Furthermore, before I began data collection, approval was obtained from the UMass Global University IRB (Appendix M). According to McMillian and Schumacher (2010), the IRB is "responsible for reviewing and approving human subjects research" (p. 123). IRBs are specific to each university in which research is conducted to ensure federal regulation compliance and the careful consideration of potential ethical concerns (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). IRB approval is required when the identified research study proposes the use of human subjects and has interests in generalizable contributions to professional knowledge throughout the world (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010).

Interviews

Data were collected through one-on-one 60 min virtual interviews using the Zoom platform. Ten special education directors of unified public school districts participated in the interview process. The nine peer researchers and three faculty advisors developed the interview protocol that was used. Participants who agreed to be part of the study were emailed correspondence, which included a participation letter (Appendix C), the

interview informed consent form (Appendix D), and the Research Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix E). I then scheduled interviews with each participant. One week prior to the interview time, the participants were emailed the purpose of the study (Appendix C) and the research definitions and interview questions (Appendix F). This provided time for the participants to review the material and prepare for the interview.

The interviews were conducted using Zoom, a virtual conference platform. Each interview had a different password-protected session, and I had a password-protected account. All interviews were recorded using the video and audio recording features of Zoom. In addition, the Zoom transcription application was used. I also used a second digital device to audio record the interviews as a backup recording tool and took handwritten notes. I used the interview protocol to conduct the interviews, which included capturing active participant consent. Probing questions were used to obtain additional or clarifying information to ensure the response included meaningful content aligned to the purpose of the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Participants were provided with the transcription of their responses and asked to verify the accuracy of the information gathered.

Artifacts

Artifacts were sought to achieve data triangulation and increase the study's validity (Patton, 2015). McMillian and Schumacher (2010) defined artifacts as "tangible manifestations that describe people's experiences, knowledge, actions, and values" (p. 361). Artifacts can include either personal documents, official documents, or objects, and they must be corroborated with other data sources (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). During the interviews, the 10 participants were asked to provide possible supportive

artifacts relevant to their experiences in building organizational adaptive capacity. Artifacts collected included meeting agendas, surveys, strategic plans, professional development training materials, staff communications, and inquiry forms.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data are collected and then analyzed inductively for findings and generalizations (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). Inductive reasoning provides the openness for a qualitative researcher to understand new ways of being from the perspective of participants. Qualitative analysis is a systematic process of synthesizing data through coding and categorizing to provide interpretation and explanation through emergent themes (Patton, 2015).

The data analysis process was initiated during the interviews as I engaged in listening for emerging themes within the participant responses (Patton, 2015). I reviewed each interview transcription from Zoom and compared it to the corresponding audio recording for accuracy. After the participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy and provide appropriate clarification or revision, I uploaded the transcripts into Delve. Delve is a qualitative analysis software that provides a systematic way for researchers to code and identify themes of uploaded data. Artifacts collected during the interview protocol process were also coded using the same process. I coded the data based on themes, patterns, and frequency as they pertained to adaptive leadership characteristics and strategies using the Delve software. A frequency table was created to organize the coded data meaningfully for analysis (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019).

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability is the degree to which two independent coders reach the same conclusion when evaluating the same data set (Lombard et al., 2010). Establishing intercoder reliability is necessary and critical to ensure validity of the data analysis (Lombard et al., 2010; Patton, 2015). The nine peer researchers initially established reliability with the use of a consistent interview protocol and the interview questions. Reliability of the study was strengthened through the use of a field-testing process. In addition, a peer researcher with expertise in qualitative research studies and experience using qualitative coding software reviewed a 10% sample of the transcribed interviews to establish interrater reliability. I met with the qualitative peer research expert to compare the individual analysis of the interview data. To increase the reliability of the data analysis, adjustments were made. According to Patton (2015), a peer researcher who analyzes 10% of the coding from a study with 80% or greater agreement increases the overall study reliability and credibility.

Limitations

Limitations are known aspects of a research study in which the researcher has minimal control over but may impact the generalizability of the study's outcomes (Patten & Newhart, 2018; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). The researcher has an obligation to transparently address a study's limitations for the readers to understand and take the potential impact on the study's outcomes into consideration (Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). In the next sections, I discuss the aspects that posed limitations to the study's generalization of results and conclusions.

Geography

The participants of this study worked in unified public school districts within Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino counties in California. Although the geographical criteria were chosen based on research design, the generalizability of the findings may be limited due to the differing circumstances and experiences of special education directors serving in other geographical regions. Therefore, these findings may not be representative of the larger population of special education directors within California or nationally.

Time and Virtual Platform Constraints

The participants of this study were fully employed special education directors. The daily job duties of special education directors are complex, demanding, and stressful. Their time is spent serving the needs of their students, schools, and community. Therefore, time allowed for engaging in an interview was limited. These factors may have impacted their ability to engage readily in interview questions that required expansive responses. In addition, the interviews were conducted using a virtual-conferencing platform and were time bound by 1 hr. These constraints may have affected the quality of participant interview responses, which would have influenced the identified themes, findings, and study results.

Sample Size

Because only 10 special education directors participated in the study, the sample size was deemed a possible limitation. There were 1,018 public school districts in California, and each one was presumed to have an administrator responsible for overseeing special education programs and support. It was not feasible to include all special education directors in California in the study. As a result, the small sample size

may limit the conclusions and generalization to the larger population of special education directors within California. McMillian and Schumacher (2010) indicated that "a qualitative sample can range from 1 to 40 or more" (p. 328). According to Patton (2015), "The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generally from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size" (p. 313). Therefore, qualitative research designs often involve fewer participants with rich data collection (Patton, 2015).

Researcher as the Instrument of the Study

My being the researcher as the instrument of this qualitative study may have caused a limitation. Researchers conducting qualitative studies directly interact with participants and may introduce biases and assumptions because of their experiences and perspectives (Patton, 2015). At the time of the study, I was a SELPA executive director. SELPAs provide special education oversight, services, and support in geographical areas throughout California to their member school districts. It is important to note that I had been a special education director in a California unified public school district for 3 years prior to obtaining the current position. This professional experience was like that of the study participants and may have had an influence on the study. Even though I minimized opportunities for personal bias and preconceptions to infiltrate the research design by ensuring reliability and validity, these aspects may contribute to the limitation of the study's generalizability.

Summary

Chapter III detailed the methodology for the phenomenological study, describing the strategies used by special education directors in California unified public school

districts to build organizational adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). The chapter began with a restatement of the study's purpose, the central research question, and the research subquestions. Next, the chapter described the research design and provided a rationale for the qualitative phenomenological inquiry framework chosen. The population, sampling frame, and sample used for the study were reviewed along with the instrumentation. Information was provided detailing the specific steps taken to ensure validity and reliability of the test instrument and study including the field-testing process description. The data collection and data analysis processes were reviewed. Last, the limitations of the study were discussed to provide researcher transparency and promote trustworthiness and credibility. In Chapter IV, I present an analysis of the data from the data collection process. Chapter V further builds on the data analysis to present the findings and conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

This qualitative phenomenological study identified and described the strategies used by special education directors to build organizational adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). This study was part of a thematic research project that included nine peer researchers under the advisement of three faculty members. The purpose statement, research questions, theoretical definitions, interview questions, and interview protocol were developed in collaboration by the thematic researchers and used in conformity across each of the nine unique studies to ensure thematic consistency.

Chapter IV starts with an overview of the study. It then reintroduces the purpose statement, central research question, research subquestions, methodology, and data collection procedures. It also reviews the population, sampling frame, sample, and demographic data. Next, the chapter analyzes and presents the data aligned to each of the study's research questions. Chapter IV concludes with a summary of the overall findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What strategies do special education directors use to build an organization's adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics (making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning)?

Research Subquestions

1. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through making naming elephants in the room the norm?
2. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization?
3. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through encouraging independent judgment?
4. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through developing leadership capacity?
5. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

A qualitative phenomenological research design was selected for this study as an appropriate design and framework to identify and understand the strategies used by special education directors to build organizational adaptive capacity. In qualitative research, data are represented by words and themes through an emergent approach to

develop an understanding of occurring phenomena and inquiry into the unknown (Patton, 2015). A phenomenological approach helps the researcher to understand the essence of the lived experiences of the person or group of the named phenomenon (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015). Phenomenological studies often use interviews to gain perspective of the participant's experiences (Patton, 2015).

For this study, data were collected through individual one-on-one interviews using an interview protocol consisting of semistructured interview questions. Semistructured questions provide the researcher with the flexibility necessary to obtain rich responses (Patton, 2015). The interview protocol (Appendix H) was developed by the thematic group of nine peer researchers and three faculty members following a thorough literature review of the subject matter. It consisted of 10 open-ended interview questions, nine prompts, and general probing questions. The interview questions and prompts were created collaboratively by the nine peer researchers and aligned to each of the research questions of the study (Appendix G) and Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics of adaptive leadership. The three faculty research experts analyzed and approved the interview questions to obtain the data of interest. Prior to engaging in data collection using the interview protocol, I obtained the course completion certification on human subject research for social-behavioral-educational researchers from CITI (Appendix L) and the approval from the UMass Global University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study (Appendix M) in accordance with university guidelines.

Data were collected from 10 eligible special education directors. Upon identification of eligibility, each participant was emailed the invitation to participate

(Appendix C), the informed consent form (Appendix D), the Researcher Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix E), and inquiry about their availability to schedule an interview. One week prior to the scheduled interview, each participant was emailed the purpose of the study, confirmation of the interview date and time, and the interview questions and corresponding definitions (Appendix F). Eight of the 10 participants returned a signed informed consent prior to the interview date. The interviews were conducted using the Zoom application with audio and transcription recording. Each interview was conducted in uniformity, following the interview protocol to strengthen reliability. Verbal consent was obtained during the interviews for the two participants who had not provided a signed informed consent. As part of the interview protocol, all participants had an opportunity to ask questions or indicate concerns regarding the informed consent and the Research Participant's Bill of Rights. Probing questions were used throughout the interview process as appropriate to elicit elaboration or clarity. At the conclusion of the interview protocol, I asked the participants to submit relevant and supportive artifacts based on the answers provided and content discussed. Participants were also informed of the opportunity to review the transcription for accuracy and provide information for clarity. The interviews were between 35 min and 50 min in length.

After the completion of the interviews, the video recording of each interview was individually uploaded into Rev, a membership-only transcription service tool that converts audio recordings and stores digital transcripts. I reviewed each transcription for accuracy and redacted all participant identifying information. The transcripts were then emailed to each participant for review and validation. Upon confirmation of accuracy, the transcriptions were renamed using Participant 1, Participant 2, and so forth and saved to a

password-protected Google folder accessible only by me. In addition to the interview transcripts, all artifacts collected and signed informed consents were securely stored using the same password-protected Google folder. The transcriptions and artifacts collected were coded for frequency and themes using the Delve qualitative coding software. Data triangulation was established using the data collected from the interviews and artifacts.

Population

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), a population is "a group of individuals or events from which a sample is drawn and to which results can be generated" (p. 489). The population includes the group of interest for the researcher (Patten & Newhart, 2018). For this study, the overall population identified was 1,018 special education directors in California public schools districts (California Department of Education, n.d.-b). An assumption was made that each school district in California has a responsible leader who oversees special education. It was determined that the overall population would be too large for analysis; thus, the population was narrowed to 345 special education directors serving in the unified public school districts in California (California Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Sample

The sample of a study is represented by the participants chosen based on their experiences with the phenomenon being studied and for which data are collected and generalized back to the larger population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten & Newhart, 2018). The sample for this research study included 10 special education directors who served in either Los Angeles, Orange, or San Bernardino counties; who did

not have the title or duties of a Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) administrator; and who met four of the six delimitation criteria. The thematic peer researchers determined a sample size of 10 to be appropriate to collect meaningful data and concurrently ensure feasibility and credibility of the study (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2015).

I used nonprobability purposeful and convenience sampling to identify the 10 special education directors. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to make judgment about participant criteria of interest and provides for a selection of participants with credible lived experiences that could align to the study's purpose and research questions (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Using criterion-based purposeful sampling, criteria of importance were identified (Patton, 2015). The nine peer researchers and three faculty advisors determined a set of six criteria that would establish eligibility to participate in the various research studies among leadership populations. In addition to the thematic criteria, I determined additional criteria based on the unique position of the special education director in unified public schools in California. For this study, the participants had to serve as a special education director in either Los Angeles, Orange, or San Bernardino counties; to not hold the title or duties of a SELPA administrator; and to meet four of the following six delimitation criteria to participate:

1. They have shown evidence of successful relationships with stakeholders.
2. They have shown evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success.
3. They have had 5 or more years of experience in the profession or field.

4. They have had articles written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings.
5. They have been recognized by their peers.
6. They have held memberships in associations or groups focused on their field.

Convenience sampling was used to identify qualified participants based on accessibility (Patton, 2015). I used the SELPA Administrators of California email listserv because it provided access to connect with special education experts who know special education directors in California. Once prospective participants were known, I contacted the special education directors by email to establish eligibility and extend an invitation to participate. Of the 19 special education directors identified as prospective participants, 13 responded with interest and eligibility (68%). The first 10 responders participated in the study. Table 1 reveals how the participants met the established criteria to participate in the study.

Demographic Data

This study included 10 special education directors who met the participation eligibility criteria. All names and identifying information of the participants were excluded from the study's findings to preserve confidentiality and anonymity. Each participant was given a pseudonym such as Participant 1, Participant 2, and so forth. Table 2 presents a description of the participants at the time of the study and includes gender, ethnicity, age range, years of experience in the organization, years in the current position, years in the educational field, and highest level of education. Of the 10 participants, six were female and four were male. All participants were in the age range between 36 and 55 years. Participants reported their ethnicity as Hispanic (3), White (5),

Asian American (1), and Asian American/Hispanic (1). Seven participants held master's degrees and three participants held doctoral degrees. Although the participants indicated varied years of experience in their organizations and current position, all participants had been in the field of education for over 9 years.

Table 1

Study Participant Criteria

Study criterion	Participant									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Serves as a special education director in Los Angeles, Orange, or San Bernardino county	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2. Does not have the title or duties of a SELPA director	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
3. Has shown evidence of successful relationships with stakeholders	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
4. Has shown evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
5. Has 5 or more years of experience in the profession or field	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
6. Has had articles written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings			X				X	X		X
7. Is recognized by his or her peers	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
8. Holds memberships in associations or groups focused on his or her field	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Note. Criteria 1 and 2 are required. SELPA = Special Education Local Plan Area.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Identified gender	Identified ethnicity	Age range	Years in the organization	Years in current position	Years in the field	Highest level of education
1	Male	Hispanic	46–55	4–8	4–8	16+	Doctorate
2	Female	Hispanic	46–55	9–15	1–3	16+	Master's
3	Female	White	46–55	9–15	9–15	16+	Doctorate
4	Female	Hispanic	36–45	16+	1–3	16+	Master's
5	Male	White	46–55	4–8	4–8	16+	Master's
6	Male	White	36–45	4–8	4–8	9–15	Master's
7	Female	White	46–55	16+	4–8	16+	Master's
8	Male	Asian American	36–45	4–8	4–8	16+	Doctorate
9	Female	Asian American/ Hispanic	46–55	1–3	4–8	16+	Master's
10	Female	White	46–55	9–15	4–8	9–15	Master's

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semistructured interviews with 10 special education directors and corresponding digital artifacts provided by participants during September 2023. The data identified and described the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). The designed interview questions allowed special education directors to share lived experiences and leadership strategies as they related to building adaptive capacity. The data collected among participants and sources were analyzed for emerging patterns and themes related to each of the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership. The findings are organized and presented by research question in alignment with the study's theoretical framework.

Data Analysis

According to Patton (2015), "Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings" (p. 521). Data analysis is focused on answering questions and identifying insights (Patten & Newhart, 2018; Patton, 2015). To aid in the data analysis for this study, all transcripts and artifacts were uploaded into the Delve tool. I coded the data using Delve based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership: (a) making naming elephants in the room the norm, (b) nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, (c) encouraging independent judgment, (d) developing leadership capacity, and (e) institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning. I read and cross analyzed the transcripts to code participant responses. Deductive and inductive coding strategies were used to identify emerging themes from the participant responses. Themes were clustered by conceptual similarity and patterns. Frequency tables were created to reveal themes, sources, and frequencies for the data associated with each key adaptive leadership characteristic as related to the research questions.

Intercoder Reliability

Reliability was established through the development of the interview protocol that was used consistently with the research participants and strengthened when the nine peer researchers conducted field tests. In addition, intercoder reliability was determined using a peer researcher with experience in qualitative data coding. Intercoder reliability is established when two independent coders reach similar conclusions on the same analyzed data set to ensure accuracy and validity of the data analysis (Lombard et al., 2010). The peer researcher completed transcript and artifact coding from one participant, equal to 10% of the data analyzed. An 88% agreement level was established across raters.

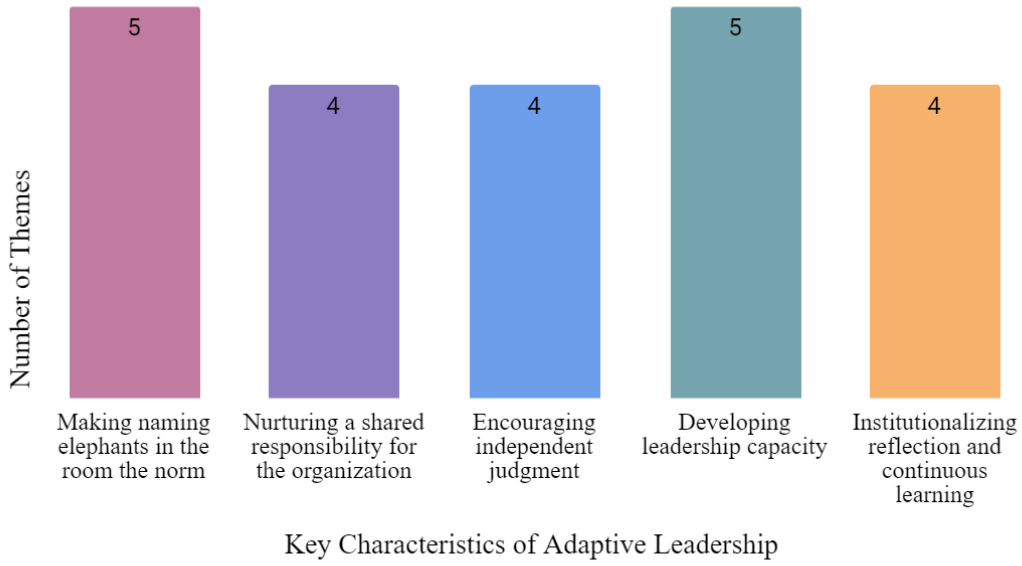
According to Patton (2015), intercoder reliability is established with 80% or greater agreement on data coding across raters; thus, using this threshold, interrater reliability was achieved for this study.

Data by Research Question

A total of 520 coded entries were obtained from the 10 interviews and 14 artifacts collected with 451 frequencies associated with interviews and 69 frequencies associated with artifacts. The coded data resulted in 22 emergent themes. Figure 4 shows the number of themes identified for each of the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership being studied.

Figure 4

Distribution of Themes Per Key Characteristics of Adaptive Leadership



Of the 22 emergent themes, making elephants in the room the norm and developing leadership capacity yielded five unique themes each. Four themes were identified for

each of the following characteristics: nurturing a shared responsibility, encouraging independent judgment, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning.

Table 3 shows the breakdown of all coded data in alignment with each research question and provides the total frequency counts along with the frequency percentage of all coded data by key characteristic. Figure 5 displays a visual representation of the frequency count and percentage of all codes identified for each key characteristic of adaptive leadership in alignment with the study's research questions.

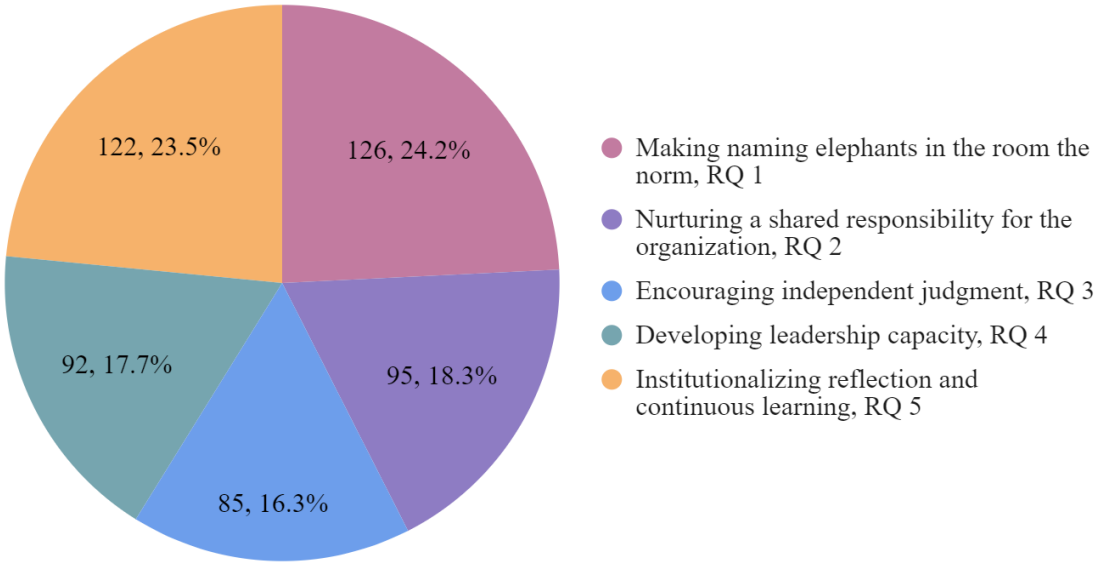
Table 3

Tabulation of All Coded Data

Key characteristic of adaptive leadership	Research question	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	Frequency %
Making naming elephants in the room the norm	1	113	13	126	24.2
Nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization	2	75	20	95	18.3
Encouraging independent judgment	3	79	6	85	16.3
Developing leadership capacity	4	83	9	92	17.7
Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning	5	101	21	122	23.5

Figure 5

Frequencies and Percentages: Data by Key Characteristic of Adaptive Leadership



Making elephants in the room the norm had the highest overall frequency count of 126, representing 24.2% of the data. Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning had the second highest frequency of 122, representing 23.5% of the data. Nurturing a shared responsibility had a frequency of 95, representing 18.3%, and developing leadership capacity had a frequency of 92, representing 17.7% of the data. The lowest key characteristic of adaptive leadership was encouraging independent judgment, which had a frequency of 85, representing 16.3% of the data.

The following sections are an analysis of the data collected organized by research question and includes a review of the corresponding definition and interview questions. The emergent themes are presented by frequency.

Research Subquestion 1

Research Subquestion 1 asked, "How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through making naming elephants in the room the norm?" For this study, making naming elephants in the room the norm was defined as the act of openly addressing sensitive underlying issues, or undiscussables, to resolve potential barriers that interfere with an organization realizing its full potential (Baker, 2004; Heifetz et al., 2009; Toegel & Barsoux, 2019). Research participants were asked two interview questions with corresponding prompts (Appendix H). The first interview question assisted me to understand leadership practices used to address sensitive underlying issues as an organizational norm. The second interview question assisted me to understand the strategies used to create an environment that allowed individuals or groups to resolve potential barriers impeding organizational success.

Data from the interviews and artifacts yielded 126 total frequencies and five emerging themes. The 10 interviews provided 113 frequencies and the artifacts provided 13 frequencies. Making naming elephants in the room the norm was the highest yielding key characteristic of adaptive leadership for the study. The five themes identified were establishing trust through physical and psychological safety, engaging in open and honest communication, gaining perspective and understanding, developing relationships, and using intentional meeting structures and processes. Table 4 shows the five themes central to making naming elephants in the room the norm and the corresponding source and frequency data. The themes are presented in descending order from highest to lowest frequency count.

Table 4

Themes for Making Naming Elephants in the Room the Norm

Theme	Sources	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	Frequency %
Establishing trust through physical and psychological safety	9	35	6	41	32.5
Engaging in open and honest communication	10	24	4	28	22.2
Gaining perspective and understanding	9	22	1	23	18.3
Developing relationships	8	17	1	18	14.3
Using intentional meeting structures and processes	9	15	1	16	12.7

Establishing Trust Through Physical and Psychological Safety

The theme most frequently referenced in response to the strategies used by special education directors to make naming elephants in the room the norm was establishing trust through physical and psychological safety. This theme had 35 frequencies from interviews and six frequencies from artifacts, for a total frequency count of 41, representing 32.5% of the data coded for this key characteristic of adaptive leadership. Nine of the 10 participants indicated trust building as a key strategy to addressing sensitive issues. According to Northouse (2016), trust is a common leadership strategy for organizational transformation because of the predictability it affords during times of uncertainty. Although psychological and physical safety is essential for trust building, power and status differences can significantly prevent undiscussables from surfacing (Toegel & Barsoux, 2019). Established space acts as a "holding environment in which opposing ideas can be explored, resolved, or embraced" and individuals feel safe to establish trust (Baker, 2004, p. 695). The special education directors identified creating a

safe space, developing a shared value system, showing responsiveness, and allowing for mistakes as supportive strategies to the establishment of trust. Participant 1 shared,

> I think you can have any conversation with anyone if you have that relationship with them and that they trust that they're in a safe space and know that it's coming from a place of good intentions and not I got you or having some hidden agenda. Everything always, to me, the crux of dealing with any issue begins with relationships and building trust. And once you do that, then I think it makes it possible to have any conversation about any topic, be it sensitive, political, anything like that.

Emphasizing the connection between a safe space and trust, Participant 4 stated, "I try to create an environment for individuals to know that they can come to me and feel safe." Participant 4 also contributed that "just being transparent as a leader myself, so then they can feel comfortable talking and addressing issues." Participant 7 provided an example in which trust is established because "people know that if they reach out to me, they are going to have an honest conversation and feel safe because I always find the good things in them." Participant 3 discussed the importance of safety when addressing sensitive issues:

> I think a big thing is allowing for errors and mistakes to address those big issues. If people are afraid to come and tell you there's been an error or something hasn't gone right, it just festers and becomes a huge underlying problem because there is no trust.

Participant 2 also shared how she develops trust through safety and shared values:

> I think that if there is a conflict or an issue, we don't publicly ever shame anyone. It's done in private; it's talked about. It's reiterating the shared values and the expectation and how there's often different issues that I need to become more informed and aware of, and us being a collaborative effort for how can we brainstorm what those solutions are to move forward. It's developing trust in this process.

Participant 5 contributed the importance of responsiveness and follow-through to trust:

> After our leadership meetings, I ask are we following through on things we talked about? Because I think that establishes trust and we can definitely have more meaningful conversations and are able to discuss things that are more sensitive if we have trust.

Artifacts collected referenced the importance of trust as an established value for organizational success. Participant 5's district strategic plan, in which he was a contributing developer, outlines an "atmosphere of mutual trust and respect" as a core value as well as the need to "cultivate safe spaces of community for students, families, and staff to engage in collective growth."

Engaging in Open and Honest Communication

The second most referenced theme in response to the strategies identified by all 10 participants to making naming elephants in the room the norm was engaging in open and honest communication. The theme had 24 frequencies from interviews and four frequencies from artifacts, representing 22.2% of the total responses for the key characteristic of adaptive leadership. The special education directors shared ways in

which they engage in open and honest conversations through accessibility, honesty, encouragement and empowerment, and implementing intentional structures for communication. Artifacts collected further demonstrated the use of intentional structures for communication in meeting agendas and agenda norms that promoted open and honest conversation.

Special education directors provided insights into the importance of engaging in open and honest conversations to promote establishing a norm of naming elephants in the room. Participant 6 stated, "And really as a leader, I think addressing those concerns and making sure that we are discussing them openly provides greater experiences for the individuals that we lead." Similarly, Participant 2 shared, "So I think just really encouraging open communication and that it's okay to have, we have a very strong value of communicating, but also being very respectful, honest, and kind." Participant 10 also expressed the importance of open and honest communication within her leadership practices:

> And I will say I practice that kind of honest open communication because sometimes it's not simply untouchables or there's things you don't want to talk about. Sometimes its perception. Sometimes it's clarifying your understanding of things which become elephants or baby elephants because you are inferring this was done or said. So being open and honest about your understanding is also really important.

Participant 4 shared that she creates an environment to address potential barriers by being open, transparent, and direct:

> I like to just call it out and not beat around it. Let's just say, hey, we've noticed this. Or if I notice something in an individual that maybe seems off and everyone kind of knows it but isn't calling it out and we're not able to move work forward, I'll call someone in my office and just say, "Hey, I've noticed you've been a little different," or "Is there anything you need from me? Do you want to tell me what's going on?" That way it's not out in the open, but they know that it's something there, so then we can continue to work as a team.

Participant 7 shared that within her organization she has created environments to resolve potential barriers through intentional structures that promote open, honest, and healing conversations:

> So we've done a lot of work in restorative justice. So restorative circles are kind of in our blood to some extent. I know that I use restorative circles even when people don't realize they're being in a restorative circle. It helps to provide the structure needed to engage in hard, honest conversations.

Gaining Perspective and Understanding

The third most referenced theme identified for making naming elephants in the room the norm was gaining perspective and understanding. Investigating differences in experiences, emotions, and responses can surface faulty perceptions that sustain avoidant behaviors associated with discussing sensitive issues (Toegel & Barsoux, 2019). An increase in value can be developed when mutual understanding is felt (Baker, 2004). Gaining perspective and understanding as a theme had 22 frequencies from the interviews and one frequency from the artifacts, representing 18.3% of the total data collected for this key characteristic of adaptive leadership as identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). Nine

of the 10 participants contributed experiences and strategies associated with gaining perspective and understanding to address sensitive underlying issues. For example, Participant 6 shared,

> So identifying the challenges is probably the most critical step in addressing concerns effectively, but once we identify that challenge, having the opportunity to gain a clear-cut understanding from other leaders and/or individual that are on the front lines of these types of issues provides the necessary understanding to ensure that we successfully move past the concern. … It's important for us to also step back and to gain perspective of individuals that we lead in those situations so that we can actually provide them with supports that they see as appropriate. If we don't understand their perspective, we're not going to understand how to help them. And I view the job as a special education director to be that of a problem solver. That's all we do all day is problem solve.

Similarly, Participant 3 described how she gains understanding during conflict:

> If there is a conflict or if there's a problem, we almost aways hold a staffing to identify what it is and to think about the problem from their perspective, what their concerns are. And then problem solve to prethink how we're going to go forward and what the best strategy to get there is. I think there's a lot of planning and understanding that actually is needed to remove barriers to resolve conflict.

Participant 9 shared her efforts to gain perspective and understanding: "I do ask questions that help give different perspectives as to how it got to that point," and Participant 10 shared that she tries "not to jump to answers, but ask more questions, trying to dig into what people are grappling with." Participants 2 and 3 reiterated that

asking questions is a strategy to gain understanding and perspective. Participant 8 shared that to "really emphasize that everything is based off of some sort of data, and that if you don't have data, you're just another person with an opinion." Participants explained that when seeking perspective and understanding, it is important to understand what the data are saying, in addition to the person's emotion and ego.

Participant 2 shared that by proactively seeking understandings of potential conflict areas, she is more readily able to be a responsive leader:

> I collect a lot of information and I'll do it anonymously. What are areas that we're really doing well at? What are areas that we have some seeds brewing? What are areas that are really huge barriers for us right now where they are holding us down? And so I collect that information twice a year. And then we talk about it, these are the barriers shared, how can we do better?

Participant 1 provided a meeting agenda that demonstrated the opportunity to gain perspective and understanding through intentional listening, hearing, asking, and processing, all before speaking and contributing.

Developing Relationships

The fourth most referenced theme that emerged in response to the questions about making naming elephants in the room the norm was developing relationships, representing 14.3% of the total data collected. This theme had 17 frequencies from interviews and one frequency from collected artifacts for a total frequency count of 18. Eight of the 10 participants revealed that relationships play a critical role in discussing sensitive underlying issues and concerns that pose potential barriers to organizational

success. For example, Participant 1 explained that relationships are the foundation to trust and a strategy for building relationships:

> With my team I have this little cheat sheet that I use and it's labeled "Getting to Know You," and it has about 20 something questions from questions like, What's your favorite chocolate? What's your favorite movie? What's your favorite book? Things that you've crossed off from your bucket list things, what's your favorite ice cream or cake or dessert. And I have them fill that out and I keep that information. I put all birthdays on my calendar and on those days I'd send text messages. And so that's really my approach, getting to know my people at a more personal level. And when you ask them about their day or about something that happened on their weekend, actually listen and be authentic.

Similarly, Participant 5 shared that personal and professional relationship development is essential to building trust:

> Getting to know our colleagues on sort of a nonbusiness time … just getting to know people at the human level. I think that's the best thing is understanding people, getting to know people, and also having some vulnerability with people. You're not always like, I'm the special ed director, or I'm the HR director and we're all business. There's something to be said about just talking, having fun, whatever the style is of the other person. Some people are a little less forthcoming, some are more forthcoming, but just having, connecting on a human level and then establishing trust. You have relationships with HR, you have relationships with business, and you have relationships with your site people so that when there becomes a point you have to have some more sensitive

> discussions or discussions about topics that maybe are things we don't want to talk about that you're able to address those.

Participant 7 also explained how she develops relationships and how those relationships are deemed critical during challenging conversations:

> Well, I don't know if this is good or bad, but everyone has my cell phone number in my district. And because I'd been in the organization 24 years, I have built relationships along the way. But part of it is visiting classrooms, getting to know them, just letting them talk, arranging a phone conversation and having discussions, welcoming new people, understanding when things are hard and reaching out to them if they've had a loss or they had a birth or something like that. There are ways to personalize the relationship. If I meet you, I'm going to want to know everything about you, but I try to be less in your face about it. Once I build relationships with people I work with, it's much easier to address something that is not as maybe easy to discuss if you already have a relationship with someone.

Participant 8 indicated that stepping back to "establish rapport" is important coming into a new position. Participant 9 also shared that relationships take time to establish when new in a position:

> It took me a year or two to really get into this district, to really get to know the staff, for them to get to know me and get to know my intent. I didn't have any hidden agenda or bad intentions. Once those relationships were established, we were able to actually take steps to move things forward.

Data were triangulated using an artifact provided by Participant 1, which demonstrated how a getting to know you tool supports relationship development with team members.

Using Intentional Meeting Structures and Processes

The theme with the lowest frequency count for making naming elephants in the room the norm was using intentional meeting structures and processes. Nine of the 10 special education directors described the use of structures and processes within meetings to support addressing undiscussables within the organization. This theme had 15 frequencies from interviews and one frequency from an artifact for a total frequency count of 16, representing 12.7% of the total data collected. The special education directors shared various types of meeting frequencies, structures, and processes that support addressing sensitive issues within their departments and organizations. Participant 4 shared,

> We have our leadership team and then we have our admin team, and we were struggling with wanting our program specialists to be a little bit more engaged and it was not happening. We were not addressing the elephant in the room. So we talked about ways to increase engagement. We will print out the agenda. Only the note taker needs their laptop out. So we were trying to practice by addressing what we were frustrated with as leaders, actually as the admin team and then asking them, let us know, is there anything that isn't working for you that you feel that you need? So we talked about it. Yes, the meeting runs long, so they want permission to be able to get up and stand up and go get a snack or whatever it is so they can remain engaged. But that's kind of how we do it in terms of a

> meeting, in terms of organization, is really setting our norms and checking in on our norms to make sure that that's what we're following so that we can call out and address those underlying issues.

Participant 9 described a process used to discuss challenging student cases in which staff have endured high emotions:

> The one thing that I've been doing since I've come here is to, whenever there's a due process complaint, a settlement agreement, I bring the team back together to have the open conversation in terms of why we're here, what were the issues going over the case, and looking at where the errors were made, where the challenges were. And it's not so much to be able to call out people or to say we did this wrong, but together we learn from our mistakes and to know why it came to this point, and then pointing out those specific things. The team knows to expect these meetings and this process in these situations.

Participant 10 described the need for space as it related to the physical safety of the environment but also the space to create intentional structures and protocols:

> But I do think it really does boil down to having space to address all the things. So whether it's sticky note parking lots, or an agenda, hey everybody if you think of things, write it down, get it up there, and we will circle back to it in its appropriate time. So I think just ensuring and being intentional about having space for that, whether you call it an elephant or you have a protocol, whether it's a strength, weakness, opportunities, threats activity, or a parking lot or self-reflection, I think just inviting that makes it a departmental norm.

Participants 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7 also revealed the importance of meeting norms and having processes by which adherence to the norms is reflected upon.

Research Subquestion 2

Research Subquestion 2 asked, "How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization?" Nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization was defined by the thematic team as the collective ownership across team member roles for the decision making of operational goals and outcomes of the organization's future (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2016; Tremblay et al., 2016). Yukl (2006) stated that "important decisions about what to do and how to do it are made through the use of an interactive process involving many different people who influence each other (p. 4). I sought to learn about leadership experiences of facilitating shared ownership of organizational goals and the strategies used to provide members with opportunities for shared responsibility.

Responses from the interviews and collected artifacts yielded 95 total frequencies and four emerging themes. The 10 interviews provided 75 frequencies, and the artifacts provided 20 frequencies. The four themes identified were creating opportunities for input and feedback; fostering relationships and team commitment; empowering shared ownership; and providing support, not solutions. Table 5 shows the themes presented in descending order from highest to lowest frequency count.

Table 5

Themes for Nurturing a Shared Responsibility for the Organization

Theme	Sources	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	Frequency %
Creating opportunities for input and feedback	10	31	8	39	41.1
Fostering relationships and team commitment	10	18	9	27	28.4
Empowering shared ownership	8	14	3	17	17.9
Providing support, not solutions	8	12	0	12	12.6

Creating Opportunities for Input and Feedback

The theme most frequently referenced in response to the strategies used by special education directors to nurture a shared responsibility for the organization was creating opportunities for input and feedback. This theme had 31 frequencies from interviews and eight frequencies from artifacts for a total of 39 frequencies, representing 41.1% of the total data collected. All 10 of the special education directors interviewed indicated that strategies associated with creating opportunities for input and feedback were important to addressing this key characteristic of adaptive leadership. They revealed strategies that included using intentional meeting structures and processes, using interactive tools to support sharing, using data, seeking feedback, and engaging in crucial conversations.

Participants 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, and 10 shared specific meeting structures and processes that allowed for increased involvement, shared voices, and contribution of ideas and thoughts. Participant 2 described,

> One thing that I am doing this year is the specialized services advisory committee. We're meeting four times this year. Applications just went out. We are getting … The application asks how can your voice really help, not just speak for yourself,

> but for specialized services as a whole. I'm excited about that because it is raising issues and providing a chance for us to really brainstorm some solutions and then also to provide those solutions or suggestions to our bargaining unit members so that they can really take our input and see if that's something that they can help utilize to make some different changes as well. I am hopeful this structure will provide for shared ownership of all special services, not just their lane of work.

Participant 7 shared a meeting structure in which team members with similar jobs come together to collaborate and share concerns: "This is a really good forum for us to hear what is going on and for team members to take responsibility to participate." Participant 1 contributed an example of how he creates opportunities for input and feedback by incorporating all members:

> We have SPED committee meetings and I carry around a little ball or a little tactile thing and I throw it at people. I say, "and you're going to throw it to the next person who's going to answer." So everyone knows and I tell them, "look, you can pass if you don't have an answer, but we're going to come back to you." Everyone knows after the first one, everyone knows that everyone's going to, and it's part of my norms. I say every voice will be heard.

Participants shared other strategies used to create shared opportunities for input and feedback, such as using Google docs, Google slides, and Google forms. Participants 4 and 10 highlighted how they leverage document sharing to increase opportunities for contribution. Participant 2 shared that she "took an anonymous poll to learn where they needed to grow" whereas Participant 9 sought "feedback and input

through a needs assessment." Participant 7 described the use of chart paper to encourage input and feedback.

In addition, data collected from artifacts supported that the special education directors created opportunities for input and feedback. Artifacts included meeting agendas, which incorporated tools for sharing, provided time and space for input and feedback and involved norms for contribution of ideas.

Fostering Relationships and Team Commitment

The second most referenced theme associated with nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization was fostering relationships and team commitment. Team leadership, which is defined by "accountability, partnership, equity, and ownership," is an essential component of shared leadership (Kocolowski, 2010, p. 25). The theme for fostering relationships and team commitment had 18 frequencies from interviews and nine frequencies from artifacts for a total frequency count of 27, representing 28.4% of the total data collected. All 10 special education directors contributed to the emergence of this theme. Special education directors spoke to the importance of teams when nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization. Participant 8 shared,

> I try to handle the teams in the department fairly informally so that people have those informal relationships. There's not a hierarchy. They're a team. And I'm lucky. I've always had teams that were very tight and that got along really well together, and so they have those discussions together.

Participant 3 expressed, "Everything is hard and it's a very negative environment, but if the people around you are positive and collaborative and really support you, it makes it a

great place to be." Participant 3 continued and provided the following example of how relationships and team commitment contribute to shared responsibility of job assignments:

> We all work very collaboratively; I love that it's team members that come to me when we're doing things like for assignments, it's collaborative. It's not me saying, you'll have these schools, you'll have these areas. It's let's work together. Let's figure out what makes sense. How can we do things differently? How can we reduce stress? How can we be more efficient and effective? And what I just love is that its other team members coming to me, not saying I have too much but saying that I'm really worried about this person. I think that they've taken on too much. We are truly a team who takes care of each other.

Participant 6 encouraged participation in shared leadership by framing collective ownership of shared problem solving and teamwork:

> Just trying to foster greater problem solving as a team to ensure that everyone is understanding what their role and responsibility is and that this is not a me problem or a you problem, but this is an us problem and together we're going to figure out how to get through this.

Participant 1 expressed the sentiment that "it goes back to my belief that it takes a team." Similar to Participant 6, Participant 1 spends time ensuring that team members are aware that "it's not me, it's us." He uses every opportunity to flatten the hierarchical structure to foster relationships and team commitment. Artifacts from Participants 1, 2, 4, 5, and 10 focused on fostering relationships and team commitment through relationship-building activities, team collaboration, and group projects.

Empowering Shared Ownership

The third most referenced theme to nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization was empowering shared ownership. This theme had 14 frequencies from interviews and three frequencies from artifacts for a total frequency count of 17, representing 17.9% of the data collected. Eight of the 10 participants shared experiences and identified strategies that supported empowering shared ownership to nurture a shared responsibility for the organization. Participant 4 described how the special education leaders empower team members to create organizational goals:

> To develop shared ownership of goals, they broke up into their groups, wrote down their ideas, and then we took it as an admin team and mapped it all out. So it wasn't saying, this is what our goals are, these are what our initiatives are, and this is who's going to do it as a leadership team. Who do we feel would be the most appropriate to take the lead on this? Who's responsible for that? Do these goals match what you feel need to be our goals based off of the work that you do? So using this process, there is shared ownership because everybody has had a say in the goals and everybody knows what we're working on and what we're leaning towards and what we want to accomplish in the next year.

Participant 6 explained, "Empowering others to contribute to the problem solving and adapt in these challenges has been something that I have taken on this year." Participant 6 thought that "creating a sense of shared ownership and shared responsibility" is a key aspect of shared leadership, which encourages contribution. Similarly, Participant 7 not only emphasized empowering collective problem solving but also emphasized using interest identification as a lever to shared ownership:

> We've had a hard time hiring speech and language pathologists. We finally got people hired, but before we could give them assignments, I had to go back to the people who had been there a while and have them decide where the holes were and what assignments needed to occur. So we did like collective bargaining. The first thing I said was, we have a problem. Some people have lighter caseloads than others, and there's some feelings of people feeling overwhelmed. Our interest is in making sure everyone is supported and that they have the load they can handle. I got agreement on the interest. Then I said, okay, now let's create, there's no suggestion that's ridiculous.

Providing Support, Not Solutions

The theme with the lowest frequency associated with nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization was providing support, not solutions. Eight special education directors provided interview responses that had 12 frequencies, representing 12.6% of the total data collected for nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization. None of the collected artifacts triangulated this theme.

Participant 6 emphasized a supportive leadership approach:

> I feel that it's necessary to guide my team for greater competency, to utilize the approach of giving the work back to them. So allowing and adapting my leadership to where I'm not just providing all the answers. It's easy for me to sit in my office and shoot off emails and give the answers to everything. But that's not empowering them to take ownership.

Participant 4 explained that being a relational leader provides opportunities to readily engage in conversations about concerns and allows for supportive problem solving and ownership of issues:

> I have them answer it for themselves. I will have them say, tell me why you think that is. And then I'll ask some clarifying questions to help them get to the answer themselves and let them see if for themselves. So it's not a top down, you must do this because of A, B, and C. I want to help them get to the answer themselves.

Two common strategies used by special education directors to provide support instead of answers were asking questions and inquiry. By asking open-ended questions that allowed for reflection, individuals and teams engaged in shared responsibility of the problem. Participant 8 indicated, "I'll have a premeet with the team to ask questions and get them thinking to come up with a plan." Participant 7 used inquiry to understand "what do you need from me in order to move forward?"

Finally, Participants 2 and 3 noted modeling as a strategy to provide support and not the answers. Participant 3 shared, "I think identifying things where you need help or support … [it] builds an open culture of we're not good at everything, so we all should push ourselves in those areas."

Research Subquestion 3

The third research subquestion asked, "How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through encouraging independent judgment?" The thematic research team defined encouraging independent judgment as a leader's capacity to provide an opportunity for team members to make choices based on personal and professional experience regardless of the position held within the organization (Casavant

et al., 1995; Heifetz et al., 2009; Shanbhag, 2002). According to Heifetz et al. (2009), independent judgment enhances leadership growth and development within an organization because ownership is dispersed across many individuals instead of solely with the hierarchical leader.

The participants were asked two interview questions. The first interview question asked about situations in which employees were encouraged to make personal and professional choices. The second interview question asked about the systems and structures in place to support employees using independent judgment and choice. The data collected from the interviews and artifacts yielded 85 total frequencies. The 10 interviews provided 79 frequencies and the artifacts provided for six frequencies. Encouraging independent judgment was the lowest yielding key characteristic of adaptive leadership for the study, representing 16.3% of the total data with four emerging themes. These included building capacity for independent decision making, promoting autonomy and decision-making authority, empowering problem solving, and embracing mistakes as growth opportunities. The themes are presented in descending order from highest to lowest frequency count. Table 6 shows the four themes central to encouraging independent judgment and the corresponding source and frequency data gathered for each theme.

Table 6

Themes for Encouraging Independent Judgment

Theme	Sources	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	Frequency %
Building capacity for independent decision making	10	26	3	29	34.1
Promoting autonomy and decision-making authority	10	25	2	27	31.8
Empowering problem solving	9	17	1	18	21.2
Embracing mistakes as growth opportunities	9	11	0	11	12.9

Building Capacity for Independent Decision Making

The theme most frequently referenced for encouraging independent judgment was building capacity for independent decision making. All 10 special education directors contributed to this theme. This theme had 26 frequencies from interviews and three frequencies from artifacts for a total frequency count of 29, representing 34.1% of the data collected for this key characteristic of adaptive leadership. A common example among participants was building the skills and knowledge of school-site leaders to support special education oversight and ownership. Participant 10 shared,

> I'm really working with principals to understand and own their power as local education agency reps. You are signing an IEP, and a lot of times new principals, even older principals, don't realize what they're signing off on. But I think giving autonomy to make decisions, but also providing them the toolbox to know what their decisions are and what those impacts are … Where sometimes I have concerns is when I haven't given people their toolboxes, not that I'm the know-it-all, but you have someone brand new who really doesn't know yet, and then

> they're making decisions alone and you haven't come up with them to partner to say what are some areas that I can support you with? And not expecting people to know their gaps. When people say, what questions do you have? And they're like, I don't even know what to ask.

Similarly, Participant 5 shared an example of how capacity building is foundational to independent judgment for school site leaders when navigating complex special education issues:

> Our principals, they're not special ed people, right? In their heart, they probably are. Sometimes they have so much stuff going on and they don't come from that background. They run an IEP or facilitate that. But the moment you start engaging them with some professional development, they thrive and they want to be the person who's in charge there. So I think capacity building is critical.

Participant 8 found that using case law examples is an effective way of building capacity of team members because "it provides a consistent approach to understanding education code … eventually they are able to independently come up with the same answer that I would've come up with because they are following case law." Participant 9 shared that "creating opportunities for the teams to have more joblike time to consult, ask questions, and learn" has been a newly implemented supportive strategy to build internal capacity to make decisions. Participant 3, 4, 5, and 7 described the use of meeting structures and processes, such as weekly cabinet meetings, monthly collaboration meetings, and structured site visits to provide opportunities for capacity building. Further, Participant 10 indicated that "understanding the structures that you're working within and

having the space to explore" are necessary for building capacity to make independent decisions.

Supporting artifacts for building capacity for individual decision making came from Participants 2 and 4. The artifacts provided were a meeting agenda, a case review request form, and an assignment survey. Each of the three examples revealed opportunities that allowed for independent judgment and choice by the user while providing data and contextual information to establish a foundation of knowledge and understanding.

Promoting Autonomy and Decision-Making Authority

The second most referenced theme to encouraging independent judgment was promoting autonomy and decision-making authority. This theme had 25 frequencies from interviews and two frequencies from artifacts, for a total frequency count of 27, representing 31.8% of the total data collected for encouraging independent judgment. Each special education director indicated that promoting autonomy and decision-making authority was an important contributor to exercising independent judgment and choice. A specific strategy used by special education directors to encourage independent judgment was to extend trust while implementing structures to check in on the outcomes of independent decision making.

Trust was a common strategy among several participants that supported giving freedom for autonomy and authority. Participant 5 shared, "I've built that trust and allow them to take risks. If things don't go well, we will debrief." Similarly, Participant 1 explained his leadership style: "You don't need to come to me again. I trust your judgment. So just really communicating often that I trust them and show them that I trust

them." Participant 2 noted, "I am definitely not a micromanager. You can do it the way that you want to as long as we're having the shared value of doing what is best for kids." Participant 8 encouraged his team members to make decisions by exercising their autonomy because they have established boundaries and developed trust:

> I tell them that you only need to involve me if there's an attorney who's coming to the meeting, if there's an advocate that you don't feel comfortable with, or if there's something that's going to cost money, like an NPS placement, an RTC. Those are the things that you should really involve me in the conversation. I should probably be at the IEP meeting. Everything else, you just let me know if you need me, if you feel uncomfortable, if you feel like it's overall complicated or you're on the fence as to what you want to do or what the parents are going to accept. If it's going to be confrontational, I'm happy to come, but it's up to you whether or not you want me to be there.

Participant 6 promoted autonomy and authority by "taking a backseat and being flexible in terms of the outcome and/or the approach and allowing those individuals to adopt their own type of solution to the problem." He found that this strategy supports capacity development with leaders.

When providing autonomy for decision making, Participants 2, 7, 9, and 10 emphasized checking in on the outcomes of independent decisions. For example, Participant 10 described, "I think it's bookmarking it. Checking in on things … So, 2 weeks from now I'm checking back to see was it done? What was the outcome? I'm not micromanaging, but saying, Hey, how's it going?"

Empowering Problem Solving

The third most referenced theme identified for encouraging independent judgment was empowering problem solving. This theme was mentioned by nine of the 10 participants and had 17 frequencies from interviews and one frequency from artifacts, for a total frequency count of 18, representing 21.2% of the total data collected for this key characteristic of adaptive leadership. The one artifact was retrieved from Participant 4 in which a Case Review Request demonstrated intentional steps for individual problem solving.

Participant 6 described how capacity building interconnects with empowering problem solving and how together, they can increase leadership potential. He shared,

> A lot of times it's out of the professional expertise of my site administrators to make decisions in correlation to special education. I'll use my high school administrator. He has little understanding of working with students with disabilities except for maybe the occasional student who was placed onto his class list. So I provide him with the opportunity to lead independently and to make determinations related to special education issues and special education concerns, and guide from a distance. So not being the individual who jumps right onto the campus and solves the problem for him, but rather coaching him from a distance and allowing him to go and address those problems and being a support to him has really encouraged his overall ownership of special education, but also creates a sense of competency amongst his teachers and really provides him with a higher level of leadership at that site.

Participant 3 explained that she empowers problem solving through a "pass the pen" concept at the weekly cabinet meeting. With established trust of judgment, confidence in skills and knowledge, and shared leadership, she provides the time and space for her team to work through problems without her. Participant 3 shared,

> Every day I want people to make their own decisions. And I also say, if you have a question, email me, text me even in a meeting, step out. Take a break but make decisions. You are there. I don't have the facts. You need to make a decision, which is student centered, keeping in mind all those things they know.

Participant 1, 3, and 10 described direct permission as a strategy to empower problem solving. Participant 3 said, "I will tell people you are going to make this choice and I'm going to allow you to." Similarly, Participant 1 indicated, "Just make a decision, I'll back you up either way. I'd rather you make a decision then always rely on me to make one."

Additionally, question asking was a strategy used to empower problem solving similar to how it was viewed as a strategy to nurture a shared responsibility for the organization. Participants 1, 2, 7, 9, and 10 conveyed the power of asking questions to promote independent problem solving. Participant 10 noted, "I look for questions more than giving input," and Participant 2 stated, "It's just asking a lot of questions and leading them to a place that I think is going to be productive."

Embracing Mistakes as Growth Opportunities

The lowest frequency count for encouraging independent judgment was embracing mistakes as growth opportunities. This theme had 11 total frequencies, all of which were obtained from interviews, representing 12.9% of the coded data for this variable. Nine of the 10 participants described strategies associated with this theme.

Commonalities among participants revealed that mistakes were expected, and at times encouraged, to grow in the profession and develop independence. Mistakes made by team members were responded to with supportive conversations and not shame or corrective actions. For example, Participant 3 shared,

> You have to expect that there are going to be errors, and you have to be okay with that. You have to have a culture where it's fine to make a mistake. I mean, I always say there's not an error we can't solve. It might not be pleasant. It may cost money. It could be a big one, but we can solve it and we can figure it out. And you can learn from that as long as you learn from the choices you make.

Participant 4 explained how she embraces mistakes as a leader and navigates a conversation with a team member:

> I think it's not necessarily wrong, but maybe we could have done something a little bit stronger or better. And so how do we learn from that? I think it's important to let them know you, especially when we're giving permission to exercise independent judgment, that it is not coming back and saying, well, that was wrong, but okay, well maybe that didn't work. Why didn't it work? What went wrong? And then what can we do better next time? I think it's really letting your staff know that there is no wrong way.

Participant 2 contributed,

> None of us are perfect. So I think that as long as we're approaching it from a steady perspective, a learning experience, and not anything that's punitive or you did anything wrong because if we're all trying to do what's best by kids, we're never going to get it a 100%. So again, I like to have private conversations and

really sit down and just brainstorm, okay, this didn't quite work out the way we wanted it to. Let's put our brains together so in case we ever have this situation or a similar situation, we can just learn from it. But I let them know that mistakes are how we learn. It's not something that has any shame to it.

Research Subquestion 4

Research Subquestion 4 asked, "How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through developing leadership capacity?" Developing leadership capacity was defined by the thematic research team as the systemic focus on expanding competencies and resources and intentionally motivating groups or individuals to increase leadership potential proactively (Eade, 1997, 2007; Elmore, 2003; Eyben et al., 2006; Harris, 2011; Heifetz et al., 2009; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). Capacity building has been seen as central to school improvement over time and is the result of people learning and performing more effectively (Harris, 2011). The two interview questions and corresponding prompts asked of the special education directors explored the perceived important leadership competencies for developing leaders and how the participants motivated others to increase their leadership potential.

The interviews and collected artifacts yielded 92 total frequencies and five emerging themes. The 10 interviews provided 83 frequencies and the artifacts provided nine frequencies. The five themes identified were providing mentoring and coaching support, creating opportunities to lead others, building collaborative relationships, providing access to professional learning, and identifying and leveraging strengths. The themes are presented in Table 7 from highest to lowest frequency count.

Table 7

Themes for Developing Leadership Capacity

Theme	Sources	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	Frequency %
Providing mentoring and coaching support	10	25	1	26	28.3
Creating opportunities to lead others	8	17	5	22	23.9
Building collaborative relationships	8	18	1	19	20.7
Providing access to professional learning	9	12	2	14	15.2
Identifying and leveraging strengths	6	11	0	11	12.0

Providing Mentoring and Coaching Support

The theme most frequently referenced by participants in response to developing leadership capacity was providing mentoring and coaching support. This theme had 25 frequencies from interviews and one frequency from an artifact for a total frequency count of 26, representing 23.9% of the data associated with developing leadership capacity. All study participants identified that mentoring and coaching individuals was supportive to leadership development and used specific strategies, such as asking questions, engaging in growth conversations, modeling, and supporting the encouragement of career expansion in their interactions with others.

Participant 7 shared a successful coaching experience in which she provided individualized support to a newer employee who lacked experience and confidence. Using modeling and encouragement, the employee excelled over time and developed leadership skills. Participant 7 noted, “The employee wrote me a card and was like, I found my voice. I understood what you were saying. I feel like you saw something in me

I didn't see in myself." Participant 2 similarly shared a success story of coaching a principal who was engaging in destructive behaviors: "Sometimes those are really tricky conversations, but if you build the relationship, you can coach and support them to be a better self."

Participants 2, 4, 9, and 10 found success in developing leadership capacity. Participant 9 shared that during individual conversations, common questions included "What is your goal?," "What do you want to do?," and "Where are your strengths and where are your areas that you feel like you can grow?" Participant 1 also asked questions but used hypothetical situations to identify "how they would handle it" as a way of developing leadership capacity.

Participants 2, 3, 6, and 7 shared how they supported the expanding career paths of employees by developing leadership capacity. Participant 7 restructured a position to an assistant director to accommodate the aspirations of her employee. In doing so, she provided mentorship and exposed the assistant director to experiences to "build capacity." Participant 2 shared that she "gives leadership opportunities to advance positions" just as she was provided capacity building opportunities 10 years prior. She recalled her own experiences and values mentorship and coaching because of it. Participant 3 explained the importance of supporting professional career advancement even if not in special education:

> I really want to know what it is they want to do and what's going to long term make them happy. These jobs are burnout, high burnout, and I don't expect anyone to spend 20 years in special ed. I mean, unless you're someplace where there's no litigation. … So you have to make sure that they're okay and that they

> know what they want as their next step and is this really it? And sometimes they ended up getting to this point because they're good and they're natural leaders and it's a pretty quick, in special ed, you go much quicker than in other things. So helping them to support what it is because if we have good educators, we need to keep them in the system, even if it's not in special ed.

Creating Opportunities to Lead Others

The second highest frequency theme associated with developing leadership capacity was creating opportunities to lead others. This theme had 17 frequencies from interviews and five frequencies from artifacts for a total frequency count of 22, representing 23.9% of the coded data for this variable. Eight of the 10 special education directors discussed strategies aligned with this theme. Commonalities among participants included skill building through assignments and collaborative teamwork.

Participant 9 motivated individuals to increase leadership potential by first developing a relationship and then engaging them through compliments to increase internal motivation:

> It's really kind of finding those individuals who have that internal spark and helping to light it and exposing them more and including them more and asking them different kind of follow-up questions and conversations that challenge them to think outside the box and take it to the next level.

Similarly, Participant 4 shared that motivating individuals to lead begins with identifying opportunities for leadership:

> Finding what those passion projects are for the people in our organization and capitalizing on that when we need things to get done. So I think within that, you

> kind of develop that leadership without them knowing it or telling them, because they become leaders, they become the experts in whatever that is.

Participant 2 addressed strategies used to create opportunities to develop leadership capacity when leadership is desired but individual skills may be lacking:

> I think not everyone was born a leader per se. It was definitely a learned skill set and for some more so than others. So I might, when they're taking on those, I let it out baby style, as far as their responsibilities, but then I really work with them on how to approach it and how to approach people because sometimes they need more structure.

The collected artifacts included meeting agendas that highlighted a variety of leadership opportunities through special projects and workgroups among the stakeholder groups. There were examples of workgroup presentations on high interest and relevant special education topics led by those not in the director role.

Building Collaborative Relationships

The third most referenced theme for developing leadership capacity was building collaborative relationships, which was mentioned by eight participants. This theme had 18 frequencies from interviews and one frequency from an artifact, representing 20.7% of the data coded for the key characteristic of developing leadership capacity. The artifact was contributed by Participant 1 and illustrated a tool to learn about others to support personal connection. According to the participants, building collaborative relationships underscores the need for trust and connection in leadership development.

Participant 4 shared an important leadership competency to develop leadership capacity:

> The one thing that we do focus on is building relationships. That is working with our leaders on how they can also build relationships with people. I think without that you can't work. There needs to be a level of trust. It has to be that they trust you in the work that you do or that you know what you're doing. And then there's also the relational trust, which is a little bit harder to build. But that is something that we focus on in developing leaders is making sure that they know how important it is to build relationships with who they work with and with the teams that they work with.

Similarly, Participant 6 shared that his organization is led by a superintendent who "is all about developing relationships." Participant 6, who followed his organizational leader, described strategies that emphasized the importance of relationships with staff and involved "depositing those positive interactions into the bank." Participant 6 continued, "If we have happy administrators, we have happy teachers, and if we have happy teachers, we have successful students."

Participant 10 reported that "knowing your why and finding your connections to walk alongside you" are important leadership competencies that develop leadership capacity. Participant 7 supported this response and indicated that "building a community through relationships" is a needed leadership competency.

Providing Access to Professional Learning

The fourth most referenced theme for developing leadership capacity was providing access to professional learning. This theme had 12 frequencies from interviews and two frequencies from artifacts, for a total frequency count of 14, representing 15.2% of the data collected for the variable. Nine of the 10 participants discussed professional

learning as a contributing strategy to developing leadership capacity. The specific use of research articles and book studies were referenced by Participants 5 and 10 to grow and build capacity as a leader.

Participant 8 shared how professional learning supports leadership capacity by building foundational knowledge and confidence:

> If you have real good quality training, then they become confident that they have the answers, and they have that efficacy that they can problem solve in the moment and come up with something; they become less nervous, they become more confident, and then they naturally become that person who knows what it is that they're doing and then people start to follow them.

Participant 5 indicated that within his organization he has an expectation to "foster professional learning amongst leaders" whereas Participant 6 contributed that "we have a variety of professional development opportunities for the management team to address leadership." Participant 1 shared that learning is a core value of the organization and stated, "Any opportunity I see, like a workshop, I say go. Just go and learn." He also shared a local process called Admin 101 in which mid-level managers are coached to be special education directors by accessing frequent and meaningful professional learning.

The artifacts aligned with this theme demonstrated the commitment of Participant 5's organization such that "access to relevant professional growth and learning" is integrated into the district's System Design Plan to "support employees in the continuous pursuit of skills to enhance their effectiveness."

Identifying and Leveraging Strengths

The lowest frequency theme for developing leadership capacity was identifying and leveraging strengths. Six of the 10 special education directors highlighted the importance of using the strengths of team members to promote leadership development. This theme had 11 frequencies from interviews, representing 12% of the data collected for this variable. No artifacts were provided to triangulate this theme. Participant 2 succinctly summarized how to leverage the strengths of others to develop leadership capacity:

> I try to really focus on people, what their strengths are and how that can help the group. I pick people who I think that's something that is a strength of theirs. And then how can we work on them being leaders in that area.

Similarly, Participant 5 shared, "Surround yourself and have people that are talented and just kind of let them go. Just move out of the way and allow them to be who they are." Participant 9 contributed that leadership capacity is developed by "knowing where their strengths are, putting them in front of people to lead conversations that they are really good at, which also increases their confidence across the board." Participant 7 described the importance of recognition when identifying strengths for leadership because often people need support in knowing their strengths: "I see when you get up, people listen to you. You always have something that you contribute to the conversation. I see that people are led by you."

Research Subquestion 5

The fifth research subquestion asked, "How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through institutionalizing reflection and continuous

learning?" The thematic research team defined institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning as providing a culture conducive to the safe exploration of new ideas and sharing of lessons learned both from an individual and an organizational perspective and creating a sustainable learning culture driven by a willingness to overcome engrained mental models across all levels of the organization (Cojocar, 2008; Pearson & Smith, 1986; Ramalingam et al., 2020; Senge et al., 2015; Veldsman & Johnson, 2016; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Two interview questions were used to explore this key characteristic of adaptive leadership with special education directors. I sought to understand how the participants institutionalized reflection and continuous learning as part of the organizational culture to build adaptive capacity and promote success. According to Senge et al. (2015), leadership capabilities emerge through practices that are "internal and external," such as those associated with reflection and continuous learning (p. 31).

Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning as a key characteristic of adaptive leadership generated the second highest frequencies among the five key characteristics. The data collected from the interviews and artifacts yielded 122 total frequencies. The 10 interviews provided 101 frequencies, and the artifacts provided 21 frequencies. Four themes emerged for institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning and were ranked by the highest number of total frequency counts. The themes included creating opportunities for sharing and collaboration, using intentional processes and practices, modeling reflective practices as a leader, and engaging in professional learning opportunities. Table 8 shows the four themes and corresponding frequencies for institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning.

Table 8

Themes for Institutionalizing Reflection and Continuous Learning

Theme	Sources	Interview frequency	Artifact frequency	Total frequency	Frequency %
Creating opportunities for sharing and collaboration	10	28	7	35	28.7
Using intentional processes and practices	10	25	9	34	27.9
Modeling reflective practices as a leader	9	28	2	30	24.6
Engaging in professional learning opportunities	10	20	3	23	18.9

Creating Opportunities for Sharing and Collaboration

The theme with the highest frequency count for institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning was creating opportunities for sharing and collaboration. This theme had 28 frequencies from interviews and seven frequencies from artifacts, for a total frequency count of 35, representing 28.7% of the collective data for the key characteristic of adaptive leadership. The 10 participants described experiences and strategies by which sharing and collaboration were valued. Strategies identified were using the evaluation process as reflection, scheduling intentional debriefs, and embracing adaptability. Special education directors also described establishing a culture of vulnerability for which sharing and collaboration were embraced and protected.

Participant 3 discussed the importance of sharing and collaborating among team members' job roles and positions and how that promotes a culture of inclusion and improvement:

> It doesn't matter what you are, transactional, authentic, call it what you will. You're not going to be in leadership long. You're going to lose your mind. People

> are so intense if you're not building a supportive leadership system around you. And I think gone are those days of hierarchical leadership. I think that's super archaic. You need to be getting your ideas from everyone. In my department, it doesn't matter who you are, what your title is, classified, or not, whatever union you belong to. If it's a good idea, it's a good idea. And we go with that; sharing is caring.

Many of the special education directors described opportunities for team members to contribute ideas, thoughts, and concerns as an individual and as a team member. Individual check-ins, team meetings, debriefs, goal setting meetings, and evaluation meetings all created the space necessary for sharing and collaboration. Participant 8 described postgame debriefs that "makes us all feel better afterwards … to exhale, speak freely." He went on to explain that this sharing and collaboration becomes part of the organizational culture. Participant 5 shared that when promoting sharing and collaboration "you've got to build a culture of creating some vulnerability, people being vulnerable and allowing it, creating that safe space." Participant 7 added that she encourages sharing by "highlighting that learning is success," so when team members learn something new, they are expected to "teach everyone else."

Artifacts used to triangulate the theme were provided via email by Participants 1, 2, 4, and 5. Examples included meeting agendas that were structured to engage in sharing and reflection through collaborative conversations.

Using Intentional Processes and Practices

The second highest theme referenced by participants in response to institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning was using intentional processes and

practices. This theme had 25 frequencies from interviews and nine frequencies from artifacts for a total frequency count of 34, representing 27.9% of the data coded for the variable. All 10 special education directors described the various processes and practices used to create a culture of reflection and learning. Protected time surfaced as an intentional strategy supportive of institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning. Participant 2 discussed how time is protected to reflect whether it be after a contentious IEP meeting or during a staff meeting:

> I like to have staffings, especially when the IEPs don't go well. It's not just, it's gone, it's done. It's okay, this is where we're at, and what are some things, how did that look? What maybe didn't feel good? What can we work through? Can we schedule another meeting and try to remedy that? … It's the need to reflect. I also like to do that in staff meetings. What are we rock stars at? What are the seeds, but then what are our barriers? Let's reflect on last year and go, okay, what were our barriers to inclusion? Let's brainstorm. Let's take half an hour. Let's talk in small groups. Let's sort through so that we can reflect.

Participant 5 said, "I mean it sounds so simple, but I think the first step is creating time." Participant 5 noted that through an exploration of high-performing educational systems, a common characteristic is "embedded time" for professional learning. Participant 10 also concurred that time is an anchor point for institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning and indicated that a strategy used is advance calendaring in the summer.

> Participant 4 described routines used in meetings that allow for reflection:
>
> We open our meetings, we always reflect on, tell me something good that's happened at work or that's happening in your personal life. And it's twofold. It's

> reflection on the week. And it's also just to build relationships. We get to know each other, and it's not always just work. Another thing that we do as part of our meeting is when we're talking about cases we have a program specialist present a case to the team, and then we give suggestions and ideas.

Participant 5 revealed structures that support reflection and continuous learning were cycles of continual improvement and indicated that "if we didn't quite meet this goal, lets restructure and create another goal, always focusing on the outcome." Participant 1 leveraged the evaluation process but stated, "I've gone rogue, and I asked three questions that forces them to reflect what went great, what are some things you want to change, and what are some goals you have?" Participant 8 sent a survey to inquire about topics of interest based on personal reflection.

The nine collected artifacts that triangulated the data revealed during the interviews included various meeting agendas outlining time set aside for individual and group reflection. The System Design Plan submitted by Participant 5 outlined a commitment to a "comprehensive district-wide system of continuous improvement based on inquiry, reflection, and change with clear expectations."

Modeling Reflective Practices as a Leader

The third highest theme referenced by participants in response to institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning was modeling reflective practices as a leader. It was mentioned by nine of the 10 special education directors. This theme had 28 frequencies from interviews and two frequencies from artifacts for a total frequency count of 30, representing 24.6% of the data coded for the variable. Reflective practices modeled by the special education directors were both personal and professional. Participant 6

described the personal activities he engages in to reflect on his success as a leader, which included physical exercise, spiritual connection, and long drives between work and home to create a healthy boundary: "Having time to reflect on how I would approach different situations has really helped me grow in terms of my overall development." He vulnerably shared with his team to model the importance of reflection and self-care.

Commonalities discussed by special education directors revealed acts of reflection. Participant 9 shared, "Everything I do, I constantly think about how it came out, how people responded to it, could I have done it differently?" Participant 4 posed similar reflective questions: "How do I move my team forward? What are our needs?" Participant 1 indicated, "I share my own personal reflections with my team. I'll say, I've thought about this, and I reflect, I try to model what it looks like." Participant 2 agreed about the need to reflect and noted, "I'm very open about the areas that I need to improve on too."

Participant 10 explained how the changing educational culture substantiates the need for modeled reflection as a leader:

> [Institutionalizing reflection] that's a big, big shift because our generations of people who are in the classroom … we grew up in rows and columns with compliant students. And so, you do what you experienced. We've moved into a lot of scientific understanding that learning is a process that is evolving, that it is more about doing rather than receiving, especially as we have lived through a technology revolution. A lot of times students don't know their multiplication tables. Well, neither do I, but I can certainly ask "Siri, what's 8 times 7?" And she'll tell me. And so, we have to learn how to use our resources more than be the

> resource. I think modeling that it starts with that, that you share, you talk about how to think aloud in the classroom, but as a leader you have to think aloud. I read this book, I read this article, I've been grappling with this. I think that is a starting point. And then sharing, here's some areas that I need some partnership that I'd like to work on together.

Engaging in Professional Learning Opportunities

The theme with the lowest frequency count for institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning was engaging in professional learning opportunities. This theme had 20 frequencies from interviews and three frequencies from artifacts, for a total frequency count of 23. All 10 participants shared that engagement in professional learning contributed to building a culture of reflection and continuous learning as a leadership characteristic. Participant 6 shared how he prioritizes professional learning:

> I bring updated research articles and I have individuals read that information so that they can gain a perspective of where special education is going or where this particular topic has come from. Having that understanding and that professional outlook in regard to the current problems not only diminishes the problem as this is our problem, but it also, it makes it more of a global problem. We also bring in professional developers related to different topics of leadership, and we're just trying to understand how to essentially change our character and/or harness aspects of our character to create a more driven leadership team.

Similarly, Participant 9 shared that within her organization, accessing professional learning is modeled and supported:

> I feel like from our superintendent down, when you see people who are constantly involved in professional development, growing, learning, reading, that trickles down. Personally, for myself, I've gone to this training to learn more about this area. Being able to provide those opportunities to have trainings or meetings to be able to follow up with what they want to learn more about and just making sure that it's constantly happening throughout the year and that those opportunities are meaningful to them.

Participants 3 and 10 used a less formalized approach to obtaining professional learning and encouraged learning through any venue based on topic of interest. Participant 10 shared that she passes along opportunities for learning, such as saying "hey, here's a book club; here's some articles; here's somethings to think about." Participant 10 went on to say that "'I didn't know' is not an acceptable response for a team member, so providing opportunities to learn is part of leadership growth and development." Participant 3 explained, "I do try to encourage if there's an area that you haven't explore before, to try it … because that's continuous learning that is going to impact students."

Participant 4 discussed how accessing professional development institutionalizes continuous learning in her organization. As an example, she shared that they use team watch parties for Zoom-based professional development that "gives us time for reflection so that we're able to use it in real time." Participant 4 also intentionally used reflection and sharing after attending conferences such as Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) to share "what we've learned and how it ties into the work that we are doing."

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). The sample of 10 special education directors from Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino counties was identified using purposeful and convenience sampling methods by which recommendations were sought through the SELPA Administrators of California email listserv. Each of the participating special education directors met the eligibility criteria for the study. Semistructured interviews aligned to each of the five research subquestions and corresponding collected artifacts comprised the qualitative data collection that resulted in the findings for the study.

The data collection produced 520 individual frequency counts, which included 451 frequencies resulting from interviews and 69 frequencies resulting from collected artifacts. The coded data were sorted based upon emerging patterns and themes by research question. From the analyzed data, 22 total themes emerged for the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership. Five themes each emerged for the variables of making naming elephants in the room the norm and developing leadership capacity. The remaining three key characteristics (nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning) each had four themes identified. Making naming elephants in the room the norm had the highest frequency count as a variable and represented 24.2% of the total data collection. The variable with the lowest frequency count was encouraging independent judgment, which represented 16.3% of the total data collection. Table 9

shows the total frequency count and total frequency percentage for each of the 22 themes presented in descending order.

The top 10 themes based on a frequency equal to or greater than 5% of the total data collected yielded two themes in response to Research Question 1, two themes for Research Question 2, two themes for Research Question 3, one theme for Research Question 4, and three themes for Research Question 5. Two of the top 10 themes were centered on strategies that emphasized creating opportunity for contribution, and an additional two of the top 10 themes were centered on strategies that highlighted autonomy and independent decision making. Each of the top 10 themes were referenced by at least 90% of the study's participants, had a total frequency count of 25 or more, and were triangulated by a minimum of one artifact. Expanding to the entire list of 22 themes, three themes centered specifically on relationships, two were specific to professional learning opportunities, and two were focused on the use of intentional processes, and as previously noted, two were centered on opportunity for contribution and two were focused on autonomy and independent decision making. Using the parameters surfaced by the top 10 themes from Table 9 (5% of total data collection, 90% of study participant responses, 25 frequencies or more, and minimum of one artifact), nine key findings resulted when combining overlapping themes from the research questions. Table 10 provides the key findings along with the aligned research question and total frequency percentage.

Table 9

Overview of Frequencies for Themes

Theme	Research question	Characteristic	Frequency	
			Total	%
Establishing trust through physical and psychological safety	1	Making elephants in the room the norm	41	7.9
Creating opportunities for input and feedback	2	Nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization	39	7.5
Creating opportunities for sharing and collaboration	5	Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning	35	6.7
Using intentional processes and practices	5	Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning	34	6.5
Modeling reflective practices as a leader	5	Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning	30	5.8
Building capacity for independent decision making	3	Encouraging independent judgment	29	5.6
Engaging in open and honest communication	1	Making elephants in the room the norm	28	5.4
Fostering relationships and team commitment	2	Nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization	27	5.2
Promoting autonomy and decision-making authority	3	Encouraging independent judgment	27	5.2
Providing mentoring and coaching support	4	Developing leadership capacity	26	5.0
Gaining perspective and understanding	1	Making elephants in the room the norm	23	4.4
Engaging in professional learning opportunities	5	Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning	23	4.4
Creating opportunities to lead others	4	Developing leadership capacity	22	4.2
Building collaborative relationships	4	Developing leadership capacity	19	3.7
Developing relationships	1	Making elephants in the room the norm	18	3.5
Empowering problem solving	3	Encouraging independent judgment	18	3.5
Empowering shared ownership	2	Nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization	17	3.3

Table 9 (*continued*)

Theme	Research question	Characteristic	Frequency	
			Total	%
Using intentional meeting structures and processes	1	Making elephants in the room the norm	16	3.1
Providing access to professional learning	4	Developing leadership capacity	14	2.7
Providing support, not solutions	2	Nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization	12	2.3
Embracing mistakes as growth opportunities	3	Encouraging independent judgment	11	2.1
Identifying and leveraging strengths	4	Developing leadership capacity	11	2.1

Table 10

Key Findings of the Study

Theme	Research question alignment	Frequency total	Frequency %
Creating opportunities for contribution	2, 5	74	14.2
Building relationships	1, 2, 4	64	12.3
Promoting autonomy and independent decision making	3	56	10.8
Using intentional processes and practices	1, 5	50	9.6
Establishing trust through physical and psychological safety	1	41	7.9
Engaging in professional learning	4, 5	37	7.1
Modeling reflective practices as a leader	5	30	5.8
Engaging in open and honest communication	1	28	5.4
Providing mentoring and coaching support	4	26	5.0

In Chapter IV, the study's purpose, central research question, research subquestions, methodology, population, sampling frame, and sample were reviewed. The process of data collection and analysis was described. Aggregate demographic information was presented representative of the study's participants. The collected data were presented by research question through narration and frequency tables. A summary of the data with key findings concluded the chapter. In Chapter V, an overview of the major findings is reviewed in addition to the conclusion, implications for action, and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted by a thematic team of nine peer researchers to identify and describe the strategies used by leaders to build an adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics of adaptive leadership. The population of leaders for this study was specific to special education directors, and data collected from the 10 semistructured interviews and 14 artifacts were presented and summarized in Chapter IV. Chapter V provides a final summary of the research study and includes the purpose statement, research questions, methodology, population, and sample. Additionally, Chapter V reveals the major and unexpected findings of the study, conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for future research. Final remarks and reflection conclude the chapter.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What strategies do special education directors use to build an organization's adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics (making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the

organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning)?

Research Subquestions

1. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through making naming elephants in the room the norm?
2. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization?
3. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through encouraging independent judgment?
4. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through developing leadership capacity?
5. How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning?

Methodology

A research design refers to the approach used by the researcher to collect and analyze data aligned with the study's purpose and research questions (Patten & Newhart, 2018). To identify and describe the strategies used by organizational leaders to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009), the nine peer researchers and three faculty advisors determined that a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach was most appropriate to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of organizational leaders. Qualitative research uses subjectivity and context to analyze words and themes when exploring aspects of the unknown (Patten & Newhart, 2018). A phenomenological

approach provides the opportunity for the researcher to understand the meaning and interpretation of an individual's lived experience (Patton, 2015). This methodology allowed the peer researchers to gain insight into effective strategies for capacity building through the collection of rich details, perspectives, and reflection of the participants.

For this study, 10 one-on-one semistructured, open-ended interviews were conducted to gain insight into the various strategies used by special education directors to build organizational adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five adaptive leadership characteristics. Participants were provided with the informed consent form (Appendix D), the UMass Global Participant's Bill of Rights (Appendix E), and the study's definitions and interview questions (Appendix F). The interview protocol (Appendix H) comprised questions to obtain demographic information, 10 interview questions, and nine prompts. General probing questions were used as appropriate to solicit additional or clarifying information. The interviews were conducted using the Zoom virtual platform.

In addition to the data collected through interviews, artifacts relevant to the information gathered during the interviews were collected via email for data triangulation. Intercoder reliability was established for 10% of the data collected using a peer researcher who substantiated a minimum of 80% agreement on data coding.

Population

A population is a group of individuals who share a common set of characteristics that allows a researcher to generalize the results of a study (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). In this study, the population included special education directors serving California public schools. A special education director is defined as the educational

administrator responsible and accountable for the special education department and the provision of special education services for students with disabilities within a unified public school district. In the 2021–2022 school year, there were 19,269 public school districts of which each had a responsible leader over special education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). For feasibility to conduct the study, the population was narrowed to California public schools. Of the 1,018 public school districts reported by the California Department of Education (n.d.-b) during the 2022–2023 school year, 345 were unified. The 345 special education directors serving unified public schools within California were determined to be the population for the study.

Because of the complexity of reaching all 345 participants for the study, a sampling frame was defined. A sampling frame further narrows characteristics of the population for relevance and feasibility while maintaining alignment with the overall population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten & Newhart, 2018). The sampling frame for this study was special education directors serving unified public school districts in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino counties in California. According to Education Data Partnership (2022), there were 80 special education directors in the sampling frame.

Sample

A nonprobability purposeful and convenience sampling technique was used to select the 10 participants from the sampling frame. Participant eligibility was determined using delimitations identified by the thematic research team in addition to criteria unique to this study. Eligible participants were special education directors in either Los Angeles, Orange, or San Bernardino counties who did not have the title or duties of a Special

Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) administrator and who met four of the following six delimitation criteria identified by the thematic researchers and supporting faculty:

1. They have shown evidence of successful relationships with stakeholders.
2. They have shown evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success.
3. They have had 5 or more years of experience in the profession or field.
4. They have had articles written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings.
5. They have been recognized by their peers.
6. They have held memberships in associations or groups focused on their field.

Using SELPA directors as experts in the field of special education for nominations and recommendations, the special education directors who met the study's criteria were selected.

Major Findings

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) key characteristics of adaptive leadership. Research subquestions were identified for each of the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership: making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning. Data collected from the interviews and artifacts were analyzed in Chapter IV and resulted in 22 themes and nine key findings. The major findings

identified were based on the alignment of data collection from this study, previous research studies, and a review of literature. The seven major findings are presented next.

Major Finding 1 for Research Subquestion 1

Research Subquestion 1: *How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through making naming elephants in the room the norm?*

Major Finding 1: *Special education directors make naming elephants in the room the norm by using intentional processes and practices that establish trust through psychological and physical safety and are built upon open and honest communication.*

The special education directors in this study described the importance of trust in creating safe environments to engage in honest conversations about sensitive issues. Recognizing that trust was a foundation for safety, nine of the 10 special education directors provided examples of how they established trust through being present, transparent, and responsive; creating time and space for conversations; getting to know individuals on a personal level; and responding readily to concerns. To address potential barriers impeding organizational success, all 10 participants identified intentional processes and practices that were used to create an environment conducive for vulnerability. These included establishment of a shared value system, upholding of community agreements and meeting norms, collaborative agenda development, individual and group meetings, professional learning, and avenues to address concerns and issues readily. Strategies described in this study closely aligned to those identified by Klonsky (2010) who examined adaptive leadership in the context of undiscussables.

Baker (2004), Klonsky (2010), and Toegel and Barsoux (2019) identified the lack of trust as detrimental to organizational success. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) contributed that "in the absence of trust, people are cautious, they are unwilling to take risks, and they demand greater protection" (p. 185). Further, Heifetz (1994) asserted that without trust, there is a reduced capacity to face difficult adaptive challenges. By identifying trust as a major component in having open and honest conversations, special education directors can create the conditions required for team members to work through organizational barriers.

The findings of this study support those of Detert and Burris (2007) who concluded that a safe psychological climate is important when asking employees to voice opinions. Patterson et al. (2012) also identified building safety as a key aspect of engaging in crucial conversations. In alignment with the strategies identified by the special education directors to address sensitive issues, research studies have found that openness for change, honesty, and a willingness to act on input were important behavioral characteristics of leaders when establishing a safe environment (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Klonsky, 2010).

Major Finding 2 for Research Subquestion 2

Research Subquestion 2: *How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization?*

Major Finding 2: *Special education directors nurture a shared responsibility for the organization and foster collective ownership by providing opportunities for team members to frequently contribute input and feedback.*

All 10 of the special education directors discussed ways in which they create opportunities for team members to provide input and feedback to elicit shared ownership, responsibility, and accountability over the organization's goals and outcomes. By using data sharing, technology applications, agenda development, and formal and informal meeting structures, team members had substantial opportunities through a variety of means to contribute their perspectives, ideas, and concerns for the organization, thus leading to shared responsibility of outcomes and collective decision making.

Harris (2008) explained that organizational development occurs using distributed leadership when opportunities exist for team members to "collaborate and actively engage in change" (p. 176). Active engagement involves responsibility of task, involvement in decision making, and contribution of thought (Harris, 2008; Kocolowski, 2010). Tremblay et al. (2016) added that engagement in shared leadership involves mutual lateral influence among team members that is accomplished through collaborative, collective, and coordinated sharing. Kezar (1998) found that when diverse opinions and opportunities for sharing are absent, teams defaulted to group think, a phenomenon resulting in poor decision-making outcomes. Heifetz and Laurie (1997) concurred that protecting all voices allows for adaptive challenges to surface and organizations to grow. The special education directors revealed the importance of hearing all voices to nurture a shared responsibility for the organization's outcomes and to promote effective decision making for the organization. Participant 9 stated, "We talk openly to take ownership of what is doable and what is challenging, personal and professional. Everyone has a voice and opportunity to provide input. Our goals are collective. Our outcomes shared."

Major Finding 3 for Research Subquestion 3

Research Subquestion 3: *How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through encouraging independent judgment?*

Major Finding 3: *Through the intentional promotion of decision-making autonomy and authority, special education directors encourage independent judgment and build adaptive capacity.*

The strategy of promoting autonomy and authority for independent decision making was described by all 10 special education directors. Special education directors demonstrated support of team members' independent judgment by embracing mistakes without consequence, providing structures to build knowledge and capacity, empowering individual problem solving, checking in on progress and outcomes of decisions, and demonstrating consistent support and trust. Using these strategies to provide autonomy and authority to team members, special education directors embraced Heifetz and Laurie's (1997) concept of "give the work back to the people" (p. 129).

According to Ahakwa et al. (2021), autonomy, which includes independence, self-determination, self-motivation, and decision making, had a positive impact on organizational commitment and responsibility. Chen et al. (2007) found that autonomy and involvement in decision making led to increased performance and empowerment of leadership. Bereel (2009) described the partnership between leadership and authority and stated that "leaders need authority to influence, motivate, and mobilize others" (p. 118). Through the promotion of autonomy and authority in decision making, special education directors have built adaptive capacity by providing team members the independence to build influence, garner respect, and develop critical thinking, all characteristics identified

in the literature as effective leadership skills (Beerel, 2009; Chen et al., 2007; Harris, 2008).

Major Finding 4 for Research Subquestion 4

Research Subquestion 4: *How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through developing leadership capacity?*

Major Finding 4: *Special education directors develop leadership capacity in their teams by encouraging engagement in professional learning and growth activities, which include mentoring and coaching supports.*

All 10 special education directors acknowledged the importance of developing leadership capacity among team members and recognized their role in supporting future educational leaders. By establishing mentorship and coaching relationships and encouraging knowledge and skill development, the study's participants intentionally supported the development of team members, encouraged career exploration and advancement, and created opportunities for leadership experiences through leveraging strengths and interests.

The special education directors provided a variety of strategies for use when engaging in a supportive mentorship or coaching relationship with a team member to develop leadership capacity. These included asking probing questions to elicit knowledge, curiosity, and reflection; being transparent about job demands; providing literature on leadership development to build knowledge; giving relevant feedback for growth; and assigning responsibilities to expand skills. These strategies are consistent with literature that focused on leadership development through coaching support (Owens & Valesky, 2011; Yarborough, 2018). Kouzes and Posner (2017) highlighted the

significance of coaching as a strategy for leadership development. Effective coaches ask questions, give feedback, provide challenging assignments while offering support, show respect and trust, and are steadfast in motivation and belief (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Owens & Valesky, 2011). Participants also identified mentorship as a strategy to develop leaders. Zeng et al. (2020) indicated that mentorship provides team members "with challenging work, social support, and relationship safety" while sharing knowledge and skills (p. 2). Zeng et al. concluded that mentors have great influence and impact on team member career performance and help to build confidence during times of uncertainty. Participant responses corroborated the findings from Zeng et al. (2020) by demonstrating the impact special education directors have on developing leadership capacity when engaging in mentoring, coaching, and promoting professional learning and growth activities.

Major Finding 5 for Research Subquestion 5

Research Subquestion 5: *How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning?*

Major Finding 5: *Special education directors institutionalize reflection and continuous learning by establishing a culture of growth through modeling reflective practices.*

The special education directors described modeling reflective practices as a strategy by which they institutionalized reflection and continuous learning. Nine of the 10 participants shared examples of modeling reflection to build a culture of growth within the organization. Participants modeled reflection through personal engagement of

activities (exercise, spiritual connection, journaling, long drives, etc.) and through professional activities (structured agendas, norm setting, debrief meetings, etc.). Reflection has been considered a core element of effective leadership and learning (Densten & Gray, 2001; Jordan et al., 2009; Senge et al., 2015). Leaders who use reflection examine actions and decisions of the past, present, and future (Jordan et al., 2009). Reflection considers various perspectives and provides opportunities for transformation (Jordan et al., 2009; Senge, 1990). According to Matsuo (2016), reflection among teams should occur within a safe environment and be goal based to best facilitate learning. Special education directors shared a common commitment to cultivating a culture of reflection through the examination of their own practices.

Major Finding 6 for Research Subquestion 5

Research Subquestion 5: *How do special education directors build an organization's adaptive capacity through institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning?*

Major Finding 6: *Special education directors who institutionalize reflection and continuous learning through the facilitation of shared learning and collaboration establish a culture of growth and build adaptive capacity.*

All 10 participants described how they facilitate shared learning and collaboration to institutionalize reflection and continuous learning. Using strategies that encourage team members to share experiences and knowledge among each other, they cultivated a commitment to growth. Research studies have shown that sharing and collaboration are essential aspects of continuous learning within an organization (Ahakwa et al., 2021; Senge, 1990; Wheatley, 2005). Yukl and Lepsinger (2002) stated that a successful

organization's "resources are invested in promoting learning at all levels" (p. 173). Kouzes and Posner (2002) contributed that "strengthening others requires that leaders provide a climate that is conducive to learning" (p. 309). Special education directors described specific opportunities for sharing and collaboration as structuring meeting agendas to include team learning and sharing, having team members present key learning from training, and offering study sessions for skill building and leadership development. These broad strategies identified by the participants support the findings within the literature that promote organizational success through reflection and continuous learning (Ahakwa et al., 2021; Beerel, 2009; Heifetz et al., 2009; Senge et al., 2015; Sessa & London, 2015).

Additional Major Finding 7

Major Finding 7: *Special education directors build adaptive capacity by fostering relationship building within and across the organization.*

During the coding process, the concept of building relationships was revealed from multiple research questions. All 10 participants identified the importance of relationships as an essential strategy for building adaptive capacity within the organization. When combining frequencies from the research questions and themes, there were 64 instances in which building relationships were referenced, representing 12.3% of the total data collected, thus making it an additional major finding. Participants shared that relationships are foundational to adaptive work in that they provide the trust, respect, and safety required to lean into challenging situations and circumstances. Examples were provided that demonstrated relationship building was both strategic and informal. Special education directors described structured relationship-building activities during meetings

to breakdown silos and create a culture of safety and collaboration as well as unstructured activities for getting to know the individual beyond the job role. Participants shared that relationships were built within the special education team, with the district office team, at school sites, with parents, and within the community. They reported that each of these relationships proved critical for organizational success.

Relationships are at the core of many leadership models. Relevant to this study, transformational leadership, servant leadership, situational leadership, crisis leadership, and adaptive leadership all place significant emphasis on the relationships developed between leader and follower (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Hayashi & Soo, 2012; Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2016). Hayashi and Soo (2012) indicated that established relationships are sustained through crisis events as a result of trust and safety. Research studies have confirmed the importance of trust in building and maintaining relationships (James & Wooten, 2004; Northouse, 2016; Weymes, 2002). Seven participants mentioned trust as a component of building relationships. Weymes (2002) found that relationships built through shared leadership are the catalyst to "sustainable and successful organisations" because they value individual commitment and establish a supportive environment in which people exist (p. 331).

Unexpected Findings

There were two unexpected findings identified from this research study. The first unexpected finding was from the variation among the participants in response to Interview Question 7 that explored the adaptive leadership characteristic of developing leadership capacity. This interview question asked participants to identify important leadership competencies focused on within their organization for developing leaders.

Northouse (2016) explained the conceptualization of leadership by trait, behavior, information processing, or relation. Leadership has also been described as sophisticated and complex with many different approaches and practices (Northouse, 2016). In this study, each participant shared, with minimal duplication in words and phrases chosen, their perception of the important leadership competencies focused on within their organization to develop leadership. Although each leadership competency identified is important to leadership development, the lack of duplication among the participants was unexpected, given the congruence of strategies identified to build adaptive capacity as evidenced by the major themes and key findings. I did not pursue inquiry into the description of each of the identified competencies to examine whether the phrases and words chosen had similar defining attributes. The competencies identified for developing leadership by each participant are as follows:

- Participant 1 identified integrity, student focus, and honesty.
- Participant 2 identified shared values, effective communicator, and relational connections.
- Participant 3 identified effective decision making and consistent behavior.
- Participant 4 identified relational trust and collaboration.
- Participant 5 identified listening, collaboration, and continuous learning.
- Participant 6 identified servant leadership and building relationships.
- Participant 7 identified social skills and building community.
- Participant 8 identified problem solving and good decision making.
- Participant 9 identified self-confidence and foundational knowledge.
- Participant 10 identified finding connections and your why.

The second unexpected finding was the lack of COVID-19 language referenced in participant responses to the interview questions. Given the significance of the pandemic endured and the resulting impact on public education, it was expected that the participants would have referred to the lived experiences throughout that time when addressing adaptive leadership strategies. The delivery of special education services and support during school closures and subsequent reopenings required educational leaders to adapt to the changing circumstances and address the profound impact on students with disabilities caused by the ramifications of a global pandemic (Hoofman & Secord, 2021; Tarkar, 2020). Components of adaptive leadership have been shown as essential and effective strategies that educational leaders employed to endure the COVID-19 pandemic (Crane, 2022; Fraker Bonow, 2022; Leitzke, 2022; Lombardi, 2022; Shaw, 2022; Urick et al., 2021).

Conclusions

The major findings of this study, in conjunction with supporting literature, were used to form conclusions for the strategies used by special education directors to build adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). The five key characteristics include making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning. The six conclusions are discussed in the following sections.

Conclusion 1: Establishing Trust Through Psychological and Physical Safety

Based on the findings of this study and a review of the literature, it is concluded that special education directors who build psychological and physical safety establish the

key adaptive capacity of trust in their teams and organization. According to Edmondson et al. (2004), "Psychological safety describes individuals' perceptions about the consequences of interpersonal risks in the work environment" (p. 4). When individuals feel safe, they are more willing to take risks, change behavior, and expose their true self to the organization. Concepts of team psychological safety presented by Edmondson et al. and reiterated in the work of Baker (2004) expressed that shared values, experiences, and goals provide for higher levels of safety in the group context and facilitate learning. Detert and Burris (2007) and Patterson (2003) further contributed that psychological safety was essential to hear all voices in the room. The participants identified that safety was a foundation for trust building and described establishing safety through individual check-ins, team meetings, connection activities, and meeting norms.

Participants identified that trust was necessary for addressing sensitive issues and organizational barriers. Participants made it clear that without trust, difficult conversations were unproductive and ineffective in changing outcomes. Trust addresses an individual's vulnerability in a relationship and is predicated on the communication of "benevolence, reliability, competence, integrity, openness, and respect" (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008, p. 33). Without psychological safety and trust, organizational success is at risk because people are less likely to engage in adaptive work (Baker, 2004; Heifetz, 1994; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran; 1999; Klonsky, 2010).

Conclusion 2: Sharing Work With Input and Feedback

Based on the interviews from participants and a review of the literature, it is concluded that when special education directors share the responsibility of work by allowing team members to provide input and feedback, the resulting collective ownership

creates adaptive capacity. Participants described examples that align to concepts of distributive and shared leadership, such as seeking input for the development of goals, assignments, meeting agendas, projects, and presentations. Further, participants shared that they provide opportunities for critical feedback and collective decision making, noting that these strategies in combination foster collective ownership. Distributive leadership occurs through thoughtful facilitation and support by leaders in which leadership is distributed among team members for collaboration, shared accountability, and shared commitment to organizational outcomes (Beerel, 2009; Harris, 2008). Contribution is an expectation for all team members (Harris, 2008). Similarly, shared leadership provides a team dynamic with shared voice, connection, and influence (Kocolowski, 2010). Within a complex system of distributive leadership, a hierarchical leadership structure is flattened, and interactions among team members influence practices and decision making (Harris, 2008; Hoch, 2014; Kocolowski, 2010). By leveraging team member influence through a shared and collaborative leadership approach, special education directors can foster a shared responsibility for the organization's goals and outcomes.

Conclusion 3: Providing Autonomy and Authority for Decision Making

Based on the findings of this study and a review of the literature, it is concluded that special education directors who provide autonomy and authority for decision making are more likely to create ownership and develop their team's adaptive capacity. Participants all agreed that autonomy and authoritative permission to make decisions was a critical aspect to building leadership and adaptive capacity. To promote these leadership skills, participants encouraged risk taking, built foundational knowledge for special

education regulations and practices, and empowered problem solving. They also saw the importance of simultaneously creating systems of safety and exercising consistent trust when promoting decision-making autonomy. These strategies are aligned to those identified by Beerel (2009) and Heifetz et al. (2009) as supportive of encouraging independent judgment.

Independent decision making has been shown to positively increase performance (Chen et al., 2007), job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization (Ahakwa et al., 2021). Further, when afforded autonomy, team members display increased responsiveness and a greater willingness to engage in shared leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Thus, by promoting autonomy and authority for decision making, special education directors are building adaptive capacity within the organization.

Conclusion 4: Encouraging Growth Through Mentorship and Coaching

Based on the findings of this study and a review of the literature, it is concluded that special education directors build adaptive capacity by developing leadership capacity through coaching and mentorship that encourage personal and professional growth. All 10 participants shared that through this personalized relationship with team members, they encouraged knowledge-based capacity building, explored career pathway goals, and identified strengths that could be used for experiential learning. Using coaching skills, the participants focused on developing leadership capacity in team members that aligned to organizational needs and personal aspirations. Participants concurred that developing leaders was essential for the future of education.

Mentorship and coaching have been identified as effective techniques to develop leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Owens & Valesky, 2011; Zeng et al., 2020). This

relationship affords connection, safety, and support while providing influence, knowledge, and guidance during trying times (Zeng et al., 2020). By using coaching and mentorship as a strategy to develop leadership capacity in team members, special education directors are directly influencing the growth of team members, strengthening the depth of leadership within their current team, and also planning for the future to ensure that the public school system has a pipeline of highly effective leaders.

Conclusion 5: Modeling Practices for Reflection and Learning

Based on the findings of this study and a review of the literature, it is concluded that special education directors who model practices of reflection and learning build an organizational culture that facilitates growth and adaptive capacity. Participants demonstrated value in personal and team reflection. By engaging in self-reflective activities and holding space for team reflection, numerous opportunities were presented to team members to learn and grow from each other. Participants also expressed value in the facilitation of learning as a mechanism for personal and professional growth. Participants collectively encouraged prioritization and access to training by leveraging both internal and external opportunities for professional development.

Reflection and learning are seen as essential components of leadership development (Densten & Gray, 2001; Jordan et al., 2009; Senge et al., 2015) and are critical to the concept of adaptation (Beerel, 2009). Adaptive capacity is enhanced by learning and is built through experience, reflection, and creativity (Beerel, 2009). Organizational outcomes are improved when new skills are acquired, challenging current practices, mindsets, and behaviors (Ahakwa et al., 2021; Moore, 2023). By identifying the significance of creating a culture of growth within their departments, special

education directors are intentional about modeling reflective and learning practices to build adaptive capacity in response to the unpredictable and ever-changing variables in special education.

Conclusion 6: Building Strong Relationships to Endure Challenges

Based on the findings of this study and a review of the literature, it is concluded that special education directors who place significant emphasis on relationship building within the organization build adaptive capacity while developing connections to endure challenging times. Participants recognized the value of fostering relationships to establish trust, commitment, and growth. Relationships were built through formal and informal opportunities, and participants acknowledged that personal connection was a critical component of a strong relationship. When faced with uncertainty or challenge, participants described that the ease in which difficult conversations were held was dependent on the relationship with the individual. This sentiment supports the findings from Hayashi and Soo (2012) and James and Wooten (2004) who emphasized the value of relationships in overcoming crisis. Adversity is easier to navigate when there is established connection, trust, respect, and security by leaders (Roth, 2022).

Fullan (2001) indicated that relationships are essential to organizational adaptation and stated, "If relationships improve, things get better. If they remain the same or get worse, ground is lost. Thus, effective school leaders must be consummate relationship builders with diverse people and groups" (p. 5). DiPaola et al. (2004) noted that "cultivating good working relationships" among educators, families, and the community is a core value of successfully serving students with disabilities (p. 7). The participants recognized the importance and implications of building relationships in the

many facets of organizational success (Bass & Riggio, 2006; DiPaola et al., 2004; Fullan, 2001; Hayashi & Soo, 2012; Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2016).

Implications for Action

This study described the strategies used by special education directors to build adaptive capacity based on Heifetz et al.'s (2009) five key characteristics of adaptive leadership. The major findings affirmed that key common strategies were used among the participants to support building adaptive capacity within their respective unified school districts. Adaptive leadership strategies are critical in supporting a leader's effective response to changing circumstances and mobilizing team members toward shared ownership of outcomes (Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). The implications for action in this phenomenological study are based on the findings and conclusions. The following implications for action have the potential to positively support special education directors to build organizational adaptive capacity and become successful and effective leaders.

Implication 1: Adaptive Capacity Building by District Leadership

A school district's success starts at the top. District leadership teams need to engage in learning about adaptive leadership strategies as an effective response to the "new realities, opportunities, and pressures" of public education (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 17). Heifetz and Linsky (2002) recognized the effectiveness of adaptive leadership for educational organizations. Recent research studies have corroborated their assertion and demonstrated that adaptive leadership proved effective on the challenges faced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Crane, 2022; Fraker Bonow, 2022; Leitzke, 2022; Shaw, 2022) and further revealed effectiveness on systems reform (Solomona Nebiyu & Kassahun,

2021; Wool, 2014). County offices of education, SELPAs, and district leaders should engage in book studies with Heifetz et al.'s (2009) *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*. Once a foundation of adaptive leadership is built by leaders in these settings, they need to identify best practices of common strategies to be used across all five of Heifetz et al.'s key characteristics of adaptive leadership and document the strategies in a plan that is presented to all leaders within their organization. These strategies will support building adaptive capacity and organizational success through collective ownership and effort.

Implication 2: Training on Effective Coaching Strategies

Based on this study's findings and conclusions, mentorship and coaching are strategies used by special education directors to develop leadership capacity in others. Research has also supported the use of coaching as an effective leadership strategy (Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Owens & Valesky, 2011). Because administrative credentialing programs do not include training on effective coaching, special education directors are left to acquire training outside of a program. To ensure special education directors are using highly effective coaching skills with fidelity, county offices of education, SELPAs, and school districts need to provide training opportunities on how to become an effective coach. There are many reputable programs available, both in person and online. The coaching program offered to the special education director should include direct instruction, guided practice, feedback, and opportunities for reflection. Engagement in the coaching program by special education directors should not be optional and should be retaken every 5 years for competency development.

Implication 3: Mentors for New Special Education Directors

Because of the significant demands and uniqueness of the position, special education directors should have access to a mentor during the first 2 years in the position. Mentors should be provided by the county offices of education, SELPAs, or school districts and identified collaboratively with the special education director. New leaders can often feel isolated, lost, overwhelmed, and ineffective, all contributors to burn out and job dissatisfaction (Hussey et al., 2019). Instability in the special education director position can have negative impacts on staff retention and student outcomes (Lombardi, 2022; Moore, 2023). Mentorship can provide the new special education director the opportunity to connect, collaborate, and calibrate. It can further support developing effective leadership strategies and enhance the characteristics exemplified within adaptive leadership—addressing sensitive issues, developing shared leadership, encouraging independent decision making, building leadership capacity, and creating a culture of growth through reflection and learning. According to Taylor (2022), special education directors identified mentorship as a benefit to leadership development. When districts prioritize the success of special education directors, "It conveys a powerful message regarding the importance that district leadership places on services for students with disabilities" (DiPaola et al., 2004, p. 8).

Implication 4: Learning Competencies for Administrative Credentials

Taylor (2020) established the inadequacy of administrative credentialing preparation programs for special education directors. Because there is not a separate credential, the pathway to become a special education director is the same as that of a general education administrator. The programs largely focus on generalized leadership,

curriculum and instructional practices, and high-leverage learning strategies (Campanotta et al., 2018). This leaves significant gaps in knowledge and skill for those pursuing a path of special education leadership. To address this gap, administrative credential programs need to build out professional learning standards and corresponding learning modules specific to special education law, disability awareness, inclusive environments, and research-based practices to address unique learning and behavior (DiPaola et al., 2004). Additionally, in support of this study's conclusions, administrative credentialing programs need to strategically address adaptive leadership and the key characteristics significant to building adaptive capacity. By adding these additional learning standards, all aspiring administrators will benefit from the collective knowledge gained to support the success of all students by promoting an inclusive school culture while enhancing their abilities to collaborate between general education and special education. Further, it is essential to equip new educational leaders with adaptive leadership skills because the landscape of education continues to change, necessitating new leadership responses for success (Shaw, 2022).

Implication 5: Networks for Reflection and Continuous Learning

Research studies have shown that collaboration among peers was found to be beneficial to special education directors (Taylor, 2020; Veale, 2010). Therefore, collaborative networks should be established by county offices of education or multidistrict SELPAs to create cohorts of special education directors to learn and reflect together. It is recommended that this network meet a minimum of quarterly throughout the school year. This network would be separate from established operation committee meetings and would focus on leadership development rather than primarily on special

education compliance and could use the findings from this study to promote effective adaptive capacity building. Through this opportunity of networking, special education directors within geographical regions can leverage the experiences and expertise of their peers to support their own success as effective, adaptive leaders.

Implication 6: Intentional Relationship Building

Relationship building was identified by the participants as an essential strategy for building adaptive capacity. Trust and collaboration are core values of relationship building (James & Wooten, 2004; Northouse, 2016; Weymes, 2002). Despite positive intentions, activities that promote connection and skill building frequently get replaced or cancelled because of urgent and prioritized matters, such as in emergency situations or in crisis response. To foster relationships among team members to support organizational success, district leaders should establish an expectation that provides intentional quarterly opportunities for staff to connect and collaborate. Leaders should have the autonomy to determine what meaningful connection and relationship building looks like within their environments. This time should be prioritized to build personal and professional connections that work toward the establishment of trust. By proactively prioritizing relationships, psychological and physical safety for team members would be in place to endure sensitive issues, conflict, or crisis situations when they occur (James & Wooten, 2004).

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al.

(2009). Based upon the findings of this study, I propose the following recommendations for further research.

Recommendation 1: Different Public School District Types

It is recommended that this study be replicated with a focus on special education directors serving public school districts that are specifically either elementary, high school, or considered other by the California Department of Education. With this study's focus on special education directors serving unified public schools, it would be beneficial to examine the commonalities and differences between the strategies used by special education directors to build adaptive capacity in differing public school district student enrollment structures.

Recommendation 2: Different Geographical Areas and States

It is recommended that this study be replicated with a focus on special education directors serving in geographical counties in California that are distinct from Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Orange. It is further recommended that this study be replicated with special education director populations outside of California. It would be beneficial to examine results across a broader population to understand trends in adaptive leadership strategies.

Recommendation 3: Impact of Previous Experience

It is recommended to examine the impact of experience on the types of strategies used by special education directors to build adaptive capacity. Special education directors often have varied career paths into the position, either from a general education background or from a special education background. These experiences can significantly impact leadership styles, strategies, and foundational knowledge. It would be beneficial

to understand how career paths and previous experiences impact the adaptive capacity of a special education director, especially considering the lack of adequate special education administrator training programs. This phenomenon can be explored by replicating this study's theoretical framework and instruments with a sample that includes special education directors who transitioned from general education and hold a general education credential and special education directors who transitioned from special education and hold a special education or related services credential. Understanding the experiences of both these groups could be done through a comparative study using qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze and evaluate similarities and differences in the strategies used to build organizational adaptive capacity.

Recommendation 4: Future Leaders

It is recommended that a Delphi study be conducted using experts in special education to forecast the strategies needed for future directors to effectively build organizational adaptive capacity in response to the changing landscape of education. The results of such a study could support the practical application of leadership strategies for current leaders as well as inform training programs for future leaders, two aspects largely absent in the literature.

Recommendation 5: Metaresearch on Thematic Dissertations

This thematic dissertation study was conducted by nine peer researchers, each with a different organizational population of interest. The different organizational populations included middle school public school principals, community-based nonprofit leaders, public school special education directors, small school district superintendents, community emergency response team (CERT) program managers, navy command senior

enlisted leaders (CSEL), public school district superintendents, nurse executives, and on-site multifamily rental property management leaders. It is recommended that metaresearch be conducted to examine the commonalities and differences of the key findings throughout all nine individual research studies. It would be of particular interest to compare the commonalities and differences of key findings as they relate to the various populations within the educational sector.

Recommendation 6: Impact of Trust and Relationships

Trust and relationships were commonly relayed by the participants as essential strategies to build organizational adaptive capacity. A mixed methods case study is recommended to identify and describe strategies that special education directors use to create trust and relationships between themselves and special education teachers and their perceptions of their impact on special education teacher retention and organizational stability. A second component of the study would ask special education teachers their perceptions as to what degree those strategies build trust and relationships and their impact on retention. With the ongoing crisis of special education teacher retention, this approach could provide insight into the perception of how essential these two adaptive leadership strategies are to the longevity of special education teachers in the profession.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

Unprecedented events, big and small, continue to challenge today's leaders and organizations. Throughout the course of this study, the world has been victim to political upheaval, terrorism, natural disasters, and senseless violence. These add to the challenges posed by the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and rapidly changing financial, technological, and political circumstances. More than ever, organizational leaders are

tasked to endure and adapt to maintain relevance and find success. Effective leaders with adaptive capacity are necessary to lead teams through uncertainty and find innovative solutions that are responsive to the ever-changing world.

Public education has been impacted by challenge and change. In response, educational leaders have been called to be adaptive leaders. Adaptive educational leaders have vision, set goals, build capacity, communicate effectively, encourage collaboration, distribute leadership, build relationships, establish trust, engage conflict, and share decision making (Crane, 2022; Morris, 2022; Noble, 2021). The particular interest of this study was the adaptive leadership strategies of the participants. Special education directors have the unique task of ensuring that students with disabilities receive the services and supports required to access their education and more so of guaranteeing that students make appropriate progress and have positive educational outcomes. As a former special education director and career long special educator, I can affirm the complexity of this position and the need for adaptive leadership. My years spent as a special education director were the most exhausting yet most rewarding. The job demands were overwhelming, and each day brought a new challenge. I was fortunate to be part of an incredible team of educators, yet on the hardest days, that was barely enough. I have the utmost respect for special education directors and was motivated to conduct this study to support the success of these educators now and into the future.

At the time of this study, I was a SELPA executive director and had the honor of supporting 13 special education directors in my county. The findings from this study will be invaluable to my support of these incredible leaders. It is my hope that the strategies to build adaptive capacity identified in this research will not only benefit the special

education directors that I worked with but also benefit all special education directors, current, new, and aspiring of today and tomorrow. The participants in this study embraced change just as many special education directors did when they endured the COVID-19 pandemic. Though unwelcome, the experience provided an opportunity to examine adaptive leadership in public education and to appreciate the courageous leadership exemplified by educational leaders. The findings of this study validate recent research on the relevance of adaptive leadership in public education and fill an existing void with special education directors as adaptive leaders. I am inspired by how these special education directors work tirelessly to advocate for students with disabilities and persevere through challenge and change. They are the true adaptive leaders.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Synthesis Matrix

Reference	Themes																				
	Theoretical Foundation						Leadership Models During Challenge and Change				Variables						Theoretical Framework				
	Adaptive Leadership Theory	Leadership Types	Transformational Leadership	Complexity Leadership	Situational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Authentic Leadership	Crisis Leadership	Leadership During Crisis, Challenge, and Change	Crisis Events in Education	Adaptive Leadership in Education	Covid-19 Impact on Education	Organizational Adaptation	K-12 Public Education System	Educational Leades	Special Education Leadership	Developing Leadership Capacity	Encouraging Independent Judgement	Institutionalizing Reflection and Continuous Learning	Making Naming Elephants in the Room the Norm	Nurturing a Shared Reponsibility for the Organization
Ahakwa et al. (2021)																		X	X		
Aiken, S.C. (2021)							X			X											
Avolio, B.J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005)							X		X												
Avolio et al. (2004)							X														
Baker, A. (2004)																				X	
Bass, B. M. (1990)		X	X																		
Bass, B. M. (2008)	X	X																			
Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R.E. (2006)			X																		
Beerel, A. (2009)	X	X							X				X								
Bogans et al. (2022)											X	X					X		X		
Bogotch, I. (2005)										X				X							
Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka														X							
Bryant, J. E. (2016)																	X				
Burns, J. (1978)		X	X																		
Cairns, T.D. (1996)					X																
California Department of Education. (n.d-a)																X					
California Department of Education. (n.d-b)														X							
California Department of Education, (n.d-c)																X					
Camby, S. (2021)				X																	
Cannistra, K. M. (2022)	X										X										
Casavant et al.. (1995, April)																		X			
Cojocar, W. J. (2008)	X	X		X	X																
Crane, R. (2022)	X										X	X	X	X	X						
Dewey, J. (1997)																			X		
Dykstra-Lathrop, D. K. (2022)											X	X			X						
Eade, D. (1997)																	X				
Eade, D. (2007)																	X				
Education Data Partersnip (2002)														X		X					
Elder, J. (2007)																			X		
Elmore, R. (2003)																	X				
Eyben, R., Harris, C., & Pettit, J. (2006)																	X				
Fraker Bonow, C. (2022)		X									X	X	X		X						
Gardner et al., (1983)										X					X						
George, B. (2016).							X														
Glover, J., Friedman, H., & Jones, G. (2002)	X																				
Glover, J., Rainwater et al. (2002)	X	X																			
Greenleaf, R. (1977)						X															
Gyuroka, T. (2010)	X																X	X	X	X	X
Hale, J. S. (2022)		X											X								
Haron et al. (2022)									X		X	X									
Harris, A. (2008)																					X
Harris, A. (2011)																	X				
Harris, A., & Spillane, J. (2008)																					X
Hartmann, K (2023)											X										
Hayashi & Soo. (2012)	X							X	X												
Heifetz, R. (1994)	X	X																			
Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009)	X	X							X				X				X	X	X	X	X
Heifetz, R., Kania, J., Kramer, M. (2002)	X	X							X								X	X	X	X	X
Heifetz, R. A., & Laurie, D.L. (1997)	X	X							X								X	X	X	X	X

Heifetz, R., & Linsky, M. (2002)	X	X							X				X				X	X	X	X	X
Hersey, P. & Blanchard, K.H (1969)					X																
Hess, J. C. (2016)	X	X															X	X	X		X
Hoofman, J., & Secord, E. (2021)											X	X	X								
Hull, R., Robertson, D., & Mortimer, M. (2018)																	X				
Hunte-Cox, D. E. (2004)																	X				
Hussey et al. (2019)																X					
James, E., & Wooten, L. (2004)								X	X												
Jordan, S., Messner, M., & Becker, A. (2009)																			X		
Kinsella, E. A. (2004)																			X		
Kitamura, D. (2019)										X											
Klann, G. (2003)								X													
Klonsky, M. (2010)	X																			X	
Kocolowski, M. D. (2010)																					X
Koehn, N. (2020)		X						X	X												
Kohman, R. (2022)	X		X								X										
Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. Z. (2002)	X	X																			
Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (2017)	X	X																			
Kurvers et al. (2016)																		X			
Lambert, D. (2022a, December 1)														X							
Lambert, D. (2022b, September 9)														X							
Laub, J.A. (1999)						X															
Leitzke, D. L. (2022)									X		X	X	X								
Lombardi, L. (2022)											X	X				X					
Miettinen, R. (2000)																			X		
Moore, M. L. (2023)																X					
Morris, N. (2022)											X					X					
National Center for Education Statistics. (2019)																X					
National Center for Education Statistics. (2022)																X					
Nelson, T., & Squires, V. (2017)											X				X						
Noble, A. (2021)											X						X				
Northouse, P. (2016)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X														
Ondrasek et al. (2020)												X				X					
Orlich, P. J. (2019)															X						
Owens, R., & Valesky, T. (2007)	X	X																			
Owens, R., & Valesky, T. (2011)	X	X																			
Patterson, K.A. (2003)						X															
Pearson, M., & Smith, D. (1986)																			X		
Peele et al., (2023, April 5)														X							
Rajbhandari, M.M. (2015)					X																
Ramalingam et al. (2020)																			X		
Reddin, W.J. (1967)					X																
Riggio, R. E., & Newstead, T. (2023)								X													
Roth, O.-D. (2022)	X	X					X	X	X	X											
Russell, R.F., & Stone, A.G. (2002)						X															
Schlaerth, A., Ensari, N., & Christian, J. (2013)																				X	
Schon, D. (1983)																			X		
Selart, M. (2010)																					X
Senge, P. M. (1990)																			X		
Senge, P., Hamilton, H., & Kania, J. (2015)																			X		
Sessa, V. I., & London, M. (2015).																			X		
Shamir, B., & Eilam, G. (2005).							X														
Shanbhag, N. (2002)																		X			
Sharratt, L., & Fullan, M. (Eds.). (2009)																	X				
Shaw, R. (2022)	X										X	X			X		X				
Smith, L., & Riley, D. (2012)								X	X												
Solomona Nebiyu, K., & Kassahun, T. (2021)	X										X		X								
Sousa, M., & Van Dierendonck, D. (2017)						X															
Spears, L.C. (1995)						X															
Spears, L.C., & Lawrence, M. (2002)						X															
Spillane, J.P. (2005)																					X
Sterling, J. (2020)																				X	
Sweetman, D. (2010)				X																	X
Tarkar, P. (2020)												X									
Taylor, M. (2020)	X	X	X				X									X					

Thattai, D. (2017)													X							
Tillson, A. R. (2022).																X				
Tinker, J. E., & Latta, G. F. (2020).												X								
Tisdale, V.A. (2022)								X	X											
Toegel, G., & Barsoux, J. L. (2019)																			X	
Tremblay et al. (2016)																				X
Turner, F. N. (2022)		X									X	X			X					
Uhl-Bien, M., Marion, R., & McKelvey, B. (2007)				X																
U.S. Department of Education (2023, January 11)															X					
Urick, A., Carpenter, B. W., & Eckert, J. (2021)								X	X	X		X								
Van Dierendonck, D. (2011)						X														
Veale, N.W. (2010)		X													X					
Veldsman, T. H., & Johnson, A. J. (2016)																		X		
Vera, D., & Crossan, M. (2004)																		X		
Wahlstrom, K. L., & Louis, K. S. (2008																				X
Weaver et al. (2003)															X					
Weiss, D. S., & Molinaro, V. (2010)																X				
Wheatley, M. J. (2005)																		X		
Wilson, S. M. (2021)								X	X											
Wool, L. N. (2014)											X									
Yukl, G.A. (2006)	X	X										X								
Yukl, G. & Lepsinger, R. (2002)	X																			
Yukl, G., & Mahsud, R. (2010)	X				X															
Zigarmi, L., & Diamond, J. (2023, January 24)																			X	

APPENDIX B

Email to SELPA Association Listserv

Date:

SELPA Administrator,

I am a doctoral candidate at UMass Global completing research toward a doctorate degree in Organizational Leadership. I am one of nine researchers in a thematic dissertation group studying the strategies used by organizational leaders to build adaptive capacity. The purpose of my phenomenological research study is to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). The five key characteristics are making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning.

To participate in the study, each special education director must serve a unified public school district within Los Angeles, Orange, or San Bernardino counties in California, not simultaneously hold the title or duties of a SELPA administrator, and have contributed to the adaptive capacity of their organization by identifying and addressing the challenges they are currently facing. The participants must also meet four of the six following criteria:

1. Evidence of successful relationships with stakeholders
2. Evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success
3. Five or more years of experience in that profession or field
4. Written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings
5. Recognized by their peers
6. Membership in associations of groups focused on their field

As current SELPA administrators, you are readily connected to exemplary special education directors in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Bernardino counties. I am seeking your support in getting me connected with these individuals as possible participants in my study. Please either provide me with contact information or pass along this email to those who may meet the participant criteria. For this study, I will be conducting virtual interviews with 10 special education directors.

I am available to answer questions you may have via telephone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or via email at agallag2@mail.umassglobal.edu.

Your support is greatly appreciated.

Amber Gallagher

APPENDIX C

Participant Invitation

Date:

Dear Potential Study Participant,

I am a doctoral candidate at UMass Global completing research toward a doctorate degree in Organizational Leadership. I am one of nine researchers in a thematic dissertation group studying the strategies used by organizational leaders to build adaptive capacity. The purpose of my phenomenological research study is to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009). The five key characteristics are making naming elephants in the room the norm, nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization, encouraging independent judgment, developing leadership capacity, and institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning.

To participate in the study, each special education director must serve a unified public school district within Los Angeles, Orange, or San Bernardino counties in California, not simultaneously hold the title or duties of a SELPA administrator, and have contributed to the adaptive capacity of their organization by identifying and addressing the challenges they are currently facing. The participants must also meet four of the six following criteria:

1. Evidence of successful relationships with stakeholders
2. Evidence of breaking through conflict to achieve organizational success
3. Five or more years of experience in that profession or field
4. Written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings
5. Recognized by their peers
6. Membership in associations of groups focused on their field.

I am asking for your assistance in the study by participating in a virtual Zoom interview which will take from 45-60 minutes and will be set up at a time that is convenient for you. If you agree to participate in the interview, you will 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 researcher. No one from your school district will have access to the information obtained during the interview. You will be free to stop the interview at any time.

I am available to answer questions you may have via telephone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or via email at agallag2@mail.umassglobal.edu. Please email or call me if you are willing to consider being a part of this study. Your participation would be greatly valued.

Sincerely,

Amber Gallagher
Doctoral Candidate, UMass Global
Executive Director, San Luis Obispo County SELPA

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent Form Information

INFORMATION ABOUT: Adaptive Leadership: A Phenomenological Study on the Strategies Used by Special Education Directors to Build Adaptive Capacity

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Amber Gallagher, M.S.

PURPOSE OF STUDY: You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Amber Gallagher, a doctoral student from the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Global. The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study is to identify and describe the strategies used by special education directors to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heiftez et al. (2009).

The interview(s) will last approximately 45–60 minutes and will be conducted in a one on one virtual interview setting using Zoom.

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 the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.

b. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded. The recordings 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 the lived experiences of special education directors and the strategies used to build adaptive capacity. The findings will be available to me at the conclusion of the study and will provide new insights into this study in which I participated. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.

d. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Amber Gallagher at agallag2@mail.umassglobal.edu or Dr. Cindy Petersen (Advisor) at cpeterse@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. 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 so 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 of Academic Affairs, UMass Global, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (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 consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

_____

Signature of Participant

_____

Signature of Principal Investigator

_____

Date

APPENDIX E

Research Participant's Bill of Rights

UMASS GLOBAL
A nonprofit affiliate of the University of Massachusetts

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.

APPENDIX F

Definitions and Interview Questions

Five Adaptive Leadership Characteristic Definitions

Making naming elephants in the room the norm. The act of openly addressing sensitive underlying issues, or undiscussables, to resolve potential barriers that interfere with an organization realizing its full potential.

Nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization. The collective ownership across team member roles for the decision-making of operational goals and outcomes of the organization's future.

Encouraging independent judgment. A leader's capacity to provide an opportunity for team members to make choices based on personal and professional experience, regardless of the position held within the organization.

Developing leadership capacity. The systemic focus on expanding competencies and resources, and intentionally motivating groups or individuals to increase leadership potential proactively.

Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning. Providing a culture conducive to the safe exploration of new ideas and sharing of lessons learned both from an individual and organizational perspective and creating a sustainable learning culture driven by a willingness to overcome engrained mental models across all levels of the organization.

Interview Questions

Characteristic: Making naming elephants in the room the norm.

IQ#1
What practices do you use as a leader in your organization to make addressing sensitive underlying issues an organizational norm?

IQ#2
How does your organization create an environment for individuals and groups to resolve potential barriers that prevent the organization from reaching its potential?

Characteristic: Nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization.

IQ#3
Can you describe a time (in your current role) when you facilitated shared ownership of organizational goals amongst team members?

IQ#4
As a leader, how do you provide opportunities for members to comment on and raise issues that are not within their area of responsibility?

Characteristic: Encouraging independent judgment.

IQ#5
Describe a situation where you encouraged employees to make choices based on personal and professional experience?

IQ#6
What are some systems and structures that you have in place for team members to exercise independent judgment and choice?

Characteristic: Developing leadership capacity.

IQ#7
What are the important leadership competencies that your organization focuses on in developing leaders?

IQ#8
As a leader, how do you motivate individuals and groups to increase their leadership potential?

Characteristic: Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning.

IQ#9
How do you institutionalize or make reflection a permanent part of your organizational culture?

IQ#10
How do you institutionalize or make continuous learning a permanent part of your organizational culture?

APPENDIX G

Alignment Table of Research Questions to Interview Questions

Purpose: The purpose of this exploratory phenomenological study was to identify and describe the strategies used by *organizational leaders** to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz et al. (2009).

Research Question	Variable	Definition	Interview Question and Prompt	Literature Support
#1. How do *leaders** build an organization's adaptive capacity through making naming elephants in the room the norm?	Making naming elephants in the room the norm.	The act of openly addressing sensitive underlying issues, or undiscussables, to resolve potential barriers that interfere with an organization realizing its full potential (Heifetz et al, 2009; Toegel & Barsoux, 2019; Baker, 2004).	IQ#1 What practices do you use as a leader in your organization to make addressing sensitive underlying issues an organizational norm? Prompt How do these practices facilitate adaptive leadership development? Can you give an example? IQ#2 How does your organization create an environment for individuals and groups to resolve potential barriers that prevent the organization from reaching its potential? Prompt Can you provide some examples of how you create an environment for individuals and groups to identify barriers to the organization reaching its potential?	Baker, A. C. (2004). Seizing the moment: Talking about the "undiscussables". *Journal of Management Education, 28*(6), 693-706. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562903252661 Klonsky, M. F. (2010). *Discussing undiscussables: Exercising adaptive leadership* (Publication No. 3426112) [Doctoral Dissertation, Fielding Graduate University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. Schlaerth, A., Ensari, N., & Christian, J. (2013). A meta-analytical review of the relationship between emotional intelligence and leaders' constructive conflict management. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 16*(1), 126-136. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430212439907 Toegel, G., & Barsoux, J.-L. (2019). It's time to tackle your team's undiscussables. *MIT Sloan management review, 61*(1), 37-46.
#2. How do *leaders* build an organization's adaptive capacity	Nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization.	The collective ownership across team member roles for the decision making of operational goals	IQ#3 Can you describe a time (in your current role) when you facilitated shared ownership of	Harris, A., & Spillane, J. (2008). Distributed leadership through the looking Glass. *Management*

through nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization?		and outcomes of the organization's future. (Harris & Spillane, 2008; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2016; Tremblay et al., 2016).	organizational goals amongst team members? Prompt: How would you describe the outcome and its relation to the organization's future? IQ#4 As a leader, how do you provide opportunities for members to comment on and raise issues that are not within their area of responsibility? Prompt: How do you encourage participation across teams and roles throughout the organization?	*in Education*, *22*(1), 31–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020607085623 Heifetz, R. & Linsky, R. (2002). *Leadership on the line*. Harvard Business School Press. Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership*. Harvard Business Review Press. Northouse, P. (2016). *Leadership theory and practice* (7th edition). SAGE Publications. Tremblay, D., Latreille, J., Bilodeau, K., Samson, A., Roy, L., L'Italien, M.-F., & Mimeault, C. (2016). Improving the transition from oncology to primary care teams: A case for shared leadership. *Journal of Oncology Practice*, 12(11), 1012-1019. https://doi.org/10.1200/jop.2016.013771
#3. How do *leaders* build an organization's adaptive capacity through encouraging independent judgment?	Encouraging independent judgment.	A leader's capacity to provide an opportunity for team members to make choices based on personal and professional experience, regardless of the position held within the organization (Heifetz et al., 2009; Shanbhag, 2002; Casavant et al., 1995).	IQ#5 Describe a situation where you encouraged employees to make choices based on personal and professional experience? IQ#6 What are some systems and structures that you have in place for team members to exercise independent judgment and choice? Prompt Could you give me a specific example of teams exercising choice in those structures? What was the result of that? situation? Was the result for one of those examples when the teams exercised choice using the structures?	Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world.* Harvard Business Press. Shanbhag, N. (2002). Responsible direction and the supervisory status of registered nurses. *Yale Law Journal*, *112*(3), 665. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A96306891/AONE?u=irv3447&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=23a3cd01. Casavant, R., Elrod, P. F., Jr., & Mayo, C. M. (1995, April). Communicate: make your expertise known. *Appraisal Journal*,

				63(2), 155. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A17015338/AONE?u=irv3447&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=c2916bea
#4. How do *leaders* build an organization's adaptive capacity through developing leadership capacity?	Developing Leadership Capacity.	The systemic focus on expanding competencies and resources, and intentionally motivating groups or individuals to increase leadership potential proactively (Eade, 1997; Eade, 2007; Elmore, 2003; Eyben et al., 2006; Harris, 2011; Heifetz et al., 2009; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009).	IQ#7 What are the important leadership competencies that your organization focuses on in developing leaders? Prompt Can you give some examples of activities that are encouraged to develop these leadership competencies? IQ#8 As a leader, how do you motivate individuals and groups to increase their leadership potential? Prompt Can you provide some examples of when your strategies to motivate leaders to develop have been effective?	Hull, R., Robertson, D., & Mortimer, M. (2018). Wicked leadership competencies for sustainability professionals: Definition, pedagogy, and assessment. *Sustainability 11*(4), 171-177. http://doi.org/10.1089/sus.2018.0008
#5. How do *leaders* build an organization's adaptive capacity through institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning?	Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning.	Providing a culture conducive to the safe exploration of new ideas and sharing of lessons learned both from an individual and organizational perspective and creating a sustainable learning culture driven by a willingness to overcome engrained mental models across all levels of the organization (Cojocar, 2008; Pearson & Smith, 1986; Ramalingam et al., 2020; Senge et al., 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2004; Veldsman & Johnson, 2016).	IQ#9 How do you institutionalize or make reflection a permanent part of your organizational culture? Prompt How is reflection used to facilitate adaptive capacity? Can you give an example? IQ#10 How do you institutionalize or make continuous learning a permanent part of your organizational culture? Prompt How is continuous learning used to facilitate adaptive capacity? Can you give an example?	Cojocar, 2008; Pearson & Smith, 1986; Ramalingam et al., 2020; Senge et al., 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2004; Veldsman & Johnson, 2016

APPENDIX H

Adaptive Leadership Thematic Interview Protocol

My name is *Amber Gallagher* and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts Global in the area of Organizational Leadership. I am a part of a team conducting research to identify and describe the strategies used by organizational leaders to build an adaptive capacity based on the five key characteristics of adaptive leadership identified by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) as perceived by special education directors in unified public school districts within California.

I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview on Adaptive Leadership. The information you give, along with the others participating in this study, hopefully will provide a clear picture of how organizational leaders build an adaptive capacity. I provided the interview questions and five key characteristic definitions for adaptive leadership prior to the interview to help you understand the aims of the study and the concepts related to the interview questions I will be asking. The questions I will be asking are the same for everyone participating in the study. The reason for this is to try to guarantee, as much as possible, that my interviews with all participating special education directors will be conducted in the same manner.

Informed Consent

I would like to remind you that any information that is obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All of the data will be reported without reference to any individual(s) or any institution(s). For ease of our discussion and accuracy I will record our conversation as indicated in the Informed Consent sent to you via email. I will have the recording transcribed to a Word document and will send it to you via electronic mail so that you can check to make sure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and ideas. The digital recording will be erased.

Did you receive the Informed Consent and UMass Global Bill of Rights I sent you via email? Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document? Do you consent to move forward with the interview?

We have scheduled an hour for the interview. At any point during the interview, you may ask that I skip a particular question or stop the interview altogether.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Okay, let's get started, and thanks so much for your time.

First, I have some demographic questions to ask you. The input gained from these questions helps to better understand the background of the participants and to provide context to the final results. Per the informed consent, your participation in this study will remain confidential and comments made or demographic information will only be presented in the aggregate to maintain confidentiality. You are not required to answer any question that would be uncomfortable.

Demographic
Please indicate your gender
Male
Female
Non-binary
Other
Please indicate the years of experience in your organization
1-3, 4-8, 9-15, 16+
Please indicate the number of years in this position
1-3, 4-8, 9-15, 16+
Please indicate the number of years in this field
1-3, 4-8, 9-15, 16+
Please indicate your highest level of education
CC, BA, MA, MBA, DOCTORATE
Other earned degrees:
Please select your age from the list below
25-35, 36-45,46-55, 56-65, 66+
Please indicate the ethnicity(s) with which you identify.
African American
Asian/Asian American
Filipino
Hispanic/Latinx
Native American/Alaskan Native
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
White

Interview Questions & Prompts

Characteristic: Making naming elephants in the room the norm.

IQ#1
What practices do you use as a leader in your organization to make addressing sensitive underlying issues an organizational norm?

Prompt
How do these practices facilitate adaptive leadership development? Can you give an example?

IQ#2
How does your organization create an environment for individuals and groups to resolve potential barriers that prevent the organization from reaching its potential?

Prompt
Can you provide some examples of how you create an environment for individuals and groups to identify barriers to the organization reaching its potential?

Characteristic: Nurturing a shared responsibility for the organization.

IQ#3
Can you describe a time (in your current role) when you facilitated shared ownership of organizational goals amongst team members?

Prompt: How would you describe the outcome and its relation to the organization's future?

IQ#4
As a leader, how do you provide opportunities for members to comment on and raise issues that are not within their area of responsibility?

Prompt: How do you encourage participation across teams and roles throughout the organization?

Characteristic: Encouraging independent judgment.

IQ#5
Describe a situation where you encouraged employees to make choices based on personal and professional experience?

IQ#6
What are some systems and structures that you have in place for team members to exercise independent judgment and choice?

Prompt
Could you give me a specific example of teams exercising choice in those structures? What was the result of that? situation? Was the result for one of those examples when the teams exercised choice using the structures?

Characteristic: Developing leadership capacity.

IQ#7
What are the important leadership competencies that your organization focuses on in developing leaders?

Prompt
Can you give some examples of activities that are encouraged to develop these leadership competencies?

IQ#8
As a leader, how do you motivate individuals and groups to increase their leadership potential?

Prompt
Can you provide some examples of when your strategies to motivate leaders to develop have been effective?

Characteristic: Institutionalizing reflection and continuous learning.

IQ#9
How do you institutionalize or make reflection a permanent part of your organizational culture?

Prompt
How is reflection used to facilitate adaptive capacity? Can you give an example?

IQ#10
How do you institutionalize or make continuous learning a permanent part of your organizational culture?

Prompt
How is continuous learning used to facilitate adaptive capacity? Can you give an example?

"Thank you very much for your time. If you would like, when the results of our research are known, we will send you a copy of our findings."

General Probes For researcher's eyes only☺
The General probes may be used during the interviewee when you want to get more information or expand the conversation with them. These are not questions you share with the interviewee. It is best to familiarize yourself with these probes and use them in a conversational way when appropriate to extend their responses.

1. "Would you expand upon that a bit?"
2. "Do you have more to add?"
3. "What did you mean by ……."
4. "Why do you think that was the case?"
5. "Could you please tell me more about…. "
6. "Can you give me an example of ….."
7. "How did you feel about that?"

APPENDIX I

Observer Feedback Form—Field Test

Conducting interviews is a learned skill set/experience. Gaining valuable insight about your interview skills and effect with the interview will support your data gathering when interviewing the actual participants. As the interview observer you should reflect on the questions below after completing the interview. You should provide independent feedback at the conclusion of the interview field test.

1. How long did the interview take? Did the time seem to be appropriate?
2. Were the questions clear or were there places when the interviewee was unclear?
3. Are there any words or terms used during the interview that were unclear or confusing?
4. How did you feel during the interview? Comfortable? Nervous? For the observer: how did you perceive the interviewer in regard to the preceding descriptors?
5. Did you feel prepared to conduct the interview? Is there something you could have done to be better prepared? For the observer: how did you perceive the interviewer in regard to the preceding descriptors?
6. What parts of the interview went the most smoothly and why do you think that was the case?
7. Are there parts of the interview that seemed to be awkward and why do you think that was the case?
8. If you were to change any part of the interview, what would it be and how would you change it?
9. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall process?

APPENDIX J

Participant Feedback Form—Field Test

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 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 K

Researcher Feedback Form-Field Test

Conducting interviews is a learned skill set/experience. Gaining valuable insight about your interview skills and affect with the interview will support your data gathering when interviewing the actual participants. As the researcher you should reflect on the questions below after completing the interview. You should also discuss the following reflection questions with your 'observer' after completing the interview field test. The questions are written from your perspective as the interviewer. Provide your observer with a copy of these reflective questions prior to the field test interview. Then you can verbalize your thoughts with the observer and they can add valuable insight from their observation. After completing this process you may have edits or changes to recommend for the interview protocol before finalizing.

1. How long did the interview take? Did the time seem to be appropriate?
2. Were the questions clear or were there places when the interviewee was unclear?
3. Are there any words or terms used during the interview that were unclear or confusing?
4. How did you feel during the interview? Comfortable? Nervous? For the observer: how did you perceive the interviewer in regard to the preceding descriptors?
5. Did you feel prepared to conduct the interview? Is there something you could have done to be better prepared? For the observer: how did you perceive the interviewer in regard to the preceding descriptors?
6. What parts of the interview went the most smoothly and why do you think that was the case?
7. Are there parts of the interview that seemed to be awkward and why do you think that was the case?
8. If you were to change any part of the interview, what would it be and how would you change it?
9. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall process?

APPENDIX L

CITI Program Completion Certificate

Completion Date 14-May-2022
Expiration Date N/A
Record ID 48824624

This is to certify that:

Amber Gallagher

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Not valid for renewal of certification through CME.

Human Subjects Research
(Curriculum Group)
Social-Behavioral-Educational Researchers
(Course Learner Group)
1 - Basic
(Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of Massachusetts Global

Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w659ba55b-110f-47c1-9683-cb85f840f7b3-48824624

APPENDIX M

Approval From the Institutional Review Board

Amber Gallagher <agallag2@mail.umassglobal.edu>

IRB Application Approved As Submitted: Amber Gallagher

1 message

Institutional Review Board <my@umassglobal.edu> Fri, Aug 25, 2023 at 9:19 AM
Reply-To: webmaster@umassglobal.edu
To: agallag2@mail.umassglobal.edu
Cc: cpeterse@umassglobal.edu, irb@umassglobal.edu

Dear Amber Gallagher,

Congratulations, your IRB application to conduct research has been approved by the UMass Global Institutional Review Board. This approval grants permission for you to proceed with data collection for your research. Please keep this email for your records, as it will need to be included in your research appendix.

If any issues should arise that are pertinent to your IRB approval, please contact the IRB immediately at IRB@umassglobal.edu. 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 the following link: https://irb.umassglobal.edu/Applications/Modification.pdf.

Best wishes for a successful completion of your study.

Thank you,
David Long, Ed.D.
Professor
Organizational Leadership
IRB Chair
dlong@umassglobal.edu
www.umassglobal.edu