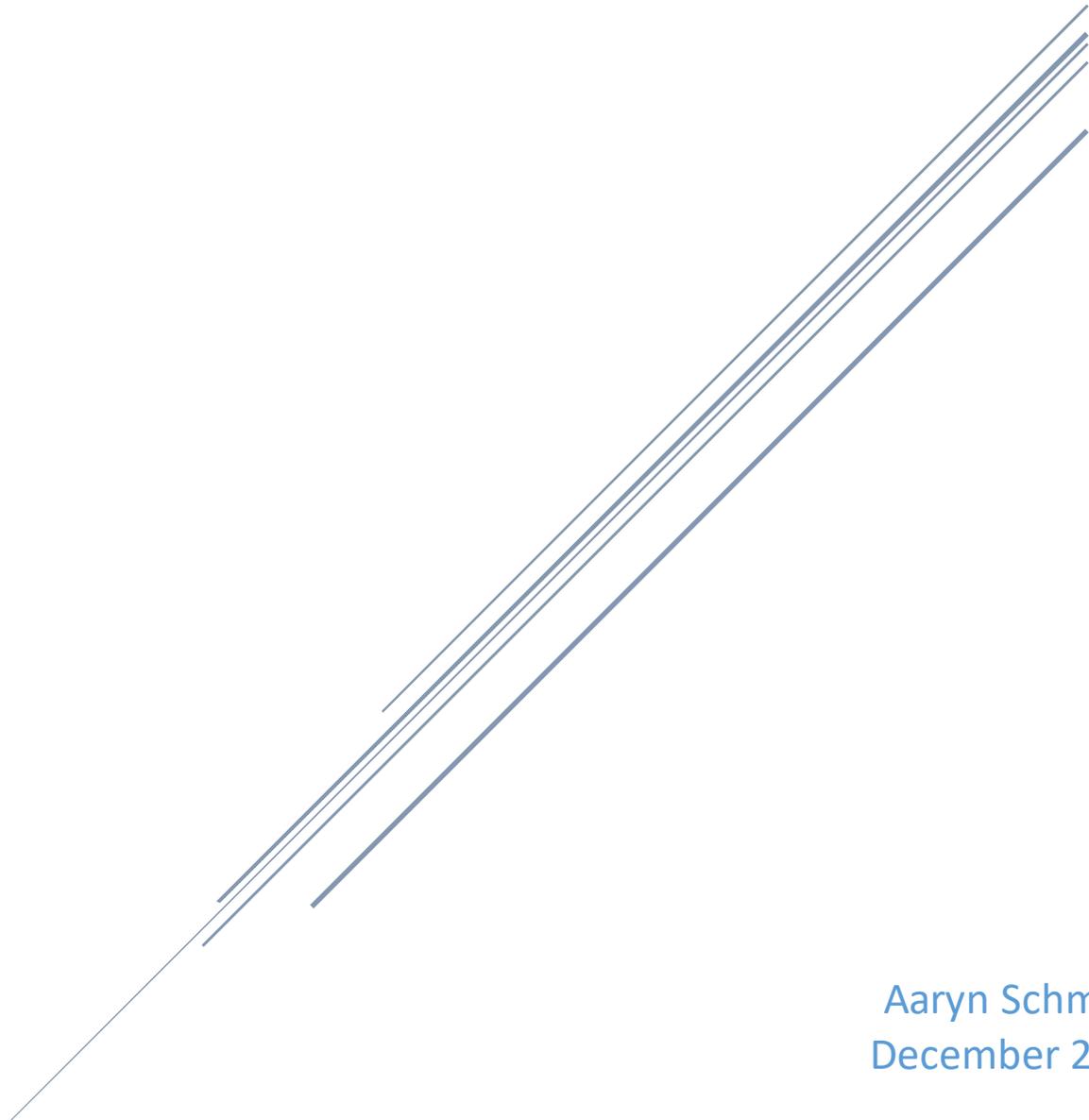# MAKING SENSE LEADING CHANGE:
A NEW SUPERINTENDENT'S CHALLENGE

A quality improvement project examining how educational leaders make sense of their roles during the transition to a new superintendent

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December 2020

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Education in Leadership and Learning in Organizations

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Acknowledgments

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

-Theodore Roosevelt

The journey to this point in my academic and professional career has been long and arduous, all the while highlighted by joyful engagements, deep conversations with colleagues, encouragement from friends, and faith in God and family to get me through.

With deepest gratitude and humble thanks to the many who supported me along the way:

My LLO Cohort II – "We got this, because we got each other."

The faculty and staff at Peabody – It has been an honor to learn from and with you.

The leaders of Social Circle City Schools – Your honest commitment to kids is contagious.

My Henry County people – I learned to challenge the status quo while fostering friendships for life.

My GLISI family - You are the place and the people I never knew I needed so badly in my journey.

My mother and father- You always believed in me, I hope I made you proud.

My sisters- Every man should grow up with women as strong as and amazing as you.

My beautiful wife- You are my rock, my energy source, my reason for being everyday. I love you.

To my son – God blessed your mother and I with you and I strive everyday to live up to the blessing of being your Dad. I love you, boy.

Executive Summary

This quality improvement study seeks to inform the school district of additional actions, decisions, and conditions the superintendent and leadership team can make to improve sensemaking of their individual and collective roles during the transition to a new superintendent. The capstone project explored the ways that a new superintendent and district leadership team individually and collectively interpreted and understood their roles in leading a small rural district to enact new policies and practices related to both re-opening schools amidst the Covid-19 global pandemic and simultaneously creating a significant shift through a new strategic plan. Central to this capstone is the notion that individual and collective policy interpretations influence what practitioners do or do not do as a result of the sensemaking they experience (Yannow, 1996). Sense-making is defined as the ongoing reflective process to construct plausible images to make sense of their experiences (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking can both contribute to and detract from policy implementation depending on whether individuals are left to their own devices (which leads to variation), or collectively participants engage in finding common understanding within their contexts, which leads to consistency (Spillane, Resier, & Gomez, 2002). This project's theoretical framework rests upon critical sensemaking, which adds the role of power and positionality as key influencers of the sensemaking that occurs in organizations (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010). The project explored how the team communicated, collaborated, and engaged with one another to support their individual and collective sensemaking of the organizational shift they experienced and the role of those in positions of power engaging in sense-giving activities (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). This study examined the factors that impacted the individual's sensemaking action and the district leadership team's collective sensemaking actions that led to a functioning team, a

smooth reopening of school, and a new strategic plan. There were two research questions developed to guide the investigation into sensemaking during organizational change:

Research Question 1: How do individuals in organizations negotiate, construct, and transform meaning during change?

Research Question 2: How do individuals interpret the discursive power of the language of change in an organization?

Finding 1: District leaders make sense of their new roles through a mix of individual reflection, collaborative dialogue, and articulated expectations.

Leaders use many cues to make sense of their roles and construct their identities as school or district leaders. These cues are enacted through retrospection, collaborative dialogue, and through the support of clearly stated expectations from supervisors. These actions are essential parts of building collective and individual sensemaking of roles and responsibilities across the district.

Finding 2: Significant informal dialogue and conversation between the new leader and those in leadership roles promotes collective, aligned sensemaking during and after change events.

Informal but intentional conversations that create safe and trusting relationships between supervisors and supervisees and amongst colleagues are essential sensemaking and sense giving activities. The ongoing, social and retrospective nature of sensemaking manifests itself in these

informal meetings, conversations, and interactions that happen outside of scheduled meeting times and in settings that are unthreatening. The ability to see oneself in the group as a leader, along with the others in the group helps create a sense of belonging and connection.

Finding 3: Frequent engagement and participation in low risk, high comprehension meetings enables sensemaking of new roles and responsibilities.

Although the informal meetings and conversations highlighted in Finding 2 are valuable, they are not sufficient for creating the necessary sensemaking for consistent enactment of change initiatives and action in organizations. Organizations also benefit from frequent scheduled and formal meetings that are focused on understanding. Language like," Be honest and help us get to the best answer" and "We are all in this together" to start meetings and set up the purpose are valuable tools that enhance the time together. This language and sacred time also helps to establish expectations around engagement and dedication to the purpose. Through these intentional meetings, expectations can be expressed, clarified, and enhanced.

Although the district and its new leader have established some healthy practices, three recommendations would help to expand and institutionalize the processes currently in place.

Recommendation 1: Provide professional development to district and school leaders on strategies to develop structured dialogue about their roles in the organization and effective collaborative decision-making protocols.

The district leadership team currently engages in informal processes to solve problems and make sense of their roles. However, this currently is driven by the leadership style of the superintendent.   The district should establish collaborative decision-making protocols, with

guidelines for how, when, and for what decisions to use them for and train leaders on their use. By creating a standard practice that empowers collective decision making and responsibility identification, each member's roles in enacting the new initiative or change will be more apparent and better understood.

Recommendation 2: Design and plan the district leadership team meetings to ensure collective sensemaking time. Have participants alternate, bringing a problem of practice to the team and engage in collective problem-solving time each month that defines roles and responsibilities in the solution.

Utilizing protocols that alternate presenters, facilitators and focus on problems of practice can greatly enhance the District Leadership Team's collective and individual leadership capacity. These practices can surface internal thinking and decision making of senior or experienced leaders for younger or newer participants and allow critical engagement opportunities around these decisions. Ensuring that roles rotate for each monthly meeting will put all members in vulnerable learning spaces and make for a safer and more trusting environment.

Recommendation 3: Institutionalize expectations for informal walkthroughs and resultant conversations that build trust and transparency across the district. Expand beyond the superintendent and assistant superintendent engaging in visits and dialogue.

The use of informal walkthroughs and school visits created space and opportunity for meaningful clarifying dialogue to take place between supervisors and supervisees. This same clarity would be valuable for other district leaders and principals between buildings. By establishing

expectations and schedules for school visits ensuring the express purpose is to build relationships and provide opportunities for clarifying dialogue, the district can become more effective at collective understanding. Because of the ongoing nature of sensemaking, it is essential that these informal visits occur regularly and continually and that they not resemble evaluation but instead learning and dialogue.

These recommendations are meant to strengthen the sensemaking and sense-giving conditions for the district's leadership team. Members of the district leadership brought their own individual histories and experiences to the work that informed the identities that they took on. This identity construction was further impacted by their collective interactions with one another, with those in positions of power having the potential for more significant influence in these interactions. By paying attention to the factors that impact sensemaking and the factors that impact it, leaders can be more successful and effective in implementing the organizational changes they seek.

Organizational Context

This qualitative quality improvement project's organizational context is a small rural city school district in northeast Georgia. Uniquely established as a city district amongst the 163 county-based districts in Georgia, Social Circle established itself as a separate school governance entity from its surrounding counties in 1905 (Strategic Plan 2015-2020, 2020). In 2018, the total student population included 1,876 students, and the district has just over 218 full-time, certified, and classified staff members that comprise teachers, administrators, and central office staff. The district has four schools, a primary school serving grades Pre-k-2, an elementary school serving grades 3-5, a middle school serving 6-8, and a traditional high school serving grades 9-12.
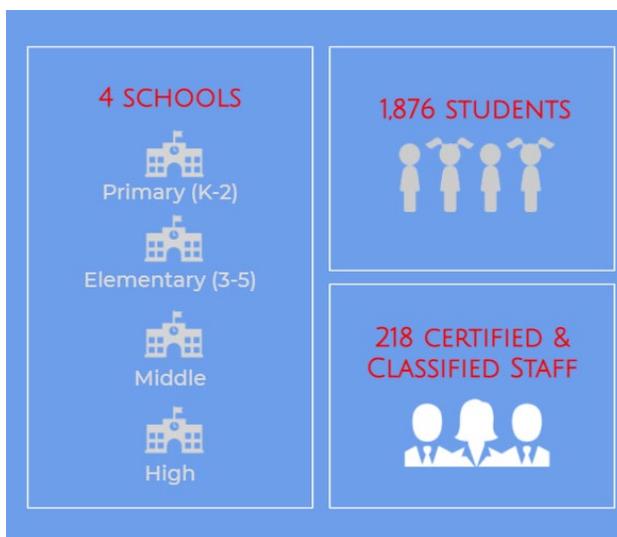

Figure 1 *District Organization*

The high school and middle school have shared facilities on the same campus located "down the hill" from the central office building. Demographically, the district is predominantly white, with 68.6% of members identifying as White and 22.3% identifying as Black. In 2018, the district scored a 67 on the current statewide accountability scale, College and Career Reading Performance Index ("CCRPI"). In 2019, the district overall improved to 80.1, led by the high school's push to maintain a strong graduation rate above 93.7%. (GaDOE, 2020) The state average CCRPI score was 78.8 in 2019. The district has experienced relatively stable academic achievement but is not outperforming like districts in the state and has been operating at or near the state average on CCRPI for the past three years.

The district prides itself on hiring from within and growing its own leaders. To that end, many of the staff grew up in or nearby this small community. In the summer of 2019, the new superintendent was named, and replacing its longstanding superintendent of seven years with a new external candidate represented a significant change for the district and its personnel. Additionally, the new leader in the first black male superintendent and the second black superintendent in the district's more than 100-year history. Being the first black male superintendent adds complexity to building relationships on top of his identity as an outsider in the community. The core district leadership team comprised the superintendent, two assistant superintendents, and the district's four principals. The entire district leadership team has been in their current position for at least four years, the longest-serving being the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, who has served in that role for nine years. The assistant superintendent for student services previously served as the high school principal in the district. All of the principals held assistant principal positions within the district previous to their current roles, with one of the principals having served her entire career in the same school, moving from teacher to academic coach to assistant principal before being named the principal. The school district has committed to growing its own leaders, but the board recognized that they needed a different perspective to help lead them to improved student achievement and more robust overall performance (Allison, 2020). The board encouraged the new superintendent to infuse the community with a renewed focus on excellence in academics, the arts, and athletics.

Not only was the superintendent new and working to integrate himself into the long-standing traditions and staff of this small town district, but he was also tasked with continuing the work of a pilot program for a new community-based accountability system as a part of the district's new five-year strategic plan. This new accountability system has the potential to change

the ways the schools, teachers, and leaders define their own success and the ways students engage in learning and school. The True Accountability model pilot is designed to replace the CCRPI scores that the state issues each year and is developed in close collaboration with parents, businesses, and the Social Circle community.   It moves beyond standardized test scores and includes other indicators that the stakeholders establish collectively (Professional Association of Georgia Educators, 2019). The initial stages of planning for the transition to the True Accountability model was happening during the study period. The quality improvement project's recommendations are focused on supporting the continued planning and implementation of the model in the future. However, the focus on True Accountability planning was put on hold within the study window because Social Circle City Schools was faced with the extraordinary challenges of leading their school district through the Covid-19 global pandemic shut down in March 2020 and the subsequent reopening of schools in August of 2020. The global pandemic

has offered unique insight into how the team made sense of their roles as they learned to work together as a collaborative decision-making team to plan for and enact the reopening plan. It revealed, more profoundly and relevantly, insights into how the superintendent and his new team could make sense of how to enact the superintendent's new vision and leadership in a world that has required a new way of thinking about and

Figure 2 *Intervening Factors*
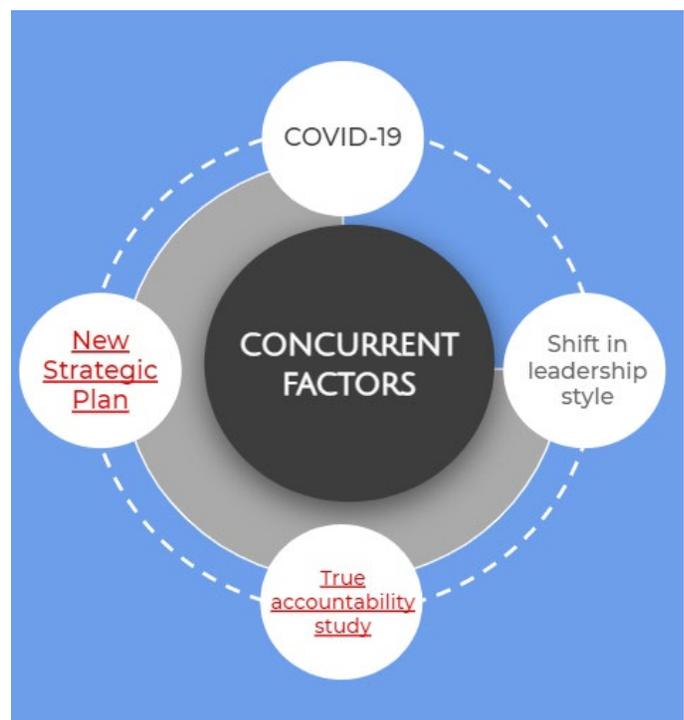
approaching running schools and educating students.

Initially, the project design was to study how the district leadership team could most effectively plan to implement the True Accountability model. The True Accountability model represents a significant strategic shift in what schools are held accountable for and moves beyond a focus on test scores, and the state created report card. However, throughout the study, the Covid-19 crisis offered a new opportunity to examine how school leaders make sense of their roles and responsibilities as community and learning leaders. In many ways, the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant shutting of schools for face-to-face learning from March to June of 2020 offered an opportunity to explore sensemaking in the midst of an educational crisis similar to the fires at Mann Gulch (Weick K., 1993). In the same way, the firefighters were paralyzed by their identity when the fire jumped Mann Gulch; school leaders face a similar existential crisis around the enacted identity of school. At this moment, "doing school" became a totally different experience that looked, felt, and was experienced another way. Long-standing cues like taking attendance, observing classroom teaching, and being at school were removed in one day. Thus, this project's problem of practice evolved to examine how the superintendent leads out of a public health crisis and into a new strategic vision informed by the lessons of that crisis and how his principals make sense of their new reality. It explored how school leaders made sense of their roles during a philosophic change in strategic mission and vision while managing schools amid a global pandemic.

The Problem of Practice

This project examined how school leaders make sense of their roles during a philosophic change in strategic mission and vision led by a new superintendent while successfully managing a school district during a global pandemic. Additionally, it explored how the superintendent created a highly functional district leadership team amid significant internal change and external turmoil. The project focused on the superintendent's sense-giving actions and the sensemaking that the district leadership team engaged in to operate as a highly reliable functioning team (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

The average tenure of a superintendent in the United States is just over five years, with those in large, urban, and high need districts holding their positions for just over three years. (Bryant, 2018). School boards across the country are consistently seeking talented leaders to transform their districts' culture and outcomes. Newly-hired superintendents are often specifically selected to move into these positions as agents of change. Frequently, they are tasked with confronting challenges in the district that require an infusion of fresh leadership perspective and action towards this improvement of culture and academic achievement (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). External candidates often enter the superintendent's role lack long-standing interpersonal relationships with employees, parents, and Board members. They have to learn district historical and political context on the job and build credibility within their own teams to lead successfully. In itself, the transition to a new superintendent is a significant shift (Casey, 2005). School boards want to be sure that there is a good fit for the new superintendent's leadership and have clarity on how the superintendent can lead the district with purpose, vision, and success. It requires a need to form new teams to engage in long-range planning efforts that

require the superintendent to work diligently to establish relationships with the board, district staff, principals, and other stakeholders in the community (Hackmann, 2012).

Over the twenty years since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, researchers have studied how district officers and superintendents lead effective change in school districts. Honig (2003) applied an organizational learning theory framework and demonstrated that collaborative leadership models were more inclusive and supported change conditions than traditional central office administration roles. Funders like the Wallace Foundation (2010) contributed significantly to the knowledge base of how leadership is leveraged for school improvement. Much of the research examined large urban districts where the substantive issues of race and poverty were at times conflated and considered root causes of academic gaps. Although the knowledge base around effective leaders in urban districts serving majority-minority districts has grown, there is little research around new superintendents in smaller districts.

The hiring of a new superintendent is exciting and challenging for all involved. It is a moment of significant change for a district and community. It is even more challenging to accomplish meaningful change when the new superintendent comes into a small rural school district with longstanding traditions and a strong sense of community values. With this significant change comes the challenge for those in the district to make meaning of their roles in light of the new leadership. The district's sitting leaders (principals and assistant superintendents) were hired into and trained under a superintendent that led with a top-down, highly centralized style that controlled the flow of information tightly and retained decision-making power in his office—the new superintendent believed in a more decentralized and flatter organizational model of district leadership. The district's philosophical and strategic shift shifted

from a centralized, top-down decision-making model to a decentralized decision-making organizational model as they constructed a new strategic plan. In this new strategic vision, principals had significantly more autonomy and responsibility in decision making for their departments and schools. This shift in autonomy and subsequent responsibility for decisions introduced increased variability in understanding district policies. The specific problem of practice is how to make this shift in philosophy and strategic vision successfully.

This project will help inform the field about the sense-giving actions that new superintendents might take to foster collective sensemaking that supports and creates a strong leadership team that connects with their communities and boards in authentic ways. It will also help identify and understand the role of sensemaking by the collective group while understanding the limitations of leaders' sense-giving actions. By examining ways that team members make sense of the change they are experiencing individually and collectively, the study seeks to identify actions, cues, and processes that might enhance sense-making and sense-giving activities that create cohesive enactment of leadership initiatives.

Research Questions

Two questions drove the quality improvement study and research agenda. These questions guided the development of a qualitative semi-structured interview protocol to gather perceptions and insights into how leadership teams made sense of the transition from a centralized, top-down superintendent to a more collaborative leader and their role in creating individual and collective meaning during the Covid-19 global pandemic. Due to the study design's qualitative nature, the research questions were purposefully designed to be open-ended and utilize the exploratory language of what or how (Creswell, 2009).

◈ Research Question 1: How do individuals in organizations negotiate, construct, and transform meaning during change?

◈ Research Question 2: How do individuals interpret the discursive power of the language of change in an organization?

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The most critical role that school boards play in American public education is hiring and evaluating the superintendent. (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) Being named the new leader and effectively leading change and improvement is a daunting task. Organizations like the American Associations of School Administrators (AASA) have developed to support new superintendents' transition successfully into their roles. Much of the educational leadership literature focuses on tactics and strategies leaders can use. Hopkins (2008) discusses the importance of taking a systems leadership approach to improve instruction and adopt meaningful change. The systems approach suggests that leaders need to consider all stakeholders and parts of the system when implementing change. The model looks at the strategic and tactical components of implementing

significant instructional change initiatives and is a helpful tool for new superintendents and district leaders to consider. Hopkins integrates the adaptive leadership frame of Heifitz and Linksy (2002) with the instructional focus that Elmore (2008) espouses for responsible large scale improvement of schools around learning. They approach educational leadership from a job function perspective and identify the challenges superintendents face. When implemented under the pressure of accountability, these challenges compound as research has shown that administrators reorient their work to answer high stakes assessments. (Rutledge, 2010). Over the past quarter-century, researchers have worked to understand how leaders and teams make sense of events and their role in leading out and through those significant events. In 1995, Karl Weick published *Sensemaking in Organizations* that illustrated a new way of thinking about how people make sense of and enact meaning during significant change (Weick, 1995). In this groundbreaking work, Weick outlines what sensemaking means, how it has drawn from literature on cognitive dissonance, and defined seven characteristics of sensemaking outlined in the chart below (Weick K. E., 1995).
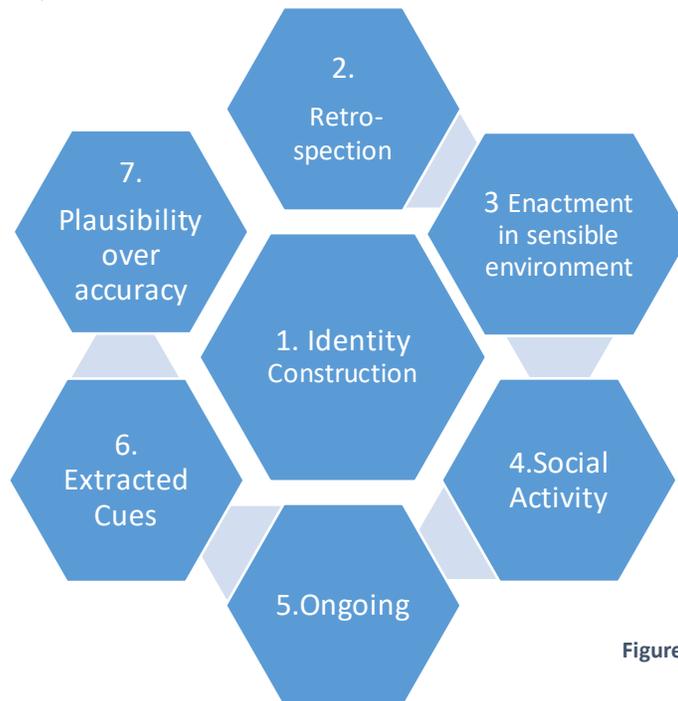

Figure 3. *Weick's 7 Components of Sensemaking*

Weick's seven categories are interconnected and simultaneously occur as individuals and groups work by making sense of events they are both impacted by and a part of. The first, identity construction, is how one has and develops awareness of themselves and their self-concept. One's identity is continually being refined and redefined by the environments and the social contact we have with others. The ongoing social contact with friends, religion, parents, colleagues, the news, and our environment affects how we view and make sense of different situations. In the classic study of Mann Gulch, the firefighters were unable to drop their tools and start the safety fire beneath their feet because in doing so, they metaphorically dropped their identity as a firefighter (Weick K., 1993).

As roles change under new leadership, there were moments when the leaders' identity construction was challenged, and they had to similarly "drop their tools." Weick posits that this redefining of one's identity can only be done through retrospection. The retrospective, derived from Schutz's (1967) analysis of "lived meaningful experience," articulates that people can only know what they are doing after they have done it. Therefore, sensemaking in the moment depends on being reflective and aware of the past. That is to say, we make sense of current activity by comparing it to past events. Weick's third component is enacted cues. We must consider some elements (enacted) and disregard others to make sense of our current situation. This retrospection takes place in social activity that includes dialogue and narratives, or stories, that people tell themselves to make sense of the world around them. In sensemaking experiences, people take cues from those around them and connect through dialogue and narrative with plausible understandings. This activity is continuous and ongoing. From a sensemaking perspective, there is a stronger tendency to consider plausibility over accuracy. As

Thurlow and Helms-Mills (2015) concisely articulate, "If we apply (sensemaking) to the understanding of the process of organizational change, we can see disparate understandings of the change process and the storytelling that is used can occur. For example, by exploring factors and events that shape who we are, we can see how they influence what cues we extract to make sense of issues, to give them plausibility."

Weick's work developed from the conceptual framing of understanding how organizations make sense of their work early on to a "recipe" to engage in research and examination with a theoretical lens inclusive of these seven components. Simply put, it helps to show how individuals assign meaning to common events and experiences. It served as a foundation for thinking about leadership and organizational change and provides a framework for understanding how individuals and groups make sense of new and novel experiences and situations. The theory is particularly flexible and accessible partly because it describes sensemaking as both an internal and inherently social process. However, Weick's work is limited as an analytical framework because of this inherent flexibility.

As Thurlow and Mills (2009) suggest, sensemaking involves individuals simultaneously shaping and reshaping to the environments they face. Sensemaking is a process that is "ongoing, instrumental, subtle, swift, social, and easily taken for granted (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005)." Put another way, sensemaking is an approach to navigate the dilemmas that arise in complex adaptive systems (Hasinoff & Mandzuk, 2018). It is a process whereby organizations can move from murkiness to clarity in the face of new situations that honors the places and experiences individuals bring to their interactions and how they move through to create knowledge and understanding. Nevertheless, little educational research offers guidance to help superintendents understand how they can help their teams make sense of their new roles during

significant change.   Although sensemaking has been applied as a lens to understand strategic

change in higher education (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and hospitals (Helms Mills, Thurlow, &

Mills, Making sense of sensemaking: the critical sensemaking approach, 2010), it has only been

used in limited ways to examine the K-12 organization.   Weick's work, in conjunction with the

scholars he has inspired, like Gioia and Helms-Mills, offers interesting insight into the ways that

superintendents and school leaders engage in both strategic change initiatives and crisis

management.

As researchers examine the best practices for superintendents taking over leadership roles

and enacting change at the behest of the boards and communities that hire them, the sensemaking

framework offers a lens by which to examine progress and create understanding.   When district

teams engage in new work, they need to interpret and translate their newfound understanding

into instructional and organizational leadership roles. The literature on implementing new

reforms in education suggests they are often adopted only by a few and with varying degrees of

depth (McLaughlin, 1991). Elmore's (1996) research on implementing instructional reform

suggests that it is difficult to wholly make substantive change in the educational setting's status

quo. This implementation gap may be attributed to many different reasons. Attribution theory

suggests that many leaders would interpret the lack of implementation as a lack of will or

capacity on the implementers' part (Weiner, 1972). However, research on the power of collective

sensemaking suggests that what leaders might interpret as clear policy and action initiatives are

not evident to the participants and policymakers (Spillane, 2000).   The lack of clarity may result

in variations of interpretation and implementation by leaders. In the case of a district change

initiative, the superintendent or other district leader may interpret that a principal is actively

subverting or being lazy about the implementation, when in fact, the principal is engaging in

their own sensemaking progress without the support of the district and implementing based on their understanding and local context (Spillane, 2000). Ikemoto (2007) offers the following diagram to help leaders use interpretative perspectives of the sensemaking process that can lead to consistent policy implementation.

Ikemoto argues that principals will have varied levels of policy implementation without intentional professional development that expressly focuses on collective sensemaking.

Although Ikemoto's approach to consistent and timely professional development that is clearly aligned with the policy to be implemented is critical, it falls short by not including the role of power and position in an organization that impacts individuals' sensemaking actions. Ikemoto suggests that creating clear, aligned expectations defined by the leader in power can promote sensemaking. However, Weick (1995) suggests that ambiguity is an essential part of collective sensemaking as it creates the space and opportunity for questions to be asked and interpreted. Often districts have hierarchies and political environments that can make questioning and public dialogue around meaning-making dangerous endeavors because the individual engaging in

Figure 4. *Ikemoto's Sensemaking Model*
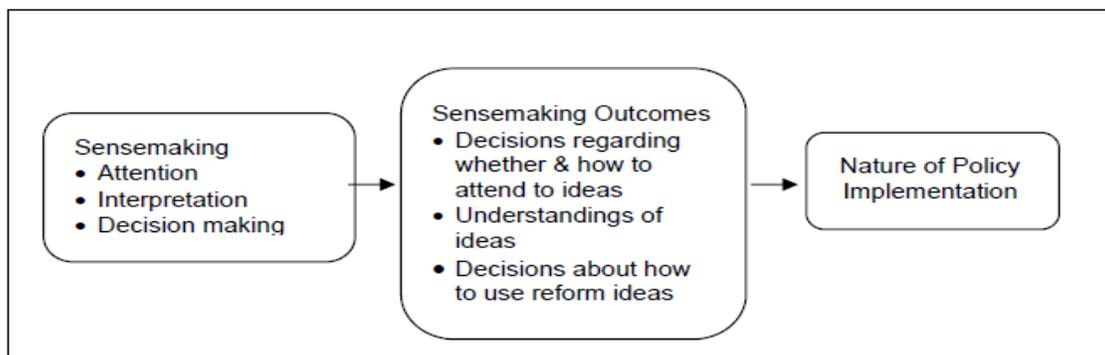
sensemaking dialogue and action is impacted by the role of power and position (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010). In the new organizational model that the superintendent brought to the district, he encouraged and sought opportunities for dialogue, questioning, and honest discussion.

These cues and dialogue led by a leader in power often carry more weight or influence and have also been described as sense-giving opportunities (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). It is the interplay of leaders' sense-giving actions, recognition of the role of power and position, and collective dialogue that enables the enactment of the cues that lead to sensemaking. Acknowledging the role of power and how sense-giving actions can support sensemaking enables leaders, like our superintendent, to create and design sensemaking experiences. However, as Weick suggests, the sensemaking is retrospective and occurs only after enacting the cues (Weick K. E., 1995). Thus, a leader can only control the conditions and not the actual sensemaking that occurs. This ambiguity requires the leader to be comfortable with some lack of clarity around how employees might enact the policies and practices. By designing an organizational model that offers autonomy for decision making within the context of the broader organizational goals, the ambiguity inherent in initial sensemaking can actually be seen as a positive step in the process.

A leader aware of an interpretive sensemaking process might consider Hasinoff and Mandzuk's five-step sensemaking approach that provides leaders with critical questions to guide them through the ambiguity (Hasinoff & Mandzuk, 2018). The authors' five-step sensemaking approach frames sensemaking being turned into action. This Hasinof and Mandzuk's framework informs the analysis of the effectiveness of the leadership team working together to make sense of their new situation and might provide a lens to examine how the team collectively and individually uses their own background knowledge, their ordinary conversations, and willingness to engage in vulnerable dialogue to make common understanding. However, the five-step process is limited in its applicability outside of a set of specific tasks to be enacted by others. This project examined more deeply how the team collectively made sense of their new roles, not just their enactment of one particular new policy initiative like implementing a new reading

program. Focus on collective sensemaking can lead to more consistent policy implementation and commitment to a vision for leadership and action across a school district operating as a decentralized organization because it provides context and boundaries within which school principals can operate.

Gawlik (2014) argues that leaders have a responsibility to engage in sensemaking around policies and that in doing so, leaders can make organizational shifts more successful. Previous studies suggest that sensemaking plays a pivotal role in how teachers and others draw on their own experiences and existing knowledge to interpret shifts in instruction or practice (Coburn, 2005) (Johnson, 2010). When accountability models and expectations are put in place, they can clash with the existing cultures, routines, and structures resulting from how teachers and leaders make sense of their world (Gawlik, 2015). As Coburn has argued, sensemaking does not occur in isolation. It is cultivated in interaction and negotiation (Coburn, 2001). New superintendents must carefully lead their leadership teams and create the space and processes that will help them individually and collectively engage in sensemaking about their new situation.

Conceptual Framework

Weick's articulation of sensemaking is useful in thinking about how organizations organize themselves and construct meaning. However, it comes up short as an easily applicable research framework because it does not explicitly account for the role of power and positionality in organizational sensemaking. Mills and Helms Mills (2004) articulate an analytic framework that adds to Weick's work called critical sensemaking (CSM). CSM offers insight into how identities within an organization are maintained, changed, or constrained during change events. CSM considers the unequal balance of power that may exist in organizations and approaches analysis of talk and dialogue within these constraints. It asks the question, whose voices are

being heard and privileged? The CSM framework adds position and power as a lens that helps to examine how individuals and groups make sense of change. The diagram below illustrates how CSM extends the sensemaking framework (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010).

Figure 5. *Critical Sensemaking Illustration created by author*
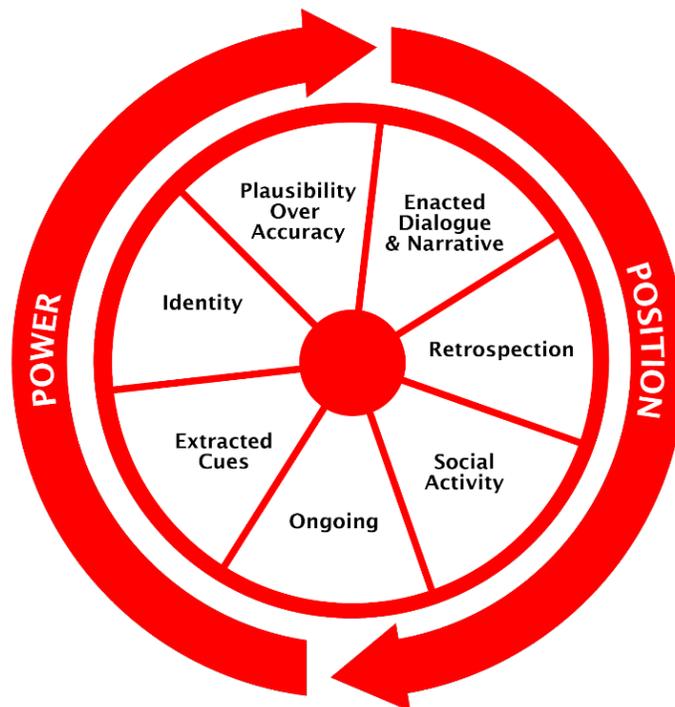
The CSM framework considers the action that a superior might make that suggests ideas and ways of thinking about policies, practices, and strategic direction. These actions have been described as sense-giving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). However, critical sense-making expands the role of power and positioning to not solely include those in positions of official power in the organization. Critical sense-making acknowledges that power and positionality shift and change based on context, composition of the group, and the perceived and actual expertise of those engaged in the collective dialogue. It suggests that sensemaking is still a collective, retrospective experience, but that cues from different individuals in the group may carry more weight or lead

to more significant enactment of the cues because of the person's position. Thus, individuals are continually engaged in sensemaking activities in the collective, taking cues and making meaning from the community members with which they are collaboratively engaged in dialogue. The CSM framework provides an opportunity to examine whose contributions and ideas may have more influence on creating sense than others. In this project, the framework helped design questions that accessed who had decision making authority, when, and in what context as a way of accessing their retrospective understanding of how they made sense of their new roles in the decentralized organizational model. Although this project did not deeply address how the individuals on the district leadership team came to their current personal identity in detail, the critical sensemaking model does acknowledge that one's sense of identity is a crucial factor in how the person engages with the cues from the environment. When a cue challenges that sense of identity, it creates a moment of dissonance that needs sensemaking (Mills, 2004). Throughout the study, the principals came upon several dissonance moments where they questioned their definition of principal.

Under the previous superintendent, they understood their identity as a principal to be a middle manager or direction follower. They were not empowered to make crucial decisions without the central office's guidance and direction. When the new superintendent, by the power of his position, granted them decision-making authority over their individual school budgets, he challenged their understanding of their roles. One principal explained that if they wanted more copy paper for their school in the past regime, they would have to make the request to the district office, who would ask a series of questions and then approve or not approve the requisition (Armstrong, 2020). In this case, the principal's role was to make the most compelling argument to justify the expense. When the new superintendent granted the school a block budget for

supplies for the year and gave them full autonomy on spending that money, the principal's role now became one of balancing demands, needs, and resources within the constraints laid out by the block budget. This autonomy represented a very different role and identity for the principals to take on. Under the critical sensemaking framework, the superintendent's power in the process forced the principals into a new identity. Moving forward from that moment, principals worked collectively as a district leadership team to identify the values and measures they would use to make expenditure decisions. Sensemaking responsibility moved from the superintendent to the principals as the power of decision-making shifted. CSM provides an additional set of lenses that help make sense of the district leadership team's sensemaking.

Study Design

> ❖ Research Question 1: How do individuals in organizations negotiate, construct, and transform meaning during change?
>
> ❖ Research Question 2: How do individuals interpret the discursive power of the language of change in an organization?

This study utilized qualitative methods of field observations and interviews to answer these research questions. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview protocol with the seven district leadership team members seeking to understand their experiences, connections, and sensemaking activities. Individual interviews with each of the seven leaders were used to provide maximum flexibility in accessing how individuals experience the discourse of their meetings and how they individually made sense of their roles under the new superintendent. The data also includes a review of relevant team planning meeting materials and documents and observations of three district leadership team meetings as they planned for re-opening their school in Fall 2020.

Part I: Field Observations of Planning Meetings

In the first phase of data collection, the researcher observed three organizational meetings that occurred over Zoom teleconferencing. These represented the first three meetings of organizing the reopening plan for the schools and school district and observing the interactions between the new superintendent, the principals, and the assistant superintendents during formal meeting settings. Following the observation of these meetings, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to help access the perceptions and experiences of the interviewees in both the

specific experiences of re-opening school amidst the Covid-19 crisis and the specific shift from centralized to a more decentralized organizational structure with the new superintendent starting in his role. The interview guide was designed to assess how the individuals experienced the dialogue they engaged in during the planning meetings for Covid-19 re-opening and the public dialogue they engaged in during the regular operations of the school district between themselves.

The field interviews revealed an open structure to meetings that encouraged and allowed all voices to participate. The superintendent selected other team members to facilitate each meeting and repeatedly asked individual participants who had not shared opinions or perspectives to answer. The meetings were conducted in a non-threatening manner that clarified that everyone's opinion mattered in creating the plan for opening schools. After the second observed meeting, the researcher was able to stay on the zoom conference during the "after the meeting" dialogue between the chair of the reopening planning team for the district and the superintendent. In this meeting, the superintendent shared with the chair that he needed to "Talk less, listen more." The superintendent had selected the ROTC instructor from the high school to serve as the committee chair. A central office administrator would usually fill this critical role. However, as the superintendent evaluated his staff and available resources, he realized that the ROTC instructor was a twenty-five year veteran of the United States Army who had served in logistics, planning, and emergency response roles for the military. He was able to capitalize on these teachers' skills and knowledge while also implicitly re-enforcing that full participation of all voices was an important part of the work moving forward to reopen schools safely. This observation helped the researcher structure the interview protocol to see if this was a common theme throughout the interactions with leaders in the district. The superintendent helped

individuals reconstruct their identities through enacted cues and social dialogue in their interactions, thus enhancing collaborative sensemaking.

Part II: Semi-Structured Interviews

Drawing from sensemaking frameworks, the semi-structured interviews were designed to uncover the spaces where gaps in interpretation exist, the situations that led to collective understanding, and the supports that have helped in collective sensemaking while offering ways to improve (Dervin, 1992). Several protocols are available to help in the design of semi-structured interviews. One such article offers guidance on designing interview protocols that provide access to information about activities and intended outcomes (Gugiu & Rodriguez-Campos, 2007). The semi-structured design allowed the interviewer to ask clarifying and follow-up questions and created a free-flowing conversational tone that helped the interviewer collect data about the interviewees' perceptions of their own experiences. The following chart shows how the semi-structured questions were aligned to the research questions:

Table 1: Research Question Alignment to Interview Questions

Context Gathering Questions	Please describe your experience with change in the organization. How would you describe the changes in the way the district operated before and after the new superintendent was named?
Research Question 1: How do individuals in organizations	What language does the leadership team use collectively that is new?

negotiate, construct, and transform meaning during change?	How do you know what the expectations are for you from the new superintendent? How did you know which decisions were school-based vs. district-based when building the reopening plan? What do you do when a leadership initiative or change doesn't make sense to you?
Research Question 2: How do individuals experience the discursive power of the language of change in an organization?	What language arose as you were creating the Covid reopening plan? What terms were new? Who talks the most during DLT meetings? What do they say?

Interviewees were identified based on their participation in the district leadership team and their roles in the district. The interview candidates were not randomly selected, but all leadership team members with the title of principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent were included. The research questions were designed to be used as possible guidance for other researchers considering the impact of collective sensemaking on the leadership through the Covid-19 crisis or other significant change events. Interviews were conducted over three weeks in September 2020 and timed to allow for the retrospective nature of sensemaking to surface after implementing the reopening plans designed over the summer of 2020. As a result of social distancing guidelines and non-essential visitor restrictions implemented under Covid-19 guidance, the researcher could not do site visits. All interviews took place over Zoom videoing conferencing with the interviewees in their offices at their respective sites.

The interview data collected was analyzed utilizing deductive thematic analysis. The data was coded utilizing a systemic process where specific statements were analyzed and categorized into themes that connected to the conceptual framework (Creswell, 2009). Initial themes emerged from the coding process that were further examined using the critical sensemaking framework. The critical sensemaking analytical framework utilized in this study makes language central to the analysis and examines how language helps individual actors make meaning within their local context (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). During the initial analysis of the data from the interviews, coding themes arose that were sensitive to the common language among all individual interviewees. Table 2 indicates the themes that arose from the coding.

Table 2. Interview Coding Themes
Open Communication
Relationships
Frequent Informal Dialogue
All In
Students First
Risk Free
Ask Questions
Trust
Visibility
Accessibility
Meaningful Meetings

After the first round of coding to identify general themes, the researcher performed a secondary analysis of the data looking for patterns about the power and position of participants (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). Specifically, the researcher wanted to see if the data revealed any voices that had more impact in the district leadership team's dialogue and the reopening task force. Critical sense-making suggests that in change initiatives or organizational shifts, the voice of superiors may carry more weight or create more enacted cues for members of the teams than others (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). Quotes were color-coded to highlight where the role of supervisors carried more impact to determine patterns.

The interviews showed that a significant shift had occurred in the culture and style of operation in the district with the new superintendent. All seven of the interviews indicated that there was a strong and clear commitment to students first. One of the principals, a 29-year

educator, stated, "I've always heard student voice, but you know the thing is that is communicated a lot more here….that has been used, and I have heard more here now under (the new superintendent's) leadership (Favors, 2020)." This sentiment was echoed by the other principals, who articulated that it was clear that students' needs came first in all decision making. For example, the interviews revealed that the superintendent would convene student advisory councils at all schools, including the primary and elementary schools, to get a sense of how they experienced the learning and school.

Interviews also revealed that the principals constructed a renewed identity of themselves that included a greater sense of autonomy and responsibility. They expressed that it was clear from the superintendent and assistant superintendents' actions and direction that they were able and expected to make critical decisions about their school buildings' operations. These decisions included instruction, operations, finance, and assessment. However, they also understood that they had the central office's full support to assist with problem-solving, resource allocation, and decision-making when needed. One key example of this was provided during the interview with the high school principal. He explained that a student had had a disciplinary issue and needed some additional social services supports. In the past, the principal explained, he would have been left trying to figure out how to get the services, what punishment was necessary, and how to protect the central office from any backlash that might occur from his decisions. Now, he described, "I called the district office this morning to inform them of the incident, and they came right over to sit with my team and help solve the problem for the student (Armstrong, 2020)." Through discussion with his supervisor, he could discern that he no longer had to play the district's role of protector. This shift in identity resulted from the dialogue he had with this

supervisor and the superintendent and showed the role of position and power in sense-giving and

sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Analysis and Findings

Finding 1

District leaders make sense of their new roles through a mix of individual reflection, collaborative dialogue, and articulated expectations.

EXPECTATIONS AND DIALOGUE

The finding that district leaders make sense of their new roles through individual reflection, collaborative dialogue, and articulated expectations arose from the interview data and the principals and assistant superintendents' related experiences. The interviews showed a repeated pattern of expectations for the team members to talk with one another in honest and transparent ways. All four of the principals interviewed repeatedly highlighted the role of frequent collaborative meetings that helped them to understand their roles as instructional leaders and trusted leaders of their schools. The interviewees explained that in the previous administration, they were often confused or unsure of what they were expected to do or enact regarding initiatives because they were just given to them, and they did not participate in the planning or decision making that got them to the enacted action. They were not afforded an opportunity to engage in the social aspect of sensemaking and were left to their own devices to make sense of the expectations. With the new superintendent, the structures of meetings and the nature of interactions and decision-making for the district and each school shifted so that all district leadership team members were a part of the

"The superintendent and several people up there, he created kind of an overarching guidance is what he called it. And that was sort of the bumpers he would create... I gave you a for instance, one of them was he didn't want us to eat lunch in the lunchroom in mass. (He would say) So I don't really care how you do lunch, but here's what you can do at lunch and what you can't. ....So some of them were simple as that, some of them were a little bit more, but I feel like, you know, the nice thing is once you've created the bumpers he didn't really question what I did as long as I stayed in my lane. Gotcha. You know, like, like, here's the funny thing with him. If I asked him today, I'm not sure whether he would have done everything the same way I would and that was okay."

-High School Principal

decision making.   Through open dialogue in the planning meetings, the principals and assistant superintendents interacted informally and problem-solved each action together.   With the specific example of the Covid-19 reopening planning, the principals were also encouraged and expected to have collaborative task force teams for each area of responsibility for planning the reopening. These task force teams created additional space for the team to make sense of what they were expected to do through collaborative dialogue.   There was a balance between the district office and the schools' role, but the role of the district was privileged for the creation of the "bumpers." Through these clarified expectations, the principals could sense their roles in the reopening plan and clarify their own identity as leaders of their campus within the school district's broader context.   CSM highlights the role of identity construction as a key factor in creating meaning and sensemaking. That identity construction is influence by the social context and ongoing processes that participants in change undergo. Critical sensemaking shifts focus on how organizational power and dominant assumptions privilege some identities over others (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, Making sense of sensemaking: the critical sensemaking approach, 2010). When asked who had the decision making power in the reopening plan and how they knew who had that power, one principal indicated that the superintendent created "bumpers" that let them know their flexibility and decision-making authority.   Finally, the interviewees reported that there was a consistent expectation that the leaders engage in personal reflection on their work, their health, and their well-being. This attention to identity development within retrospective action helped the individual leaders to be able to understand their role in the collective better.

Finding 2:

Significant amounts of informal dialogue and conversation between the new leader and those being led promotes collective, aligned sensemaking during and after change events.

The second finding relates to the second research question and highlights the role of informal relationships and dialogue in sensemaking in organizations. Although there were several formal meetings where the district leadership team came together to discuss the reopening and set in place appropriate plans, the roles, responsibilities, and expectations for the leaders on the team happened during unstructured opportunities to discuss. The assistant superintendents' interviews revealed that the new superintendent spent countless hours discussing with them, helping them understand their new roles and identities. The new superintendent built strong interpersonal relationships with principals' teams through frequent informal check-ins on-site, via text, and on the phone. Each of these interactions created the opportunity for trust and psychological safety to grow between and amongst the district leadership team. These interactions showed leaders by example, the expectations for how leaders act and interact with one another and staff, but they also created the social space necessary for individual sense-making to become aligned with the collective. The CSM lens adds that individuals' position and power in the collective group play a role in what enacted cues might supersede others

"We were in desperate need of really strong student centered leadership, and now we have it. And so before my role would have been putting out fires and trying to get us not sued or in the paper, and now my role is helping principals and teachers, and to be better supporters of students, and to help them to be able to remove whatever artificial barriers there are to Student Learning and Performance and growth.

-Asst. Superintendent

as plausible, thus enabling sensemaking for those individuals (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). The interviews revealed that the superintendent spent a significant amount of time making

informal visits to the schools to speak with staff and faculty and that he expected his central office team to do the same. The superintendent made it clear that central office staff was to play the role of support to the local schools. This required a shift in the identity of the central office leaders from director to supporter and problem-solver. This identity shift could have brought significant dissonance as a change initiative. However, through informal dialogue and the repeated enacted cues that the superintendent modeled, the leaders could sense their new identity and role in the organization.

Each of the interviews separately highlighted the importance of the informal individual attention they experienced while building an understanding of how they were to lead in their new district leadership team's roles. Research question number two asks how individuals experience the discursive power of the language of change. Throughout the informal meetings where the superintendent and the district leaders were meeting in small groups or individuals, students' language first, support, and focus on growth was repeated repeatedly. Every leader lifted up the slogan of #ALLIN and how it drove their decision making as they planned for the Covid-19 Reopening over the summer. Through numerous visits, in person, from the superintendent and the assistant superintendents, the organization created meaning through dialogue that was a safe space for questioning, processing out loud, and clarity. The principals indicated they are now encouraged to be honest, transparent, and to ask questions to get the best answers, best decisions, and best leadership actions as a school and district. These all started with informal relationships. As the elementary school principal shared:

"Well, from day one, when Dr. Hooker first introduced himself to me, he came to my building, you know, and introduced himself sat in a chair. And the first thing one of the things he did before he left to really truly make me feel like I was valued and important, was he wrote his cell phone number on my board,

and I will never forget that and he said, plug it into your phone, and you call me anytime you need me.."

(Hargrove, 2020)

From the first interactions, the superintendent made it clear that the team was all in together, and they would make sense of their roles as district leaders by working together collaboratively, exhibiting honest and transparent dialogue, and supporting one another in making the best decisions. Through these several interactions, the superintendent engaged in sense-giving actions that enhanced his team's ability to construct new cues and reshape their personal identities into a leadership paradigm that gave them more autonomy and responsibility. The superintendent demonstrated that he understood that meaning-making was an ongoing process because of his commitment to growth over goal achievement.

Finding 3:

Frequent engagement and participation in low risk, high comprehension meetings enable sensemaking of new roles and responsibilities.

The first research question asks how individuals in organizations negotiate, construct, and transform meaning during change. The district leadership team experienced a significant change when the new superintendent was named. The principals and assistant superintendents had all been in their roles previous to the new superintendent being named and had at least four years of experience in leadership roles in the district. By applying the critical sensemaking lens to their experience during the transition to and first year of the new superintendent illustrate the several ways that individuals make meaning. The previous findings indicated the individual identity-forming experiences that occurred to help the district leadership team members make sense of their new identities in their previously held roles. The third finding brings to the forefront an

organizational process that was instituted helped to enable sensemaking.   The team took advantage of their monthly district leadership team (DLT) meeting. This meeting brings together the four principals, their assistant principals, the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and several other directors and coordinators from the district office. This team of about fifty leaders is responsible for the school district's operation and is responsible for all areas from busses to ground, from food preparation to instruction, and from discipline to human resources. The principals interviewed relayed that these meetings had been in place for over a decade, but before the new superintendent, they were used to tell information from the district office to the schools, and there was little to no conversation or questioning. The recent meetings have the schools sharing agenda items and asking for clarification. This formal structure helps to establish expectations and shared information for all leaders in the district. Although helpful and necessary to navigating change, these meetings are not sufficient. The superintendent re-organized the two assistant superintendents' responsibilities and several of the directors and coordinators to be responsible for two of the schools in a more personal way. After each of the DLT meetings, the school teams discuss what was discussed and how to make sense of what actions they need to take due to the meeting and the initiatives.   These secondary principals' meetings happen without the superintendent in attendance and create even more safe space to make sense of their roles and responsibilities.

Another example that arose from the observations and interviews was the power of multiple planning meetings while preparing for school reopening. The district established a district task force with different sub-committees that were responsible for different parts of the re-opening. A district office staff member was responsible for curriculum and instruction, one for transportation, grounds, and logistics, one for hardware/connectivity technology support, one

for instructional technology support, and another for food distribution. These task forces met separately and came together to a shared collaborative district-wide plan. This plan was shared with the schools who were tasked with mirroring the structure in their schools. In this way, each school could include teachers and staff in understanding by creating their responsibility areas. The principals indicated that the five required planning meetings over the summer, with trial runs, and teacher teams helped their teachers to make better sense of what school would look when it re-opened under Covid guidelines that would limit things like class size, when students attended school and increased use of virtual/digital learning tools. By creating a tiered structure of formal meetings with formal areas of responsibility but still providing the space to make critical decisions collaboratively in those team meetings, the district staff and teachers were supported in constructing meaning and understanding about their roles and identities in the new normal that was the Covid-19 reopening of school.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

Provide professional development to district and school leaders on strategies to develop structured dialogue about their roles in the organization and effective collaborative decision-making protocols.

Although school leaders have adapted to the new superintendent and there is a general feeling of goodwill and excitement around the leadership style and focus that has been brought to the district, continued development of processes that make the act of sensemaking visible and intentional from all positions and seats would be beneficial for long term success. The reorganization of the assistant superintendent positions to directly evaluate two principals and a team of central office staff has created the opportunity for more confusion and lack of clarity to develop. Under the previous model, all district leaders were evaluated by and directly reported to the new superintendent. The reorganization creates more distributed responsibilities and reporting structure but also creates the opportunity for mixed messages to persist. By ensuring that all the leaders are trained and aware of the importance of structured dialogue that leads to collaborative decision-making, the district can ensure that all district members can effectively make sense of their roles and responsibilities. Additionally, the district would benefit from institutionalizing collaborative decision-making protocols across all areas of responsibility.

As reported by the superintendent and other interviews, currently, the superintendent makes decisions by gathering information, insights, and opinions from several constituencies and considering different options before taking action. The act of asking for and expecting clear, honest feedback before, during, and after decisions are made can build a sense of belonging and

understanding but can also be interpreted as indecisive or weak. By developing a decision-making protocol and determining what areas of responsibility benefit from this decision-making model, the process can move from the superintendent's personal preference to an intentional leadership strategy expected and practiced across the district.

Recommendation 2:

Design and plan the district leadership team meetings to have collective sensemaking time. Have participants alternate, bringing a problem of practice to the team and engage in collective problem-solving time each month that defines roles and responsibilities in the solution.

The district leadership team (DLT) structure that is in place provides time and opportunity for the leaders to engage in professional learning. Prior to the new superintendent, the meetings were strictly for information transfer and directives from the central office to the school-based leadership. In the first year of the superintendent's tenure, the DLT engaged in a book study of a school leadership book. The team would read a chapter and spend a few minutes discussing the book's relevant parts each month. This laid a foundation for the DLT time to be leveraged for professional development. The district would benefit from designing the leadership development professional learning around problems of practice facing the district's individual leaders and applying relevant experience and literature to collaboratively developing solutions to the problem of practice. Utilizing protocols, such as a tuning protocol, the team can create a habit of communicating about the work in intentional and safe ways that advance skills and build capacity in one another and the district. Because the DLT includes district office leaders, principals, and assistant principals, this time can also be leveraged as developing the "bench" by including future leaders from within the district in a learning space and offering full legitimate participation opportunities to younger leaders (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This model of structured collective sensemaking utilizing protocols that alternate responsibilities for presentation and evaluation and discussion help to address the role of power and position that CSM raises when thinking about organizational initiatives and change (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, Making sense of sensemaking: the critical sensemaking approach, 2010). Frequently, supervisors and leaders' voice can carry outsized weight when it comes to sensemaking as participants to cues from the leaders and attach plausibility to their understanding. By utilizing protocols that alternate roles and put all on similar footing during the DLT meetings, the work of individual sensemaking of initiatives and leadership practice can be created within each member in open and transparent ways that allow for multiple opportunities for clarity. These protocols also offer the opportunity to understand the philosophy and practices of leaders in the district to be more consistent as they can access the thinking and considerations behind decisions and not just observe the resultant activity. This will benefit each school leader and help the district leaders better understand their role in supporting the schools as they listen to the school leaders' considerations and decision-making processes.

Recommendation 3:

Institutionalize expectations for informal walkthroughs and resultant conversations that build trust and transparency across the district. Expand beyond the superintendent and assistant superintendent engaging in visits and dialogue.

Sensemaking is an inherently social activity (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Individuals make sense of the events they experience through retrospection on their actions by discussing them and comparing them with those around them. They take cues from the actions of those in similar situations and make connections to ideas and concepts that are plausible and align with the identity they have constructed for themselves. Considering this framework, the

district should institutionalize expectations for site visits be all district office staff and by building leaders in buildings other than their own. The superintendent currently visits schools frequently (at least weekly) and asks the leaders to walk the building with him. In walking and observing the building's teaching, learning, and operations, the superintendent builds relationships with the teachers, staff, and students by having informal conversations with everyone. Leveraging visibility and familiarity, he builds a sense of trust, cohesion, and togetherness that makes the community feel comfortable processing their own understanding out loud. Although leaders might mimic these walkthroughs without a formalized process, institutionalizing leaders' expectations to be in buildings, talking with one another, staff and students can create collective sensemaking opportunities.

It is important that the expectation that the walks occur not become a checklist oriented set of expectations of "look fors." The walkthroughs' intent is observation, connection, and dialogue, and they have served successful because they are not seen as opportunities for review and evaluation. Although being present in buildings allows the superintendent to evaluate learning and teaching, operations, and staff morale, it is not an expressed intent of the walkthroughs. The intentional but informal nature of the visits makes them successful tools for creating collective sensemaking. It also builds the opportunity for ideas and change suggestions to be more readily accepted at the school level when they come from the district office staff regularly seen in the schools. In much the same way that the firefighters at Mann Gulch could not make sense of the need to drop their tools and build a safety fire at their feet because the concept was so far removed from their identity as firefighters and how they had been trained to act, a new idea or mandate from an anonymous and removed central office administrator may be received in the same way by teachers and staff (Weick K., 1993). However, if there is familiarity

that creates plausibility in the leaders' enacted cues, the new initiatives will be better received by the school staff and faculty.

In the same manner in which the principals have had to make sense of their roles by engaging in dialogue with one another and the leadership team, the superintendent is also engaged in his own sensemaking activity. That is to say, the superintendent does not just engage in sense giving but also is making sense of his new identity, the constructs that impact what cues he enacts and how those shift as the team collectively defines the work and roles that they play. Thus, the entire team, including the superintendent and the principals, is engaged in continuous retrospective sensemaking. By creating awareness of this need and setting up the space for continual dialogue, they enhance their individual sensemaking and expand the collective sensemaking that exists consistently among and between them as individuals.

Limitations

Though there is significant literature on the application of the sensemaking framework generally, there is limited research that has been utilizing critical sensemaking as a lens for examining organizational change in public education. As a tool to guide leadership actions, understanding how individuals and groups make sense of the initiatives, demands, and philosophies that guide organizations is valuable from an academic and practical sense. This study depended on qualitative interviews and limited team field observations to understand the role of discourse in sensemaking. The global pandemic associated with Covid-19 shut down schools at the beginning of the research window and did not allow for on-site observations at the individual schoolhouse. The project would have benefitted from additional observations of the principals operating with their leadership teams to discern how much of the planning and

interactions between the superintendent and the district leadership team were observable in the interactions between principals and their teams.

Additionally, the study would have benefitted from a more extended period of study to observe the initial meetings of the new superintendent with the principals and district office staff instead of just accessing the perceptions of those interactions from interviews occurring after the fact. Although the sample size of the interviews included all of the principals and assistant superintendents as designed initially, the analysis of the data suggests that including the assistant principals in the interview cohort may have added more clarity and understanding about how collective sensemaking occurs slightly further from the center of the district leadership team. The diffusion of information and understanding from the superintendent to the assistant principals is an area for additional research to be considered.

Conclusion

Across the nation, school boards and school districts face constant turnover in their top leadership position. They are searching for influential chief executives with the right mix of managerial, financial, instructional, and political prowess to ensure students' success, maintain strong community relationships, and empower teachers with working conditions and expectations that help them do amazing work with students. This project examined how district office staff and principals experienced the change brought by a new superintendent and how they made sense of their new roles and identities due to the change. The critical sensemaking lens provided a conceptual framework for examining and better understanding how a new superintendent might support coherence and alignment of understanding and thus the consistent and effective enactment of change initiatives across job categories and roles in a district.

A few key indicators of actions that helped to support and foster collective and individual sensemaking became evident throughout data collection and analysis. First, informal interpersonal connection between those in positions of power and those in follower roles is essential to fostering the ongoing social dialogue necessary for sensemaking. The new superintendent substantially impacted the people who would become his leadership team by talking to them in informal, meaningful conversations about their work, their families, and how they were bettering themselves. He expressed deep personal concern for them as people and humans, not just as employees in the district. This personal connection created a sense of psychological safety that made it acceptable and expected for those in the organizations who had questions to ask them and collectively build better understandings of how to enact vision, philosophy, and action steps aligned with their new role identities.

Secondly, the district established and refined specific time and space for dialogue and conversation about plans and initiatives where the express purpose was understanding how and why to implement re-opening plans. Reopening amidst Covid-19 signifies a new way of thinking about school, bringing students and staff together, and how to do so in physically and medically safe ways that foster educational goals. The teams of teachers and leaders in the district appreciated and valued the meeting time that was focused on the task at hand, that allowed them to play out plausible, even if not accurate, scenarios of what might occur, and allowed them to be able to establish deeper meaning for themselves in the organization.

Finally, the role of community context in fostering understanding and sensemaking is clear. Sensemaking is grounded in the identity that we make for ourselves (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010). This identity is informed by the company that we keep, the interactions that we have with the world personally, digitally, informally, and the stories we tell

ourselves about ourselves. A robust and engaged community helps influence the stories that this small school district's leaders tell themselves about their roles. They see themselves as protectors of the student body and teachers and work to ensure that all students have safety and security. Any initiative or change action that did not align with that sense of identity would have been a break from their sensemaking. The new superintendent understood that identity construction and worked within the local context, only breaking it intentionally and knowing that doing so would create cognitive dissonance that would need to be worked through with dialogue, clear enacted cues, and retrospection.

New superintendents have a daunting task in front of them when they take on the responsibility of leading a school district. They would benefit from paying attention to and attending to how people understand and make sense of the world around them as they strive to make changes in their new roles. There is much opportunity for researchers and leadership development organizations to examine and research how the receiving leaders in a district can sense their newfound identities and roles when a new superintendent comes into a district.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Protocol

Interviewer: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The information gathered from this interview will be used as part of a doctoral capstone for Vanderbilt University. I will be recording the interview so that the data will be accurate. You may request that the tape recorder be turned off at any point in the interview. I'm going to ask you a set of questions about your perspectives about your district's planning for the implementation of community-based accountability and the reopening of school under Covid-19. When I ask you questions from your experience, think of how you make sense of what you and the district are planning to do/doing. The entire interview will last approximately an hour. Do you have any questions? (Answer any questions.)

Time of interview: _____

Date of interview: _____

Interviewee: _____

Question/Prompts:

> ❖ Research Question 1: How do individuals in organizations negotiate, construct, and transform meaning during change?
>
> ❖ Research Question 2: How do individuals interpret the discursive power of the language of change in an organization?

1. Please tell me what your position in the district, your responsibilities, and how long you have been working in this position.

2. How do you typically describe your role in the organization? (RQ1, RQ2)

3. Please describe your experience with change at this organization. (RQ1, RQ2)

4. How do you describe the change process that has occurred in the last year to employees at this organization? Specifically around reopening school after Covid closure? (RQ1)

5. What language/vocabulary did you create/use as a team to make sense of the reopening plans? (RQ2)

6. Who made decisions about reopening at your school? How did you come to understand what decisions were made by you, by the district? (RQ1)

7. Whose voices were not a part of the decision making about reopening? (RQ2)

8. Who has the most power in decision making in the district? How is this reflected in this organization's process? (R13)

9. What are/were your meetings like? Who talks the most? About what? (RQ2)

10. How would you describe the new superintendent's Leadership style? How do you know his expectations? (RQ1, RQ2)

11. What has been done to bring principals and central office leaders together on the same team? (RQ2)

12. What language does the leadership team use collectively to make sure everyone is on the same page? (RQ2)

13. Who do you usually talk with to make sense of what you have to do next? (RQ1, RQ2)

14. When and how do you communicate with your peers or the leadership team? What helps you the most? (RQ2)

15. What do you do when a leadership initiative doesn't make sense to you? (RQ1)

16. When something is challenging for you as a leader (communicating to staff about why you are doing something, figuring out a challenge), how do you solve that challenge? (RQ1)

17. What do you see as the challenges facing the district in terms of district leadership cohesiveness? (RQ1)

18. How would you like to hear members of the organization talk about change and their roles as leaders in change? (RQ2)

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