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Superintendent and public Board of Education members overcoming controversial policy

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**SUPERINTENDENT AND PUBLIC BOARD OF EDUCATION MEMBERS
OVERCOMING CONTROVERSIAL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION**

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Glen, for always being there and pushing me to higher levels. Without your support I would not have been able to accomplish this goal. To my son Colin, I hope this is an illustration that you can accomplish any goal you have when you rely on hard work and perseverance.

Thank you to my amazing sisters for always supporting me and encouraging me to continue follow my dreams. To my mother and my late father, I hope I continue to make you proud.

"Many of life's failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up." – Thomas Edison

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Abstract
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The purpose of this descriptive multiple case study was to explore the actions of

educational leaders when implementing policy that may be deemed controversial,

through the lenses of sensemaking theory. Findings provide insight on how districts

leaders are able to operate efficiently and effectively, and shows that it is essential for

board members and the superintendent to adapt to the given situations, to reflect on the

current setting, and to be committed to moving forward. The organization looks to the

superintendent to be the educational leader, but also to be the one to provide the guidance

and means to create and share the vision that balances the requirements of the state with

the needs of the local district. Educational leaders strive to find the balance of

coordination and control as they make sense, frame, derive, and interpret multiple

messages to guide their management of future interactions. Leaders must lead and

maneuver situations to move the organization forward, but must also recognize the

situation and the environment to maintain a commitment to move forward all parties

together on a common vision. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The history of education and politics is a long, and often entangled one. Educational policy, laws and funding may find themselves in conflict with a community's established culture. In addition to school districts' local issues and policies that reflect the individual needs of the district, state and federal policies continue to evolve and influence public schools (Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012; Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary, 2015). Navigating the complexity of policy change, especially when controversial policies emerge, can be complicated for educational leaders (Diem et al., 2015; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Effective education reform is contingent upon the school leadership carrying out the reform (Ganon-Shion & Schechter, 2017). Superintendents must be able to make sense of the situations and align actions to maintain the common focus of the organization. How a superintendent and school board members handle controversy when it erupts in policy and school operations is an important topic to examine.

The national and local demands for education reforms result in many changes for the leaders of public education to implement. The present-day responsibilities, knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of a superintendent in the U.S. are diverse and complex when compared with the original function of superintendent (Eadie & Houston, 2002; Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). Peterkin, Jewell-Sherman, Kelly, and Boozer (2011) found the emergence of legislation heightened the complexity of the role of superintendent to address the challenges of political pressures and conflicting interests. For example, individual states have created governing

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policies in response to federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race to the Top (RTTT) and most recently the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Rather than leaving educational decisions to the local level, these state and federal demands have created what education researchers characterize as legislative-centered school policy (Valli, Croninger, & Buese, 2012; Diem et al., 2015). This disconnect at the local level often leads to conflict.

Board of Education (BOE) members are elected state officials, empowered by state law to govern the public schools at a local level. They are representatives of their community with oversight authority derived from the state constitution and the legislature (Hamann & Lane, 2004; Jacobsen, & Saultz, 2012). As elected officials, they must be responsive to interest groups that wish to see their perspective mirrored in school policies and are the driving factor to obtain a seat on the board (Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Danzberger, 1994; Mountford, 2004). Some school board members view policy setting as an exercise in persuading others to side with a common agenda (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Trujillo, 2013). Thus, an individual board member may use coercion with educators in the organization to ensure policy is implemented as he/she sees fit (Mountford, 2004; Diem et al, 2015).

A survey of superintendents found that 70% felt there were members of their school board who represented specific, narrow constituencies (Farkas, Foley, & Duffett, 2001). Superintendents reported that often members with special interests and agendas often dominate the board (Farkas et al., 2001). Additionally, since the board has the authority to hire and fire superintendents, some board members leverage their power to

ensure that superintendents adhere to the wishes of the board (Eadie & Houston, 2002; Mountford, 2004; Trujillo, 2013), making it difficult for educational leaders to meet the various demands of federal and state regulations, while still meeting the diverse needs of the community.

BOE are an integral part of the public school system throughout the U.S. Its role is to make certain local policies are implemented. Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary's (2015) qualitative case study supported the previous research of the role of school boards in implementing policies, specifically diversity policies in a post- *Parents Involved* era (Fowler, 2013; Trujillo, 2013). This research supports the assertion that school board policy making can be highly influenced by the social and political contexts in which school districts are situated. Board members navigate the politics of their communities and the competing interests, deciding on policies that accommodate and appease their constituents (Mountford, 2004; Howell, 2005; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). The success of a policy depends upon the beliefs, relationships, politics, knowledge, and ability of the people that the policy affects, and the organizational culture of the places where they work (Honig, 2006; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012).

Local districts are regulated by statute, code and decisional law, as well as state and local policy. It is the responsibility of the local board of education to set the policies and procedures that most directly affect students and staff within the districts (Diem et al., 2015). School leaders must ensure that the public is correctly informed of the happenings in the district (Ball et al., 2012; Fiore, 2011). Correspondingly, in the State of New Jersey, many parents have fought against recent federal and state policies, causing

discourse in many school districts. Tension is present in all aspects of governmental affairs, but the fact that education directly involves children adds an emotional element to the policy implementation.

The tension was observed during the 2015-2016 school year when the Pascack School District in New Jersey encountered a public debate to permit students identified as transgender to use different bathrooms as required by the federal mandate that "transgender students must be permitted to use bathrooms that align with their gender identity" (Emma, 2016; Ma, 2016). The BOE tabled the policy implementation upon resistance from the community. A follow-up school board meeting provided a forum for both sides of the debate to voice concerns, providing the school board to make sense of the community response and balance it with the legal requirements (Ma, 2016).

Policies that affect a school environment must be adaptable to each individual school community and must be clearly articulated to the various stakeholders that are impacted (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). Individuals in leadership positions face the challenge of adapting and managing change. School leaders in the 21st century look to develop opportunities for the community to have a voice (Fiore, 2011; Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). This becomes even more complicated when local BOE are required to adopt policies from federal and state mandates especially policies that do not align with the social climate or beliefs of the community. How district leaders understand policy, address controversy, and align requirements while maintaining a cohesive school environment is important to study.

Context of Study

The context of this study is the State of New Jersey K-12 public school districts. K-12 public school districts are specified as school districts that are maintained at public expense, using federal and state aid, for the education of the children of the community and are part of free public education including primary and secondary schools (grades K-12). Since the districts accept federal and state funding, they must adhere to the federal and state regulations, policies, and mandates. The districts that will be represented are geographically located in two of New Jersey's counties. The districts are similar in size and demographics. In order to be included the school must have experienced controversial BOE policy implementations during the 2015-2017 school years.

Statement of the Problem

Superintendents and BOE are responsible for meeting the needs of the local community. However, federal government mandates dictate public education policy to such a degree that local control is limited. The superintendent must provide strong, clear, and collaborative leadership as he/she and the BOE work to find acceptable common ground (Fiore, 2011). When studying the conditions and nature of policy implementation, it is important to identify the variables and actions that enable or restrain the enactment of educational policy in the school or district (Fowler, 2013; Frankenberg & Diem, 2013). The way to study how controversial educational policy initiatives are implemented at the local context is through an examination of the way people in schools make sense of the policy and translate the policy into practices (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

It is the purpose of this study to understand the actions of the educational leaders when implementing policy that may be deemed controversial. This descriptive multiple-case study (Yin, 2013) analyzed how a purposeful sample of similar K-12 school district leaders in New Jersey reacted to controversial policies that disrupted the school community. The major sampling strategy for this study was purposeful sampling, specifically criterion sampling strategy for the identification and selection of individuals that were knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994, Patton, 2014). Each participant in this research was selected based on homogenous and criterion sampling methods (Creswell, 2013). These techniques provided me with greater opportunities to gather relevant information and develop deeper insight on the research topic.

Educational leaders must make sense of the problem and understand how to approach issues and remove any barrier. This research contributes to a broader understanding of sensemaking theory. Individual and situated cognition (Spillane et al., 2002) and many other factors contribute to how individuals make sense of policy and how leaders diagnose the needs of the organization to identify the challenges and develop actions to align the stakeholders together. Reframing is the deliberate process of looking at a situation from multiple perspectives, examining alternative views and explanations (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). Educational leaders have a choice how to frame and interpret the situation.

Research Questions

Three research questions, and additional sub-questions, guided the exploration of educational leaders' perceptions of and response to controversial policies that have impacted their school:

1. How do board of education members and the superintendent describe the influence of adversity, challenge, and confusion of policy adoption and implementation?

2. How do educational leaders frame their organizations and determine the actions to lead effectively?

3. How did district leaders make sense of (understand, perceive, critique and/or experience) controversial policies impacting their district?

    a. What ideas experiences, conditions, school structures and/or policy tools influence the district leaders' sensemaking of, responses to, the controversial policy?

    b. What did the district leaders say about their ability to lead during the time of implementation of the controversial policy?

The methods used to conduct the research include qualitative interviewing of primary participants: superintendents and board of education members, along with a review of BOE meeting minutes, observation, and field notes. Triangulation of data sources and data types was a primary strategy used and supported the principle in case study research that the phenomena be viewed and explored from multiple perspectives.

Definition of Key Terms

A variety of essential terms, not previously defined, were used throughout this study. They are defined as follows:

- **Board of Education (BOE) -** a body of officials elected or appointed to oversee a local or statewide school system or systems.

- **Superintendent of Schools-** a superintendent, or superintendent of schools, is an administrator or manager in charge of a number of public schools or a school district, a local government body overseeing public schools. The selected candidate must hold appropriate degrees and certifications as required by individual states.

- **Policy** – Series of objectives, prescribed methods, guidelines, rules, regulations or requirements issued by the state department of education that govern the operation of the education system.

- **Controversial educational policy** - – Series of objectives, prescribed methods, guidelines, rules, regulations or requirements issued by the state department of education that govern the operation of the education system that give rise or likely to give rise to disagreement among the various stakeholders of the school community.

Theoretical Perspective

The literature review has revealed how complex the position of educational leader is today. This research uses a conceptual framework considering the influenced placed upon educational leaders, specifically superintendents and BOE members, as they make

sense of a controversial policy. The term sensemaking has been used in various fields, specifically in education (Weick, 1995; Sariento & Stahl, 2006). Sensemaking can be defined as finding meaning in a situation. Specifically, sensemaking determines how an individual understands and reacts to a particular situation within a particular context. Education literature describes how educators make sense, frame, derive, and interpret multiple messages they receive from their school environments (Brown et al., 2008; Coburn, 2006; Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita & Zoltners, 2002; Weick, Sutchliffe, & Obstfel, 2005).

Sensemaking Framework

Policy implementation is often viewed in a linear, top-down approach, with the assumption that the stakeholders will carry out the reforms they are instructed to implement as a result of new policies. However, this approach does not explain the reality that exists when policy is interpreted, analyzed, and reshaped within each school community. The success of a policy depends upon the beliefs, relationships, politics, knowledge, and ability of the people that the policy affects, and the organizational culture of the places where they work (Honig, 2006; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). Spillane, Reiser and Reimer (2002) call the process of interpreting educational policy at the level of schools "sensemaking" because it tries to take into account the personal histories and contexts of educators as they work to understand school-based educators' perspectives about policy and reform.

As district leaders "encounter moments of ambiguity or uncertainty, they seek to clarify what is going on by extracting and interpreting cues from their environment, using

these as the basis for a plausible account that provides order and 'makes sense' of what has occurred, and through which they continue to enact the environment" (Weick, 1995). Thus, sensemaking is an activity that is an explanatory process and provides a method for comprehension of events, placements of items into frameworks, and constructing meaning retrospectively. Sensemaking may be discovered through written and spoken narratives, as individuals come to understand the events that they have (or may currently) experienced. Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as a process that included the following seven characteristics: identify construction, retrospect, enactment, social, ongoing, extracted cues, and plausibility. Sensemaking looks to the past through the awareness that individuals make sense of their actions only after they have been performed. Sensemaking is not only an individual practice; multiple leaders, such as a BOE, must also come to a decision based on how they make sense of the problem or sensemaking through the construction of meaning, placing items into frameworks, and readdressing it (Weick, 1995).

The perceptions, interpretations, and actions of individuals are at the center of the way policies are received and implemented (Hanmann & Lane, 2004). Organizations are often not well prepared to change cultural and structural routines for the sake of adapting to sudden, difficult climates and conditions (Weick 1988). As a result, organizations are forced to reorganize their story to make sense of the unusual and/or stressful situations (Gilstrap, Gilstrap, Holderby, & Valera, 2016). To ensure consistency with the purpose and message of the policy, districts would be well-served by identifying a barrier and then identifying how to forge partnerships with all members of the school community to

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overcome it. Policy messages must be more than top-down communications with little or no implementation support; all members of the school community must be well-informed and merge a common vision as to how the policy can be applied within the community (Fiore, 2006; Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012).

Woulfin, Donaldson, and Gonzales' (2016) qualitative study identify the relationship between state, policy, and district leadership when required to implement the state's mandated policy. Though the framing of the evaluation policy met the structure and content of the state policy, the policy was not implemented successfully as district leaders emphasized the accountability aspects rather than the development. Thus, leaders that have failed to motivate principals and put understanding to the reason for the change. Sensemaking looks through the awareness that people make sense of their actions only after they have been performed. Individuals create a world where they need to make sense of their action (Weick, 1995). Leaders encounter difficulties or misalign the information when information is ignored, thus leaders do not truly make sense of the various perspectives of the situation (Bolman & Gallos, 2011).

Research supports that district leaders must have a deep understanding of policy and be able to translate state policy into school level change to expand on the policy messages to diverse audiences (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Woulfin et al., 2016). A collaborative relationship between all stakeholders of the school community is imperative for a district to attain the goals set by the BOE and to meet the mandates and requirements of federal and state agencies (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Uncertainty will lead to ineffective board relationships or disconnect with the local community, resulting

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in the inability to focus on established goals. Educational leaders must take time to reflect on their organization and realign, when necessary, if controversy arises from implemented policies (Weick, Sutchliffe, & Obstfel, 2005; Woulfin et al., 2016).

School leaders throughout the U.S. are called upon to address a range of issues, many of which can be controversial (Spillane et al., 2002; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). The controversy most often exists at the local level. An example of policy discourse within a school community occurred during the 2016-2017 school year, when a student in the Cherry Hill School District in New Jersey challenged the BOE and the Superintendent on his right to bring his service dog on the school bus (Shelly, 2017). News coverage highlighted that the current school policy forbid students from bringing service dogs on school buses, which contradicts federal Americans With Disabilities Act and a 2015 state law that specified "A student with a disability, including autism, shall be permitted access for a service animal in school buildings, including the classroom, on school buses, and on school grounds." When approached by the student, the superintendent responded that a revised policy would be introduced at the next BOE meeting. To meet the needs of the law and students' rights, the superintendent claimed that the revised policy will include a specific process that students must follow (Shelly, 2017). From Weick's perspective sensemaking seeks to answer, "What is going on here?" as individual attempt to make sense of events or information affect an organization (Weick, 1995). In this framing, the individuals create their environments and determine what is relevant and what explanations are acceptable (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008).

Effective leaders learn thought processes to identify what is going on, reflect on it, assemble it quickly into a conscious pattern, and see the big picture (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). To guide the organization through complex and possible controversial circumstances, such as the examples provided, leaders use sensemaking to make meaning of the situation (Weick 1995). Sensemaking theory is generally understood to be a cognitive act of taking in information, framing it, and using it to determine actions and behaviors in a way that manages meaning for individuals (Weick et al., 2005).

Understanding the actions of district leadership during controversy will provide leaders the ability to view the organization through a prism of how others may view, or make sense of, the same situation. This reflective approach will assist with managing the various demands of the role of governing the school and identify how to move the organization forward. Therefore, this study will describe and analyze the perceptions of superintendents and Board of Education members as they respond to controversial policies that have impacted their districts.

Worldview

Both my experiences as an administrator and my worldview helped me to conceptualize this study. Through a constructivist worldview, a belief that people actively construct their own subjective representations of objective reality, I seek to understand the world in which I work (Gearing, 2004). Under the constructivist worldview, I was seeking to understand the world in which I am an educational leader. I have created meaning out my own experiences, however I realize that they could be subjective. In order to be more objective I relied on the views of my participants' and my conclusions

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on how they interpret the world. Specifically, I looked to understand how the participants made sense of the given situations, and understood the culture and climate in which to move the organization forward. I am bound by my experiences and the limited number of districts in which I have experienced.

Significance of Research

Although this study was focused on public K-12 school districts in the State of New Jersey, the findings and insights could lead to further research in pursuit of more specific knowledge for specific constituencies. The findings may have significant implications to future research, policy, and practice of educational leaders and policy makers. The practice of educational leaders can be changed to better foster a cohesive school community, as a result of cognitive behaviors to implement policies. A significant amount of research is available on the topic of superintendent leadership, board of education relationships, as well as policy implementation. However, little research has directly addressed how the educational leaders are able to work through controversial policies. This research adds to the growing body of research about the sensemaking process in the field of education as leaders encounter policy mandates. Thus, as a result deepening researchers understanding about how sensemaking can be useful as a theoretical lens for studying this phenomenon. Understanding how educational leaders overcome obstacles and make sense of a situation to realign the District can have significant impact on educational leadership.

Advancing Practice

This study sought to inform the practice of educational leaders at the district level,

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specifically those that must approve and make certain that all adhere to the policies. While policies continue to change and controversies may vary district to district, this research will assist those who may have struggled with the implementation of a policy or initiative in general.

Research

The findings of this study can inform the broader discussion of policy implementation and educational leadership. Though this research focused on controversial policies, this research can inform leaders at levels of the school district to reflect on any controversial situation and determine the necessary steps to move everyone in the organization forward.

Delimitations

As with all research, this qualitative case study had some limitations. Qualitative research allows for a deep understanding of an issue or event, however, the event being studied is bounded in time and activity (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Therefore, the study is context dependent and may not be applied directly to another case. For this qualitative research, interviews were conducted through semi-structured interview protocols. Semi-structured interviews invite interviewees to express themselves openly and freely (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Member checking was also employed, this approached allowed for participants that were interviewed were permitted to review the transcribed interviews and provide feedback to the interpretation; thus advancing credibility with the findings (Toma, 2006). The same protocol and methodological protocol across the different educational settings. To further support the

credibility of the findings, external validity is reviewed.

For this study superintendents and BOE members were asked to reflect on controversial policies the district had encountered previously specifically in school years 2015-2017. Therefore, the amount of detail that the participants were able to recall may be affected.

Although bracketing of personal paradigms, belief, assumptions of meaning can be used to eliminate personal bias, past experience as a Superintendent has allowed me to better understand the participants and therefore make more quality inferences (Gearing, 2004). In order to best demonstrate this in my research, I kept field notes about each event, specifically during the BOE meetings, review of BOE minutes.

Participants

Purposeful sampling strategies were used to select participants for the study. Purposeful sampling is defined as the means by which a particular group of participants is chosen to participate in a study (Creswell, 2013). Patton (2014) suggested purposeful sampling strategies as a useful framework for thinking about who should be interviewed. To select the educational leaders for this study, the selection process was based on the following criteria: the educational leaders must be from a K-12 public school district in the state of New Jersey, and they must have encountered a controversial policy implementation as identified through media coverage.

Researcher Role

Public education has been the basis of my career. As a superintendent in a public school district in New Jersey, I must adhere to and require that my staff uphold board-

approved policies. One of my philosophies is that all district leaders must be transparent and work to get others to understand why policies are implemented. District leaders are influential members of the school community and must work together to maintain a common message. If a mandated policy does not align with the mission of the district or the belief of the school community, I am interested how the district leaders build consensus. The goal of this research is to identify how other district leaders make sense of policies that may be controversial and realign the organization toward a common goal.

Limiting this study at public schools within the State of New Jersey allowed ease in access to other district leaders. Although bracketing of personal paradigms, belief, assumptions of meaning was used to eliminate personal bias, past experience as a Superintendent allowed me to better understand the participants and therefore make more quality inferences (Gearing, 2004). I operated out of a framework that I created through my own experiences, I continuously journaled to monitor my own assumptions and bracketed them during data analysis. I found that a multiple case study provided the best possible means to understand and generalize the data through various settings and to understand the lived experiences.

Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. This, the first chapter, includes the context and purpose of the study, narrowing it from broad to specific. The research problem and research questions are stated, along with a definition of key terms, theoretical framework, and significance of the study. Chapter Two explores the literature significant to policy, the development and roles of board of education members and

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school superintendents, and theoretical perspective of sensemaking. Chapter Three reviews the methodology in this study. Chapter Four discusses the study's overall findings, and Chapter Five provides conclusions and implications that I have derived from the study.

<center>**Chapter 2**</center>

<center>**Literature Review**</center>

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to explore the literature related to my topic to better situate this study in its proper context. Navigating the complexity of policy change, especially controversial policies, can be complicated for educational leaders attempting to lead in a way that is instructionally sound (Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary, 2015; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Educational reform is full of innovative ideas or policies that fail to get implemented, or that are successful in one situation but not in another (Ball, Maguire, Braun, 2012; Fullan, Cuttress, Kilcher, 2005; Fullan & Scott, 2016). Policy makers do not want to be slowed down by knowledge of change. However, the complexity of a school community may impede the ability of the policy to be implemented as it is intended (Frankenber & Diem, 2013; Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012).

This literature review begins with the history of the role of the superintendent and the board of education at the local level. An overview of policy development is summarized. The literature review has revealed how complex the position of educational leader is today. This research uses a conceptual framework considering the influence placed upon educational leaders, specifically superintendents and BOE members, as they make sense of a controversial policy through Weick's (1995) Sensemaking Theory.

The Historical Development of School District Leadership

   Superintendent. The role and performance expectations of the superintendent have undergone significant changes in response to the increased complexity and changing conditions of the U.S. public school system. Superintendents' leadership priorities have

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transformed to reflect the values, needs, and expectations of the population and various changes in the U.S.

Historically, the superintendent's role has incorporated various responsibilities (Fowler, 2013; Frankenberg & Diem, 2013). Kowalski (2005) discussed how normative roles and expectations of superintendents had evolved and became more extensive, complex, and demanding. The role and expectation of the superintendent initially was to coordinate programs, align instructional practices among teachers, manage business practices, maintain financial records, and develop purchasing processes among the schools and act as a secretary to the board of education (Honig, 2012; Eadie & Houston, 2002; Grissom & Andersen, 2012). Additional roles and responsibilities of the superintendent developed in reaction to changing societal needs. For example, from the late 19th century through the beginning of the 20th century, superintendents evolved to be teachers and scholars (Land, 2002; Eadie & Houston, 2002). As this was a time in United States history when more than half of the nation's white children did not attend formal education institutions, concerned religious activists advocated for laws to require education. It was also during this time that Jim Crow laws restricted or segregated education for African-American children and the rate of illiteracy was increasing. These political and social structures required superintendents to develop skills not only as teachers, scholars, but also managers to address the needs of society and individual communities (Eadie & Houston, 2002; Land, 2002; Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Kowalski, 2005).

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Social, cultural, and economical structures in the 1960s shifted to an increased focus on vocational education and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Superintendents were required to expand their responsibilities, encompassing the roles of teacher, scholar, statesman, and social activist all while developing communication practices and political ties within the community (Kowalski & Björk, 2005; Jacobsen, & Saultz, 2012). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the role of superintendent varied throughout the nation as new policies were implemented to meet federal legislation (Frankenberg & Diem, 2013). It was at this time the power of the superintendent and the board of education was weakened as the federal and state governments mandated several requirements and regulations (Kowalski et al., 2011; Hess, 2008; Land, 2002; Ravitch, 2010).

Peterkin, Jewell-Sherman, Kelly, and Boozer (2011) found the emergence of legislation such as No Child Left Behind (2001) heightened the complexity of the superintendent to address the challenges of political pressures and conflicting interests. The present-day responsibilities, knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of a superintendent throughout the U.S. are diverse and complex when compared with its original establishment (Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). Close examination of the role and expectation of superintendents in New Jersey can be identified through state certifications and New Jersey School Board Association. New Jersey School Boards Association (2014) identified the responsibilities of today's superintendents are divided into three areas: the chief advisor to the board of education, the executive officer of the school district, and the educational leader of the community. The superintendent is charged with implementing the board's policy decisions and sets

the tone for the district (Eadie & Houston, 2002; Fowler, 2013). As the chief advisor to the board, the superintendent updates the BOE on district problems or issues, providing background information, alternatives, suggestions, and recommendations before decisions are made (Ball et al, 2012). The superintendent must keep the BOE current on district operations (Fowler, 2013; Fiore, 2011). As the top education professional, the superintendent continually evaluates and assesses how policies are being implemented, keeping aware of those which are working well, those which need changing, and those areas which need new policy (NJSBA, 2014; Ball et al, 2012; Fowler, 2013). Glass and Franceschini (2007) explained these expectations: "superintendents play a unique and critical role being the connecting link between schools and communities. . . . These men and women are directly charged with a societal responsibility of administering resources and efforts to ensure the community's children meet ever-rising academic standards" (p. xiii). As the executive officer of the school district, the superintendent is responsible for not only being the instructional leader, but also making certain that the district is adhering to federal and state requirements, and administering the policies adopted by the school board (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012).

While the superintendent's role and responsibilities have been defined and redefined based on the societal needs of individuals in different eras, one constant in the primary role of superintendent is to manage people, mainly the board of education, through the process of change and adherence to educational policy (Eadie, & Houston, 2002; Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012; Fowler, 2013; Frankenberg, & Diem, 2013). A superintendent must be the leader to move the organization through the process. Effective

leaders must combine personal, interpersonal, and cognitive capabilities and competencies, as well as role-specific and generic skills to manage change effectively (Kowalski, 2005; Fullan & Scott, 2016). Often encountering demanding situations, superintendents must remain cool, empathize, understand differences, and work to find solutions through joint action, while maintaining compliance and retaining the vision and mission of the district (Kowalski et al., 2011; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Woulfin et al., 2016).

Local school boards. The history of education in the United States has evolved as societal issues influenced the needs of the public school system. This democratic approach was established to keep educational policy decisions in the hands of local citizens (Frankenger & Diem, 2013; Land, 2002; Danzberger, 1994). School board members are expected to work collaboratively with each other and the district superintendent to ensure that the school district's educational needs are met and concerns are addressed (Datnow, 2006; Diem et al, 2015). Local boards have considerable autonomy to dictate the policy and direction of the district (Fiore, 2011; Diem et al., 2015). However, due to increasing demands and additional federal and state legislation has lessened the power of the local board (Howell, 2005; Land, 2002; Frankenger & Diem, 2013).

School boards can be traced to town meetings established in Massachusetts in the late 1700s. Communities shifted power from the school boards to an individual with the establishment of superintendents (Land, 2002; Eadie & Houston, 2002). As the power of the states increased, their formal authority to oversee public education was written into

their constitutions (Howell, 2005; Kwalski, 2005; Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012). The authority for states to govern education is often traced to the tenth amendment to the Constitution, which states "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people."

School boards transitioned to meeting regularly for the purpose of setting school policy in the first part of the twentieth century actions of the superintendent and board members became more clearly defined into hierarchical lines of authority (Land, 2002; Kowalksi et al, 2011). As society began to question local education leadership in the 1960s, BOE membership was modified. In some communities, members shifted from local chamber of commerce members to blue-collar workers, home-makers, and citizens who had specific agendas regarding changes that individuals believed should be made in the district (Land, 2002; Eadie & Houston, 2002). Federal and state mandates and regulations evolved to include a stronger sense of accountability measurements on student achievement (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). With each new legislative measure, more power was taken from local school boards' decision-making ability and overall traditional power (Mountford, 2004; Trujillo, 2013; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). The accountability movement had put school boards in new unfamiliar environments.

As outlined by New Jersey School Boards Association (2014) the laws, rules and regulations governing public schools pass through the legislature to the State Board of Education. The State Board's staff, the Department of Education, has the authority to

carry out the mandates created by those in higher offices. The board of education

develops policies that govern school operation in compliance with state and federal laws

and regulations (NJSBA, 2014). The BOE's primary job is not to "run" the district, but to

ensure that the school district is well run (Eadie & Houston, 2002; Jacobsen & Saultz,

2012). The written policies of the board provide guidance and direction to the chief

school administrator for making decisions and taking action (NJSBA, 2014). Well-crafted

policies minimize ambiguity between the board and its chief school administrator and

promote the smooth operation of the school system (Eadie & Houston, 2002; Fiore, 2011;

Fowler, 2013).

Currently, local BOE members are elected state officials, empowered by state law

to govern the public schools at a local level. They are representatives of their community

with oversight authority derived from the state constitution and the legislature (Hamann

& Lane, 2004; Jacobsen, & Saultz, 2012). As elected officials they must be responsive to

interest groups that wish to see their perspective mirrored in school policies and is the

driving factor to obtain a seat on the board (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Danzberger,

1994; Mountford, 2004; Trujillo, 2013). Some school board members view policy setting

as an exercise in persuading others to side with a common agenda (Trujillo, 2013). Thus,

an individual board member may use coercion with educators in the organization to

ensure policy is implemented to as he/she sees fit (Kowalski et al 2011; Diem et al,

2015). A survey of superintendents found that 70% felt there were members of their

school board who represented specific, narrow constituencies (Farkas et al., 2001).

Additionally, superintendents reported that often members with special interests and

agendas often dominate the board (Farkas et al., 2001). Additionally, since the board has

the authority to hire and fire superintendents, some board members leverage their power

to ensure that superintendents adhere to the wishes of the board (Mountford, 2014;

Trujillo, 2013).

Diem, Frankenberg, & Clearly's (2015) qualitative case study supported the

previous research of the role of school boards in implementing policies, specifically

diversity policies in a post- *Parents Involved* era (Fowler, 2013; Trujillo, 2013). Data

collection included 37 interviews with school district officials and community

stakeholders to understand the varying levels of how the school boards make policy

decisions while navigating the politics of their local communities and surrounding racial

diversity. This research supports the assertion that school board policy making can be

highly influenced by the social and political contexts in which school districts are

situated. Board members navigate the politics of their communities and the competing

interests deciding on policies that accommodate and appease their constituents (Howell,

2005; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012).

Researchers believe that local communities are best suited to address their

educational issues through local school boards (Rice, 2014). However, this has become

more difficult as Federal mandates, such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and the Race to

the Top (2009), dictated to by the Federal government with little input from local

communities (Gerwertz, 2011). Frankenberg and Diem (2013) found school boards have

become increasingly complex, as various stakeholders have influence in educational

policy.

Levels of Policy Development

Federal laws. There are various layers of law that govern public education. Regulation begins at the federal level where the U. S. Congress makes laws affecting various fields of education. In addition to congressional acts, federal agencies create rules and regulations that implement federal law and affect all school districts. For example, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, passed by Congress in 1975, was the first special education law directed at students with physical and mental disabilities. The law stated that public schools must provide children with special needs the same opportunities for education as other children. States receiving federal funds were required to adhere to this law. Special education and remedial programs were established to ensure that all children have the programs and services available to them that are necessary to offer the opportunity for a meaningful education and significant learning.

State statute. Similarly, each state is given the responsibility to enact state laws affecting education. The N. J. Legislature consistently drafts bills designed to become state statues regarding education in the state. If bills are signed into law by the Governor, they become part of the body of education law entitled New Jersey Statutes Annotated (N.J.S.A) Title 18A. Examples of statutes included in Title 18A are the school funding law and the Charter School Program Act 1995.

State regulation. Details about procedures and applications often are necessary for state education statutes to be implemented. These are developed by the Department of Education along with the Commission of Education and State Board of Education. Once a law has been enacted, the process begins with a code proposal, if necessary. The

Commissioner or State BOE begin discussion of the proposed code, also referred to as rules or regulations, and the public is invited to provide input. The code proposal is revised and then adopted by the Commissioner or State Board, at which time it is added to the New Jersey Administrative Code 6 or 6A. The state board has adopted code for the education of students with disabilities, 6A:14. Rules and regulations adopted by a state agency have the force of law unless changed by the agency or invalidated by court action or a change in statute.

      Local policy. Local districts are regulated by statute, code and decisional law, as well as state and local policy. It is the responsibility of the local board of education to set the policies and procedures that most directly affect students and staff within the districts. Local policies generally are considered valid as long as they do not conflict with provisions of federal or state statutes and regulations. Disputes that arise from local board decisions can be brought before the Commissioner of Education for a legal determination when they involve questions of education law. However, local board decisions cannot be voided by the Commissioner unless they are found to be in violation of state law. The Commissioner's judgment cannot be substituted for that of the local board.

Effective Policy Implementation

      Educational issues and policies are continuously being debated at the federal, state, and local levels. District leaders must build the relationship between federal, state, and local policies and translate the policy into practice at the local level (Honig, 2006, 2012; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Woulfin et al., 2016). As Fowler (2013) discusses, the policy process is a sequence followed to find solutions to issues. These issues are

generally controversial and thus, the process can assist in legitimizing an approach to a policy's creation (Fowler, 2013). The understanding is that all policy processes are not necessarily linear. The success of a policy depends upon the beliefs, relationships, politics, knowledge, and ability of the people that the policy affects, and the organizational culture of the places where they work (Honig, 2006; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). An issue evolves as it is defined, and often includes agenda setting. Once this occurs, the issue is often believed to be serious, especially by politicians (Fowler, 2013). A policy is needed to address how this problem could be solved.

During policy adoption, policy is appropriated through the government body by majority vote in Congress and in state legislatures. At the local level, statutes are passed through the state department of education, and local boards of education or college boards and senior leadership (Fowler, 2013). At the implementation level of a policy, the K-12 district administrators, principals, and classroom teachers or the higher education institution leadership will implement the action and cause of the policy. The success of the policy will depend on the ability to implement the policy at this level (Datnow, 2006; Diem et al., 2015). Often as policies are implemented, substantial modifications will take place (Diem et al., 2015; Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Fowler, 2013). It is important that the institution, or governing body, evaluate the policies to determine if they work as intended and if the proposed needs have been met Frankenberg & Diem, 2013; Fowler, 2013).

Woulfin, Donaldson, and Gonzales' (2016) qualitative study of 14 districts in Connecticut highlight the relationship between state, policy, and district leadership when required to implement the state's mandated teacher evaluation system. The study drew from the framing theory to analyze district leaders' efforts to promote the implementation of the evaluation system. Though the framing of the evaluation policy met the structure and content of the state policy, it found that district leaders emphasized the accountability aspects rather than the development. Thus, leaders failed to motivate principals and put understanding to the reason for the change. When issues arise, the analysis of the implementation process helps to alleviate contradictions that exist between the actual and the ideal. District leaders must have a deep understanding of the policy and be able to translate state policy into school level change to expand on the policy messages to diverse audiences (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Woulfin et al., 2016). Through the evaluation process, stakeholders will look at the effectiveness of the policy through its implementation (Fowler, 2013).

Resistance. Natural resistance to change, particularly paradigm-shift of expected behavioral changes and individual belief systems that impact the relationships within the organization and the culture of the organization – a "second-order" change (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Fouts, 2003; Hall, Hord, Auguiler, Zeoeda, & von Frank, 2011) – presents an obstacle to the transformative effect intended by policy writers. Schools also vary greatly not only in the compliance with policy, but with the authentic acceptance of policy and accommodation of new, policy-driven ideas into their range of practice (Fowler, 2013; Glass et al., 2007). There is a human tendency to resist change, because it

forces people to adopt new ways of doing things (Fullan & Scott, 2016). In order to cope with this recurring problem, school leaders must understand why people resist change.

Both external and internal forces, such as the laws and regulations, and administrative processes, can create the need for change in school organizations. Research has supported the idea of policy and school practices being separated (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Driscoll, 1995; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). Educators for whom a policy makes sense and resonates with their own personal beliefs are more likely to adhere to that policy (Coburn, 2005; Honig, 2012). Research suggests that it is important to analyze not only how individuals become aware, make sense of, and form attitudes about policies (federal, state, or local), but also how school and district leaders do the same as they are often the front line of sharing the message (Spillane et al., 2002; Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013). Ideally, policy implementation would involve close alignment between policy mandates and what schools actually do. Rather than a "top down" and bottom up" policy makers, along with the schools and communities must work together toward a common goal (Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012; Fullan et al., 2005).

Theoretical Perspectives

Policy implementation is often viewed in a linear, top-down approach, based on the assumption that school-based educators will rationally and predictably carry out the reforms they are instructed to implement as a result of new policies. However, each policy is implemented in a unique school culture with varying reality when it is interpreted, analyzed, and reshaped at the district level (Datnow & Park, 2009). Spillane,

Reiser and Reimer (2002) call the process of interpreting educational policy at the level of schools "sensemaking," because it tries to take into account the personal histories and contexts of educators as they work to "make sense" of or understand what it is that policy calls for in terms of their daily work.

Sensemaking

The term sensemaking has been used in various fields, specifically in education (Weick, 1995; Sariento & Stahl, 2006). Sensemaking can be defined as finding meaning in a situation. Specifically, sensemaking determines how an individual understands and reacts to a particular situation within a particular context. Education literature describes how educators make sense, frame, derive, and interpret multiple messages they receive from their school environments (Brown et al., 2008; Coburn, 2006; Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita & Zoltners, 2002; Weick, Sutchliffe, & Obstfel, 2005).

Sensemaking occurs most often in uncertain, ambiguous, and stressful climates that disrupt typical and routine behaviors (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking seeks to answer, "What is going on here?" as individuals attempt to make sense of events or information that is impacting an organization (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking may be discovered through written and spoken narratives, as individuals come to understand the events that they have (or may currently) experienced. Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as a process that included the following seven characteristics: identify construction, retrospect, enactment, social, ongoing, extracted cues, and plausibility. Sensemaking looks to the past through the awareness that individuals make sense of their actions only after they have been performed.

Sensemaking to Implement Policy

        Policy interpretations influence how practitioners implement the policy (Chase, 2016; Yanow, 1996). School leaders are called upon to address a range of issues, many of which can be controversial and translate the policy into practice (Honig, 2012; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Woulfin et al., 2016). As outlined by Coburn (2012) and Spillane (2000), sensemaking – the process by which practitioners are influenced by factors in the policy environment as make sense or meaning of policies – has a significant impact on how policies are implemented (Weick et al, 2005; Chase, 2016). External forces and context of power influence the means in which policy is understood and implemented (Chase, 2016; Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). Sensemaking assists leaders develop a sophisticated analysis of context and an understanding of the dynamic relationship between the variables that impact their organization.

        The success of a policy depends upon the beliefs, relationships, politics, knowledge, and ability of the people that the policy affects, and the organizational culture of the places where they work (Honig, 2006; Brown et al, 2008). During the 2015-2016 school year, the Pascack School District in New Jersey encountered the debate to permit students identified as transgender to use different bathrooms (Ma, 2016). The BOE tabled the policy implementation upon resistance from the community. Additional school board meetings provided a forum for both sides of the debate to voice concerns, providing the school board an opportunity to make sense of the community response and balance it with the legal requirements (Ma, 2016). How a superintendent and school board members

handle controversy when it erupts in policy and school operations is an important topic to examine.

Sensemaking involves placing events within a framework, comprehending, redressing surprises, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning (Weick, 1995; Weick et al, 2005). As in the Pascack School District example, the objections from the community varied from rights of the other students to religious beliefs (Ma, 2016). For school leaders to effectively navigate the policy issues, the superintendent and board members must understand the system of public school governance and have the ability to develop a relationship with the various members of the community (Weick et al, 2005; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012; Hoyle, 2005).

School leaders throughout the U.S. are called upon to address a range of issues, many of which can be controversial. The controversy most often exists at the local level. An example of policy discourse within a school community occurred during the 2016-2017 school year, when a student in the Cherry Hill School District in New Jersey challenged the BOE and the Superintendent on his right to bring his service dog on the school bus (Shelly, 2017). News coverage highlighted that the current school policy forbid students from bringing service dogs on school buses, which contradicts federal Americans With Disabilities Act and a 2015 state law that specified "A student with a disability, including autism, shall be permitted access for a service animal in school buildings, including the classroom, on school buses, and on school grounds." When approached by the student, the superintendent responded that a revised policy would be

introduced at the next BOE meeting. To meet the needs of the law and students' rights, the superintendent claimed that the revised policy will include a specific process that students must follow (Shelly, 2017). From Weick's perspective sensemaking seeks to answer, "What is going on here?" as individual attempt to make sense of events or information affect an organization (Weick, 1995). In this framing, the individuals create their environments and determine what is relevant and what explanations are acceptable (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008).

Sensemaking enables leaders to have a better grasp of what is going on in their environments. This complex process is established through the following steps: exploring the wider systems, creating a map of the current situation, and acting to change the system to learn more about it (Weick et al, 2005; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is a cycle of creating experiences and environments by such activities as identifying the specific problems within problematic situations and identifying cues to be attended to in the process of interpreting events (Weick et al, 2005). Through an in-depth qualitative case study, Chase (2016) identified that policy interpretation can influence whether a policy improves equity or maintains the status quo. Drawing on sensemaking theory Chase examined factors within higher education that will influence how a policy is implemented or in these cases are resisted. Coburn (2001) demonstrated that the current practices, worldviews, and shared understanding influence policy interpretations, whereas Chase's (2016) findings identified the inherent politics involved in the interpretation of policy. As Lin's (2000) study determined, staff are more likely to implement a policy if it is perceived as beneficial to them. Practitioners act against it (the policy) when the policy is

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a threat to their self-interest. Thus, powerful groups and individuals play a role in how a policy is interpreted (Chase, 2016).

Sensemaking theory enhances the understanding of leaders' ability to lead an organization in response to policy mandates by clarifying the social cognitive processes through the organization is understood (Weick, 1995). It also explicates the role of social interactions as the central mechanism through which the organization shapes meanings about policies and devises means of carrying them out within their existing practices. The cognitive framework for which the leader's action completes will influence the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of the followers.

Summary

A review of current literature provided a theoretical foundation essential to demonstrate how public school district leaders determine how to frame the obstacles encountered, and reflect upon the actions to make sense of a controversial policy. The following topics were explored: history and development of the roles of superintendents and the BOE, review of policy development from the federal to local level, sensemaking theory.

In discussing sensemaking, educational leaders are faced with multiple streams of input. Educational leaders often are influenced by their personal beliefs, previous experiences, the practical demands of their organization, and their professional communities. Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as a process that help decision-makers to answer the question, "what's going on here?" when they experience something new.

Educational leaders, which include the BOE and the superintendent, have the power to develop and drive the solution to address controversial policies. These leaders must be able to reflect on the current issues and work within the school environment to overcome the obstacles and maintain the vision for the school district.

Chapter 3

Method

This descriptive multiple-case study analyzed how a purposeful sample of similar K-12 school districts in New Jersey reacted to controversial policies that disrupted the school community. The goal of the research was to understand the experiences of Superintendents and BOE members who have experienced controversy in their district and were able to move the district forward. The study considered the superintendents' and the board of education members' actions during controversial policy. The case is bound by the sensemaking process that occurs when educational leaders encounter a controversial BOE policy (Weick, 1995). The study sought to understand how educational leaders framed a situation and were able to think about others, their situations, learn from experiences, and translate that into effective action and move the organization forward (Bolman & Gallos, 2011). The major sampling strategy for this study was purposeful sampling, specifically criterion sampling strategy for the identification and selection of individuals that were knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1994, Patton, 2014). Each participant in this research was selected based on homogenous and criterion sampling methods (Creswell, 2013). These techniques provided me with greater opportunities to gather relevant information and develop deeper insight on the research topic.

The K-12 public school districts located in NJ were the focus of the descriptive multiple-case study because of the ability to utilize the BOE structure. The K-12 structure

in a public school district provides a wider range of policies that are required due to the acceptance of federal and state funding, but some of these policies may impact a school community. The K-12 leadership structure is one of a superintendent and BOE members, of which the members may reflect and frame the controversy in varying means. Public schools must adhere to federal, state, and local laws and regulations. Because public policies may not align to the values or beliefs of a school community, policies can cause controversy. Thus, public schools provide a wider range of participants to select for this study. My experiences in education have been framed around K-12 public school structure; as a result, my worldview of school policy implementation is framed in this format. The K-12 public school districts sites chosen for this multiple case study were purposefully selected, based on their media coverage due to a controversial BOE policy that occurred between the years 2015-2017.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with superintendents and board of education members. These interviews helped to provide a greater depth of understanding of the manner (Creswell, 2013) in which superintendents and BOE members made sense of a controversial policy gaining examples of the lived experiences provided by the district leaders. As well, educational leaders were able to frame the situation and reframe actions when their worldview did not adhere to the school community. BOE meeting minutes, observation of participants in public meetings, and media coverage were further reviewed. Each participant in this research was selected based on criterion sampling methods (Creswell, 2013; Patton 2001). These techniques provided me with greater opportunities to gather relevant information and develop deeper

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insight on the research topic.

Research Questions

Three research questions, and additional sub-questions, guided the exploration of educational leaders, specifically superintendent of schools and BOE members, perceptions of and response to controversial policies that have impacted their school:

1. How do board of education members and the superintendent describe the influence of adversity, challenge, and confusion of policy adoption and implementation?

2. How do educational leaders frame their organizations and determine the actions to lead effectively?

3. How did district leaders make sense of (understand, perceive, critique and/or experience) controversial policies impacting their district?

    a. What ideas experiences, conditions, school structures and/or policy tools influence the district leaders' sensemaking of, responses to, the controversial policy?

    b. What did the district leaders say about their ability to lead during the time of implementation of the controversial policy?

Most literature on the superintendent's role focuses on instructional leadership, as well as the negative relationships of superintendents and school boards. From this research, additional insight in the cognitive behavioral aspect that district leaders use when implementing a policy, along with identifying the characteristics of a collaborative approach to address community needs. By acquiring the data from the superintendent and

data from the school board members, plus observations of the BOE meeting and review of BOE meeting minutes, data triangulation was completed to validate themes that were identified.

Rationale and Assumptions

Qualitative studies seek to understand how people make meaning of their world through their lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research strives to answer the "how" and "why" of human behavior, opinion, and experience (Yin, 2014) and is collected in natural settings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). Data collection in qualitative research generally includes interviews, observations, and review of documents. The researcher is considered the primary instrument of data collection (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014).

The primary qualitative strategy of inquiry employed by this study is multiple case study. The case study method is used to contribute to the knowledge of an individual, a group, an organization, a social, or political phenomena (Yin, 20013). Case study research allows for exploring deeply into the unique attributes of an individual case and communicating those qualities through thick description and well-crafted story (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; 2006). Stake (1995) explains that "not everything is a case" (p. 2). A case must be a bounded, integrated system, such as a person or program; it is "a specific, a complex, functioning thing" (Stake, 1995, p. 2). Stake (2006) explains that an instrumental case study is used when the study goes beyond the case. The case is of secondary interest; it is a supportive role, facilitating the understanding of something else. This approach is appropriate for this case study as the purpose of this study is to detail the

characteristics of how superintendents and BOE members made sense of a controversial policy gaining examples of the lived experiences provided by the district leaders.

This study used a qualitative methodology to understand and interpret the factors that contributed to the controversial policy and how the leaders moved the organization through it. Stake (2006) suggests that qualitative inquiry was developed to study the experiences of real people operating in real situations. K-12 superintendents' and board of education members' cognitive approach to make sense of a controversial policy and how the leaders thought about the situation will define this case study.

Qualitative case inquiry is the optimal method to answer the substantive research questions of "how" and "why" in this study. Practical knowledge of the educational leaders, the participants, is captured through interviews, observations, and review of physical artifact providing insight into how the educational leaders made sense of the given situations. This case will allow me to study and analyze these practices within each setting and across multiple settings (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 2006).

Multiple Case Study Features

The purpose of a multiple case study is to examine multiple cases, parts or members – each with its own unique problems and relationships (Stake, 2006). According to Merriam (2009), the power of a multiple case study is in presenting descriptive subunits and then constructing a common analysis of the research topic based on generalizations that are evident across the subunits. This distinct research approach is flexible and able to adapt many sources of data collection, capturing the relationship of the participants (Stake, 2006). A multiple case study design works to understand each

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case "almost as if it is the only one" (Stake, 2006, p. 1) and then looks across the case

findings to understand. For this study, a comparative analysis was presented of how

superintendents and BOE members in two identified K-12 public school districts reacted

to controversial policies. Each public school district is its own case, as well as, each

educational leader interviewed is a case. Interviews allowed for district leaders to provide

information from lived experiences regarding the experiences of making sense of a

controversial board policy (Weick, 1995). Specifically, since policy implementation is

deeply embedded in the school community in which they are used, multiple case study is

a fitting methodology for the study.

Descriptive Case Study

A descriptive case (Yin, 2014) focuses on describing a phenomenon. The

investigation is an in-depth exploration within a specific bounded system. The

exploration occurs through an array of data collection and observation to create a detail-

rich image of the phenomenon being investigated (Yin, 2014). This phenomenon is

characteristic in many school districts; specifically, how superintendents and BOE

members made sense of a controversial policy gaining examples of the lived experiences

provided by these district leaders.

As discussed in Chapter 2, all public school districts are regulated by statute, code

and decisional law, and must follow state and local policy (DOE). The state establishes

the broader framework within which school districts must operate; local boards of

education set many of the policies and procedures that most directly affect students and

staff. Therefore, to understand fully the phenomenon the participants must have experienced a controversial BOE policy required by statute, code, and law.

Rationale

For this study, a qualitative approach was used. My worldview is one that in my prior experience as an educational leader gave me a direction for exploration in a qualitative form. The phenomenon of various reactions to a controversial policy existing within an educational setting was well-suited for qualitative research because educators are likely to apply personal perspectives and beliefs to the obstacle and the methodology to overcome it (Yin, 2014). Creswell (2014) articulated features of qualitative research that researchers must consider when determining a research method. The research topic must exist in an active reality that researchers cannot isolate for study (Creswell, 2014). The design of educational leaders' reaction to controversial policy implementation and lived policy implementation within the context of a controversial school community cannot be isolated for study. Field observations are necessary to capture the means in which the district leaders reacted to the situation and worked amongst themselves to address it.

Creswell (2013) also explained that qualitative research is designed to give voice to the experiences, values, and beliefs of research participants. For this study, district leaders in K-12 public schools grappled with the implementation of policies that may not be accepted by the school community, thus requiring them to reflect on their leadership and beliefs. A qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth examination of how district

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leaders in this study reflected on the controversial policy and adjusted their approach or actions.

Participant Selection

I conducted this research as a descriptive multiple case study to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of superintendents and BOE members who have faced and made sense of a controversial BOE policy. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis on districts that met specific criteria. Purposeful sampling is defined as the means by which a particular group of participants is chosen to participate in a study (Creswell, 2013). Patton (2014) suggested purposeful sampling strategies as a useful framework for thinking about who should be interviewed. For this study, participants were purposefully selected based on the following inclusion criteria: participants must be educational leaders, superintendent or BOE members, at one of the research sites, and the participants must be have engaged in a controversial policy issue that impacted the school community.

To determine which school districts I would study, I conducted an online search for public school districts in New Jersey that experienced controversy based on the implementation of BOE policy. K-12 public school districts are specified as school districts that are maintained at public expense, using federal and state aid, for the education of the children of the community and are part of free public education including primary and secondary schools (grades K-12). As outlined in the New Jersey Department of Education School Finance (2017), District Factor Groups (DFGs) represent an approximate measure of a school community's relative socioeconomic

status. The districts in this study are identified to be DFG "FG" ("School Finance", 2017) providing similar demographic information for comparison of the school community.

I narrowed the identified school districts based on the media coverage and the timeframe of the controversy, 2015-2017. The individuals were identified to be from different counties, cities, and schools to diversify the purposeful sampling of participants. While sensemaking is not practiced in isolation, it is important to note that each school district has its own culture, therefore organizational context plays an important role in the sensemaking process (Spillane et al, 2006; Weick, 1995). The organizational structure and school community can lead to differing understanding of the same policy and mandates within the same state (Spillane et al, 2006). The selected school districts were determined to be similar in size and enrollment. This permitted the cases to have similar structure and power within the educational leadership. Within an organization there may be one voice that is more influential than the others, or one network of leadership that is more influential than the rest, potentially placing the educational leaders within a school district to make sense of the policy and how to maneuver the district through the controversy (Coburn, 2005; Weick, 1995).

I contacted the districts' superintendent and reviewed my research study proposal. After the review of the proposal, a formal letter was sent to each corresponding superintendent to determine if board approval was required (see Appendix A). The superintendents reviewed my proposal with the BOE members to identify members that were on the board at the time a policy caused controversy and were willing to participate in the study. Applying criterion sampling strategy individuals that were knowledgeable

about or experienced with leading during a controversial BOE policy (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1994, Patton, 2014) were selected. After approval was obtained, I then met with the superintendent to establish the timeline for research. The dates selected were in conjunction with the school board's established BOE meetings and calendar of events that included BOE committee meetings.

According to Maxwell (2013), purposeful selection of the cases and the participants is appropriate for case study research because the goal of case study design is to inform researchers about the experiences of a particular population and to obtain the richest data possible. Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined condition of importance (Patton, 2002) thus bounding the unit (Stake, 2006). The districts were selected based on the media coverage of a controversial BOE policy and narrowed down to be districts of similar size.

The selection of two school districts was identified with a total of six participants – two coordinating superintendents and two BOE members from each district. Interviews took place until data saturation was met. Data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012), when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Approval of the Institutional Review Board on Human Subjects (IRB) at Rowan University was sought.

Instrumentation

Naturalistic research explores complex situations using a variety of techniques, including interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The data collected for this case study included an interview protocol for semi-structured interviews, observation at public BOE meetings, and review of physical artifacts, the BOE meeting minutes. I designed these data collection instruments, based on the research of Merriam (2009), and Miles et al. (2014). I used the same data collection instruments at both sites. In addition, I asked experts in the field and my community of practice to review these instruments for alignment with the research questions before I began data collection (Creswell, 2013). I also aligned these instruments with the research questions for this study (see Table 1).

Table 1

Data Source Matrix

Research Question	Data Source 1 Interviews	Data Source 2 Observation	Data Source 3 BOE Minutes
1. How do perception of leadership influence the adversity, challenge, and confusion of policy adoption and implementation?	Experience of leaders	Actions of leaders	Actions of leaders
2. How do educational leaders frame their organization and determine the actions to lead effectively?	Experience of leaders/Application	Actions of leaders	Actions of leaders
3. How did district leaders make sense of understand, perceive, critique and/or experience policies impacting their district?	Experience of leaders	Establishment of culture	Experiences of leaders

Research Question	Data Source 1 Interviews	Data Source 2 Observation	Data Source 3 BOE Minutes
a. What ideas, experiences, conditions, school structures and/or policy tools influence the district leaders' sensemaking of response to, the controversial policy?	Experience of educational leaders Information from educational leaders on policy	Establishment of culture	Experience of educational leaders
b. What did the district leaders say about their ability to lead during the time of implementation of the controversial policy?	Reaction of political pressure	Establishment of culture	Reaction of political pressure

Semi-Structured Interview

Interviews are integral to case study research (Yin, 2003). Interviewing involves

asking questions and getting answers from participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For this

qualitative research, interviews were conducted through semi-structured interview

protocols. Semi-structured interviews invite interviewees to express themselves openly

and freely (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A semi-structured

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interview was most appropriate, as it allowed for follow-up questions, both scripted and

unscripted, which enabled participants to speak freely on their views and lived

experiences (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Semi-structured interviews can provide

reliable, comparable qualitative data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interview protocols included demographic and "grand tour questions" (Rossman

& Rallis, 2012, p.132) to enhance conversation with the participants. These questions are

designed to allow the researcher to gain insights into the study's fundamental research

questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). To capture the sensemaking process of

educational leaders, I interviewed participants using semi-structured interviews. Each

participant is expected to have a unique experience and their own story to tell (Stake,

1995), thus it was important to follow the standard questions, but to also probe

participants to provide greater depth of information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Observation

Observation in qualitative research involves spending time in the setting. To

document the behaviors and interactions of the educational leaders and the community,

observations were conducted during a public BOE meeting. Observation fosters an in-

depth and rich understanding of a phenomenon, situation and/or setting and the

behavior of the participants in that setting (Creswell, 2014). Observation is an essential

part of gaining an understanding of naturalistic settings and its members' ways of

seeing (Hancock & Algozzine, 2012). Many researchers also record notes to assist in

determining what the observed events might mean and to provide help for answering

the research questions easily (Merriam, 2009).

I observed a public BOE meeting for each district participating in this study. I used criteria that Merriam (2009) recommended for observations of qualitative research in any setting to structure my observations. I adapted these criteria to fit this study as follows: (a) the physical setting, which included the physical layout and arrangement of the BOE meeting room, (b) the participants, which included the number and gender of BOE members and community participants in the BOE meeting room during the observation, (c) the interactions between the BOE members throughout the meeting; (d) conversation between the BOE members and the community before and after the BOE meeting, (e) subtle factors, which included how superintendent and BOE members interacted during the BOE meeting, and (f) researcher presence, which included the location of researcher during the observation and researcher interactions with the superintendent and BOE members. The intent of the observations was to record the behaviors the educational leaders used during public BOE meetings and document the lived experiences.

Physical Artifact Checklist

As Yin (2003) states physical artifacts, or documents, can play an important role in case study research. Documents can provide a rich source of information that can add to the data collected through interviews and observations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2012). BOE meeting minutes served as physical artifacts in this study. Data collected from documents can be used in the same manner as data from interviews (Merriam, 2009). Documents, such as policies and meeting minutes, can be informative addition to interviews or observations. However, I kept in mind that the BOE meeting minutes were

written for a specific purpose and audience (Yin, 2003) and written as an interpretation of the event (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Merriam (2009) specified that a qualitative researcher needs to make two considerations when collecting a particular data source: (a) whether the source contains information or insights relevant to the research question, and (b) whether it can be acquired in a reasonably practical and systematic manner. If the data does provide the information, then the source of data should be used (Merriam, 2009). For this study, the following areas were reviewed each document: (a) the reported interactions between the BOE members throughout the meeting; (b) the reported conversation between the BOE members and the community before and after the BOE meeting, (c) the reported subtle factors, which included how superintendent and BOE members interacted during the BOE meeting.

Data Collection Process

I applied for approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Rowan University to conduct this study. The IRB process ensured that participation in this study would not be harmful to participants.

Interviews. To capture the sensemaking process of educational leaders, I interviewed the participants using semi-structured interviews. Each participant is expected to have a unique experience and their own story to tell (Stake, 1995), thus it was important to follow the standard questions, but to also probe participants to provide greater depth of information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviews were conducted at the location of the BOE meetings, a public building, following the district's BOE meeting

and/or a committee meeting. Each session lasted approximately forty minutes. Interviews were recorded, with prior verbal consent, using a recording device and immediately transcribed following the session; thus providing exact quotations (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Member checking was also employed, this approached allowed for the participants to review the transcribed interviews and provide feedback or comments to the transcripts and return it to me. If I did not receive a response from the participants, I assumed the information was accurate and no further clarification was warranted.

Observations. Observation is an essential part of gaining an understanding of naturalistic settings and its members' ways of seeing (Hancock & Algozzine, 2012). To document the behaviors and interactions of the educational leaders and the community participating in this study, I conducted an observation of a public BOE meeting. The observations were conducted for approximately 90 minutes. This timeframe included 10 minutes prior to the official start of the meeting until approximately 10 minutes following the motion to adjourn the meeting. Observation notes were taken throughout.

Public Documents. As Yin (2003) states physical artifacts, or documents, can play an important role in case study research. Document can provide a rich source of information that can add to the data collected through interviews and observations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2012). BOE meeting minutes served as physical artifacts in this study. Specifically, I reviewed the website of the districts participating in this study. I read and printed the BOE minutes from previous BOE meetings. I kept in mind that the BOE meeting minutes were written for a specific purpose and audience (Yin, 2003) and written as an interpretation of the event (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Supplemental Evidence. Supplemental data collection included field notes that I wrote during and after each interview to ensure the nonverbal communication was noted and utilized to validate the findings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Throughout the research I wrote memos recording reflective notes about what I was learning from the data (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing, interactive process of examining, interpreting and reinterpreting of collected data (Maxwell, 2013). In case study research, making sense of information collected from multiple sources is a recursive process in which the researcher continuously examines and interprets the data throughout the investigative process (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

Throughout my research I collected data, specifically, I took notes and created analytic memos to keep track of preliminary analysis and record initial patterns of categories (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Field notes were made throughout the data collection to capture conceptual factors, initial impressions, and emerging themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This process allowed me to reflect on the data and ask questions about its meaning, and also served as a way to analyze how the data related to my research questions (Corbin, 2007; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Saldana, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

As Maxwell (2013) explains one of the first steps in qualitative analysis is to thoroughly read all transcripts from interviews in each setting. I read each transcript, memos and reviewed of the observation protocols to obtain a general sense of the

information and reflect on its overall meaning to the research questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

To make sense of the data collected, each piece was coded. Coding is defined as a short word or phrase that "symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). Coding is the critical link between data collection and the explanation of the data's meaning (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). First cycle coding methods happen during the initial coding of data and create a foundation for further analysis (Saldaña, 2009). The primary method I employed is the Elemental Method and its subcategories, Descriptive Coding, and In Vivo Coding. Descriptive coding is appropriate when analyzing field notes and physics artifacts, which were collected throughout the research. In Vivo coding is used to code a word or phrase from the actual language of participants (Saldaña, 2009). This provided me the opportunity to closely reflect on the interview transcripts and become attuned to the language and perspectives of the participants.

Second Cycle coding methods are a means of reanalyzing data coded through the First Cycle methods to "develop a sense of categorical thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization" (Stake, 2006 p. 207). In this cycle I applied Pattern Coding, a means to identify similarly coded data. This enabled me to organize and group the summaries into a small number for the development of themes (Saldaña, 2009). Themes are identified in each unit, or district, and then also across the cases (Stake, 2006). Themes must reflect the purpose of the research and respond to the questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Through coding, comparisons, similarities and patterns can be clearly

seen. This will support, or dispel, the educators' belief of how they made sense of the controversy (Weick, 1995).

Data Quality and Rigor

Case study research is a recursive process in which the researcher continuously examines and interprets the data to reach tentative conclusion and to refine the research questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Trustworthiness is essential for qualitative research (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Trustworthiness is demonstrated by taking steps during research design, data collection, and analysis to ensure that findings are credible, dependable, confirmable and transferable (Toma, 2006; Yin, 2014).

In qualitative case study, credibility depends on the degree to which others in the field agree with the constructions and interpretations of the researcher (Toma, 2006). I established this through the identification and inclusion of a literature review. A rich, thick description of the research was provided. Multiple data sources, documentary evidence, observations, interviews, and field notes were triangulated to generate the themes, creating confidence in the findings (Stake, 2006; Toma, 2006). Member checking was also employed, allowing participants who were interviewed to review the transcribed interviews and provide feedback to the interpretation; thus advancing credibility with the findings (Toma, 2006). The same protocol and methodological protocol were applied across the different educational settings. To further support the credibility of the findings, external validity was reviewed. External validity examined the research design to determine if the research findings can be generalized or transferred beyond the immediate

study sample (Yin, 2014). Multiple participants from two different school districts were used for the interviews, observations, and document reviews; thus expanding the opportunity to generalize the findings.

An audit trail was kept throughout the research. This allowed for notes of the events taking place in the study to enhance reflection while also examining other data sources (Creswell, 2013; Janesick, 1999; Yin, 2014). This also provided me the opportunity to bracket personal paradigms, beliefs, and assumptions of meanings (Gearing, 2004; Patton, 2014).

A case study must be applicable to another setting. Researchers are able to look holistically to determine the means in which the study can apply to another. Transferability is created through thick description of the context. The case study included a complete description of the setting, including the boundaries, and how the participants were selected, informing theory and practice (Toma, 2006).

Dependability of this study was confirmed as I was able to accommodate changes in the environment studied and in clear research questions (Toma, 2006). As data was collected I reflected on the data and revised the research questions if needed. Data was also collected in a range of settings. Research questions and findings were reviewed and discussed with experts in the field (Toma, 2006).

Confirmability, the concept that the data can be confirmed by another (Toma, 2006), was established a clear audit trail created throughout the research and identifying my own assumptions and biases as it may influence the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The audit trail provided an outsider to examine that process and products of the study.

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Through member checking and sharing my results with my community of practice and experts in the field, I was able to ensure that I bracketed my own meaning of the data and focused on the understanding of the perspectives of the data collected (Creswell, 2013; Toma, 2006). Table 2 outlines the data collected and strategies to confirm rigorous analysis.

Table 2

Trustworthiness Strategies and Justification

Criteria for assessing research quality and rigor	Strategy employed	Justification
Transferability	Diverse sample	Cross section of superintendent and board members in NJ, but commonality between demographics of districts
Legitimization	Audit trail, researcher journal, review of instruments by expert, member checking, member validation, code-recode, community of practice, peer review, bracketing, and alternative interpretations	Lived experiences of superintendent and BOE members
Generalizabity	Diverse sample	Superintendent and BOE members could be similar to those in the sample of NJ
Triangulation	Multiple data sources and collection techniques	Qualitative research
Confirmability and credibly	Audit trail, researcher journal	Qualitative research
Dependability	Protocol reviewed and critiques by expert, code-recode	To understand lived experiences
Creditability	Member checking	To understand lived experiences
Reliability	Review process with experts	Qualitative research

Researcher Role

Public education has been the basis of my career. As a superintendent in a public school district in New Jersey, I must adhere to and require that my staff uphold board-approved policies. One of my philosophies is that all district leaders must be transparent and work to get others to understand why policies are implemented. District leaders are influential members of the school community and must work together to maintain a common message. If a mandated policy does not align with the mission of the district or the belief of the school community, I am interested how the district leaders take contrasting perspectives and realign to a common goal that meets the needs of the policy. The goal of this research is to identify how other district leaders make sense of policies that may be controversial and realign the organization toward a common goal.

Limiting this study at public schools within the State of New Jersey allowed ease in access to other district leaders. Although bracketing of personal paradigms, belief, assumptions of meaning was used to eliminate personal bias, past experience as a Superintendent allowed me to better understand the participants and therefore make more quality inferences (Gearing, 2004). I operated out of a framework that I created through my own experiences, and I continuously journaled to monitor my own assumptions and bracketed them during data analysis. I found that a multiple case study provided the best possible means to understand and generalize the data through various settings and to understand the lived experiences.

Worldview

Both my experiences as an administrator and my worldview helped me to conceptualize my study. Through a constructivist worldview, a belief that people actively construct their own subjective representations of objective reality, I seek to understand the world in which I work (Gearing, 2004). Under the constructivist worldview, I was seeking to understand the world in which I am an educational leader. I have created meaning out my own experiences, however I realize that they could be subjective. In order to be more objective I relied on the views of my participants' and my conclusions on how they interpret the world in which they have encountered. Specifically, I looked to understand how the participants made sense of the given situations, and understood the culture and climate in which to move the organization forward. I am bound by my experiences and the limited number of districts in which I have experienced.

Ethical Issues

To ensure an ethical study, I applied for approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Rowan University to conduct this study. The IRB process ensured that participation in this study would not be harmful to participants.

Qualitative research consists of researchers observing, interviewing and interacting with their participants (Hatch, 2002). The nature and design of qualitative research inherently makes it vulnerable to several ethical issues. Ethical considerations must be acknowledged before qualitative researchers can begin their study. Hatch (2002) identified reciprocity as one major issue that must be considered when conducting qualitative research. Reciprocity is the bargaining between the researchers and the

participants to ensure that both parties benefit from the study (Hatch, 2002). Another

issue concerning qualitative research is the voluntary consent of participants. Many

qualitative research studies require individuals to provide personal information about

themselves (Babbie, 2007). Therefore, researchers must make sure that they obtain

informed consent before they begin their research (Babbie, 2007). Although researchers

may obtain consent, they still have a moral obligation to participants.

For this study, districts provided a letter documentation of willingness to

participate. All participants were informed of his or her rights, the purpose of the study,

the procedures to be undergone, and the potential risks and benefits of participation.

Specifically, each member was informed that he or she may withdraw at any time. All

participant data was collected, stored, and analyzed in a manner that maintained

participant privacy and confidentiality, such as the use of secure storage located off

school campus and the use of pseudonyms for the school districts, the schools, and the

participants.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this descriptive multiple-case study was to understand the actions of the educational leaders when implementing a policy that may be deemed controversial to the school community. I also sought to gain insight specifically on how the educational leaders made sense of the situation and were able to move the district forward, despite the belief of barriers within the community. This chapter consists of identified themes based on individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews with current education leaders, Board of Education (BOE) members and superintendents, who experienced controversy when the BOE implemented a policy, review of board of education meeting minutes, and observation from public board of education meeting policy, and an overview of key program documents.

The study considered the superintendents' and the board of education members' actions during a controversy of a policy. The case is bound by the sensemaking process that occurs when educational leaders encounter controversial BOE policy implementation. The study sought to understand how educational leaders reframed a situation and were able to think about others, their situations, learn from experiences, and translate that into effective action and move the organization forward.

Data Collection Overview

Interview transcripts, observation notes, and review of BOE minutes served as resources for this qualitative case study. A total of six educational leaders participated in this study. The interviews were conducted at the location of the BOE meetings, a public

building, following the district's BOE meeting and/or a committee meeting. Each session

lasted approximately forty minutes in length. Interviews were recorded, with prior verbal

consent, using a recording device and immediately transcribed following the session; thus

providing exact quotations (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These interviews

helped to provide a greater depth of understanding of the manner (Creswell, 2013) in

which superintendents and BOE members made sense of a controversial policy gaining

examples of the lived experiences provided by the district leaders. Educational leaders

were also able to frame the situation and reframe actions when their worldview did not

adhere to the school community.

BOE meeting minutes, observation of participants in public meetings, and media

coverage were further reviewed provided additional data for this research study. To

document the behaviors and interactions of the educational leaders and the community

participating in this study, I conducted an observation of a public BOE meeting. The

observations were conducted for approximately 90 minutes. This timeframe included 10

minutes prior to the official start of the meeting until approximately 10 minutes following

the motion to adjourn the meeting. Observation notes were taken throughout. Physical

artifacts, or documents, can play an important role in case study research (Yin, 2003).

BOE meeting minutes served as physical artifacts in this study. I read and printed the

BOE minutes from previous BOE meetings. Data collection ended when patterns of data

and reoccurring themes were present in the data and data saturation had occurred.

Cases

A total of six participants from two different school districts in New Jersey participated in the data collection phase of this study. Districts that participated in this study are identified to be District Factor Group (DFG) "FG." The DFGs represent an approximate measure of a community's relative socioeconomic status. The classification system provides a useful tool for examining student achievement and comparing similarly-situated school districts in other analyses. District D and District C enroll less than 3,000 students in grades Pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Both districts had encountered controversial policy implementation covered by local media.

District C. District C is a suburban town located in the southern part of New Jersey. It is a comprehensive public school district that served approximately 2,500 students in 2015 – 2016 school years. The district offers programs for students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The District is comprised of seven schools, five elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. During the 2015-2016 school years there were approximately 200 certified staff members. District C is identified in the New Jersey Department of Education as being a District Factor Group (DFG) of "FG," which is the fourth highest in the eight groupings. The DFG is identified based on socioeconomic characteristics, such as median income.

The participants from District C discussed various policies that they deemed controversial during the 2015-2016 and the 2016-2017 school. These policies included attendance, mandatory standardized assessments, and a bicycle policy. The participants identified specific policies he/she felt disrupted the school environment. These details are

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summarized in Table 2. Interviews were conducted on the campus of one of the elementary schools in the administrative offices, which are located in the basement. This is the elementary school where the Board of Education holds its monthly meetings in its gymnasium.

The first questions on the interview protocol served as introduction, allowing for the researcher to learn the role of the person, their role in policy implementation, and their knowledge or role of the identified controversy. These questions were very important as they gave the researcher the insight of the member's active role during the course of the controversy and how the member identified the ability of the organization to move forward.

District D. District D is a suburban town located in the southern part of New Jersey. It is a comprehensive public school district that served approximately 3,000 students in 2015 – 2016 school years. The district offers programs for students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The district is comprised of four schools, two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. During the 2015-2016 school years there were approximately 251 staff members. District D is identified in the New Jersey Department of Education as being a District Factor Group (DFG) of "FG," which is the fourth highest in the eight groupings. The DFG is identified based on socioeconomic characteristics, such as median income.

The interviews were held in Administrative Office which is located in an off campus building. The observation of the Board of Education was conducted at its monthly meeting that was held in high school. The participants in this study discussed

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various policies that he or she deemed controversial. These details are summarized in Table 2. The participants framed their discussion around policy issues he/she identified.

Participants

Participants were purposefully selected with the criteria being that they were in the role of educational leader from a K-12 Public School District in the state of New Jersey. The participants must have encountered a controversial policy implementation as identified through media coverage.

Participant C1. The first interviewee was female board of education member in district C. She had been on the BOE for 11 years. During the time on the board participant C1 revealed that her role in policies has been approving policies as recommended by the superintendent. As a member of the Board of Education, the interviewee has held various positions, specifically on the Policy Committee, the Facilities Committee, Vice President, and President of the Board of Education. During the time on the board C1 expressed there has been controversy, a time in which the public expressed loudly how the board was handling a situation. C1 identified that there were two policies that she felt were controversial to the district, a lateness policy and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) policy. C1 revealed details about the compulsory attendance policy that caused some pushback from parents, despite it being a long-standing policy upheld by the courts of New Jersey and the U.S. Supreme Court. The majority of C1 responses during the interview were framed around the PARCC standardized test administration. Specifically, C1 discussed how the

parents in the community did not want the district to administer the PARCC assessments. This controversy, as the participant indicated, could have absorbed all of their time.

Participant C2. The second interviewee was a female board of education member in district C. She had been on the BOE for 9 years. During the time on the board participant C2 revealed that her role in policies has been approving policy recommendations from the superintendent. She held various positions, specifically on the Policy Committee, the Curriculum Committee, and as the Vice President of the Board of Education. C2 identified that the policy that she felt was controversial was the "No Bicycle" policy. This policy prohibited students from riding bicycles to school. The district prohibited this practice as some students live far from the school he/she attends. The district maintained it was not safe for students to ride bicycles to and from school. Parents wanted children to be permitted to ride bicycles to increase healthy lifestyle and to reduce the congestion of vehicles around the school. The district stood on the stance of safety in and around the elementary school. As she revealed this is a policy that is often brought back to the board, despite being addressed the same every time.

Participant C3. The third interview, a male, was conducted with the superintendent of district C. The superintendent has been in the district for five years. During that time, C3 indicated he addressed several controversies at the BOE level and with the public. C3 explained that in his current district he proposes policy updates to the committee of the board, and then the full board takes action. During that time, he answers questions and addresses the concerns. The interviewee referenced the attendance policy that impacted both students and staff as one specific example that the board needed to

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address. As he revealed this policy was a requirement of the state and contractual obligation however, it was not well-received and caused some disagreement among parents and staff.

Participant D1. The first interviewee from District D was a female board of education member who had been on the Board for five years. During the time on the board participant D1 revealed that her role in policies had been approving policies as recommended by the superintendent. As a member of the Board of Education, the interviewee held various positions, specifically on the Curriculum Committee, Policy Committee, and the Facilities Committee of the Board of Education. During the time on the board D1 expressed there has been controversy that the Board and the superintendent had to address. The interviewee framed the interview around an enrichment policy that the BOE implemented, but was not well received by parents. Specifically, the BOE revised the identification process for students qualifying for the gifted and talented program. Parents were not satisfied with the revisions as they complained they were not notified of the alterations to eligibility in a timely manner. This controversy had recently occurred and the BOE member reiterated the need for the Board and the school community to be open with communication and changes to make sure everyone is clear when changes are proposed.

Participant D2. The second interviewee from District D was female board of education member who had been on and off the Board for a total of more than thirteen years. During the time on the board participant D2 revealed that her role in policies has been approving policies as it is recommended by the superintendent and at one time

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during a transition to a new superintendent D2 indicated she worked closely with New

Jersey School Boards Association to write policies for the school district. As a member of

the Board of Education, the interviewee has held various positions, specifically on the

Policy Committee, the Finance Committee, the Facilities Committee, and Vice President

of the Board of Education. Participant D2 defined a controversial policy as,

> (When) They are unhappy; parents aren't happy something we did or the principal
>
> did … but they tell you that they're not in agreement with what you're doing and
>
> as a board, they're going to make sure that you know that either at a meeting, an
>
> email, or on Facebook.

One such controversial policy D2 discussed the student code of conduct policy

that caused disagreement when the district disciplined students for underage drinking on

the weekend. Each district board of education is required to develop, adopt and

implement a code of student conduct (CSC) that establishes standards, policies and

procedures for positive student development and student behavioral expectations on

school grounds, including on school buses or at school-sponsored functions, and, if

determine appropriate by the board, conduct away from school grounds. The school

community pushed back against the BOE indicating the school was overstepping its

bounds. D2 revealed with some reservation the impact that this controversy had on the

superintendent's ability to lead, and ultimately the superintendent was dismissed.

Participant D3. The third interview, a male, was conducted with the

superintendent of district D. The superintendent has been in the district for four years.

During that time, D3 indicated he addressed several controversies at the BOE level and

with the public. Similar to participant D1, D3 framed the discussion around a controversy of a recent enrichment policy that had changed. Specifically, D3 revealed how the controversy brought to the board level had him reflect on his communication and the need for him to make sure he is clear with all parties along the way. Participant D3 expanded the importance of collaboration as he specified that,

> I, along with the Board, worked to identify the stakeholders of the organization to create an environment where we are saying the same thing, the same vision. A solid district is built on a strong community network, by that I mean one that is involved as each group brings a different perspective to the table...The message has to be the same, so we need to work together.

The interviewee further explained this in his responses as he indicated he must collaborate and work with all stakeholders to set a clear vision that all understand to set a new norm.

Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of important characteristics of the participants in this study and the coordinating policy controversy.

Table 3

Educational Leaders Interview Participants

Participant	Case	Code	Gender	Years in Educational Leadership	Role	Policy
Participant 1	District C	C1	Female	11 years	BOE Member	Assessment: Mandatory District testing
Participant 2	District C	C2	Female	9 years	BOE Member	Bicycle
Participant 3	District C	C3	Male	5 years	Superintendent	Attendance
Participant 1	District D	D1	Female	5 years	BOE Member	Enrichment
Participant 2	District D	D2	Female	13+ years	BOE Member	Student Code of Conduct
Participant 3	District D	D3	Male	4 years	Superintendent	Enrichment

Table 4

Research Participant Policy Summary

Participant	Policy	Issue
C1	Assessment: District must administer state mandated assessment requirements. Compulsory attendance: District has an obligation to require that the students be present in school.	Parents did not want the district to administer the new state assessment. Parents did not agree with revised lateness policy that included discipline as result of lateness to school.
C2	Bicycle: District provides bus service to and from school to children as required. To maintain safe arrival students are not permitted to ride bicycle.	Parents wish to have children permitted to ride bicycles to and from school.
C3	Attendance – staff: It is the expectation and goal of the Board that all school district personnel shall report to work.	District teachers disagreed with requirement of attendance plan for use of personal illness days.
D1	Enrichment: All public school districts must have a board-approved gifted and talented identification process and provide services for identified students enrolled in the grades of that school district.	Parents felt information was not provided prior to the change.

Table 4 (continued)

Participant	Policy	Issue
D2	Student code of conduct: Each district board of education is required to develop, adopt and implement a code of student conduct that establishes standards, policies and procedures for positive student development and student behavioral expectations on school grounds, including on school buses or at school-sponsored functions, and, if determined appropriate by the board, conduct away from school grounds.	Students were suspended from school after they were arrested on the weekend for underage drinking. Parents did believe the district should discipline for events that occurred off school grounds.
D3	Enrichment: All public school districts must have a board-approved gifted and talented identification process and provide services for identified students enrolled in the grades of that school district.	Parents felt information was not provided prior to the change.

Data Analysis

To make sense of the data collected, each piece was coded. Coding is defined as a short word or phrase that "symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). First cycle coding methods happen during the initial coding of data and create a foundation for further analysis (Saldaña, 2009). The primary method employed was the Elemental Method and its subcategories, Descriptive Coding, and In Vivo Coding. Descriptive coding is appropriate when analyzing field notes and physical artifacts, such as the board of education meeting minutes, which were collected throughout the research.

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In Vivo coding is used to code a word or phrase from the actual language of participants (Saldaña, 2009). This provided the researcher the opportunity to closely reflect on the interview transcripts and become attuned to the language and perspectives of the participants.

Second Cycle coding methods are a means of reanalyzing data coded through the First Cycle methods to "develop a sense of categorical thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization" (Stake, 2006 p. 207). In this cycle the researcher applied Pattern Coding, a means to identify similarly coded data. This enabled the researcher to organize and group the summaries into a small number for the development of themes (Saldaña, 2009). Themes are identified in each unit, or district, and then also across the cases (Stake, 2006). Themes must reflect the purpose of the research and respond to the questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Through coding, comparisons, similarities and patterns can be clearly seen.

The coding and analysis of the data led to the development of dominate themes Performance Effectiveness, Reflective Practices; and Commitment to Move Forward (Table 5).

Table 5

Code Mapping

First Cycle Coding		
Identity of members	Reflecting to guide future	Focus
Roles and expectations	Strategic approach	Common message
Steps and process	Key stakeholders	Clear message
Connections		Future

Second Cycle Coding		
1A Awareness of Roles	2A Retrospective	3A Vision
1B Navigating Interactions	2B Believing in Actions	3B Common Message
	2C Awareness	

Dominant Themes		
Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
Performance Effectiveness	Reflective Practices	Commitment to Move Forward

Discussion of Findings

The following research questions guided theme development through analysis of data:

1. How do board of education members and the superintendent describe the influence of adversity, challenge, and confusion of policy adoption and implementation?

2. How do educational leaders frame their organizations and determine the actions to

    lead effectively?

3. How did district leaders make sense of (understand, perceive, critique and/or

    experience) controversial policies impacting their district?

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a. What ideas experiences, conditions, school structures and/or policy tools

 influence the district leaders' sensemaking of, responses to, the controversial policy?

b. What did the district leaders say about their ability to lead during the time

of implementation of the controversial policy?

Findings that emerged from the data analysis demonstrated how educational leaders described the means in which educational leaders were able to adapt during a given controversy, reflect on the current practices to solve problems, and how to maintain a commitment to move the district forward.

The first theme, Performance Effectiveness, depicts educational leaders were able to identify roles of the leaders and the performance effectiveness which led to the controversy. Central to this theme is the educational leaders' awareness of roles and the ability to navigate changing interactions. The second theme, Reflective Practices, was based primarily on input from the participants' description of friction with the community and the board of education regarding a specified policy. When educational leaders were able to discuss their actions, as well as the concerns of the community, they were being retrospective.

This makes the past clearer than the present or future; however, it cannot make the past transparent (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988).

The third theme, Commitment to Move Forward, relates to the educational leaders' ability to move forward *as best as he/she can* as plausibility and sufficiency enable action-in-context. I found a common pattern that existed in the relationship between the participants and their districts – they wished to move beyond a statement.

Performance Effectiveness

Regardless of their situations, all educational leaders face challenges. To make sense of a controversy in these challenges, leaders need to identify his/her role as it relates to the broader community and the issue. Sensemaking requires us to understand ourselves in relation to the world around us. Patterns arose as participants explained his/her role, but further examined how that role had to adapt to the various stakeholders. This theme emerged as the researcher reviewed the data from research questions and sub-questions 1 – 3, 3a and 3b. Sensemaking clarifies who you are, where you are, and provides the most realistic assessment of how things are going. The educational leaders expressed the actions that were required to clarify the messages or change their actions.

Awareness of roles. For a school district to operate efficiently and effectively, it is essential that board members and the superintendent understand their respective roles while maintaining an environment that is collaborative. The participants of this study indicated that they look to the superintendent to be the educational leader, but also the one to provide the guidance and means to create and share the vision that balances the requirements of the state with the needs of the local district. Interviewee C1 reported that, "Our board looks to him (the superintendent) to be the educational leader and that is how we operate really." This is further explained through C2 that "the superintendent is

definitely the leader – he is the educational leader." Each participant expressed that it was the superintendent that was the identified educational leader.

The Board of Education has a dual role: To represent the concerns of the citizens, taxpayers and parents to the school administrators, and to represent the needs of the students and school district to the citizens, taxpayers and parents of the community. This is done through policies and goals set for the district. Therefore, the superintendent is responsible for implementing the policies and achieving the goals. As C3 expressed,

> The Board represents the public interest in preserving education programs that best serve the community, whereas the superintendent serves as the as the district's educational leader. . . Schools have a projected course that is to have all functions of collaborative work -together we look to arrive at a place where all students learn, value their education and succeed.

D2 further exemplified the relationship as an important aspect of the leadership of the district:

> We work as committees (of the Board) and work that all members know what we are doing. Our job as the board is to make sure policies are there so that the superintendent can run the district; he's the leader. He can run things day to day, and the board is the overarching guide to the procedures, if that makes sense – so really we work together as the leaders.

The educational leaders must be able to identify his/her role but how the members interact together. C2 explained the structure of the board: "People overlap, but for the most part, we spread out between the three committees …We also have discussion items

at the end of each committee that may not be on the agenda items, but they also help us communicate cross-committee." This approach provides the members of the board to be actively informed on the matters, while maintaining the superintendent to be the educational leader.

This was further explained from D2, as the structure of the board and response to the community,

On the broader sense, we act as a committee to the board. This works to support the educational initiatives, so we all know what is happening since it is reported to the full board. Then at the board meeting, the community members have a chance to ask questions to the board. The Board President will take the question, but it is the Superintendent to answer questions or do the follow-up. The communication must be shared to adapt to the reaction from the event. To be successful the collaborative environment must extend beyond the board of education level.

To avoid internal controversy and to understand the actions of the board of education, members must be aware of his/her role and how each member is interacting.

Navigating challenging interactions. The participants in this study identified that the superintendent takes the leadership role; however, the superintendent must then be focused on partnering with all stakeholders - teachers, students, parents, and community members to create a shared environment. A collaborative relationship between all stakeholders of the school community is imperative for a district to attain the goals set by the BOE and to meet the mandates and requirements of federal and state agencies. The educational leaders must be able to identify key stakeholders and be able to

partner with the individuals. The educational leaders specified different influential stakeholders in each district. As C2 specified,

I think the stakeholders like to identify themselves so we know who they are – we have a lot of outside groups, like rec, PTA and other involved parents. We reach out to them or they reach out to us. Together we need to share.

Educational leaders continuously strive to find the right balance of coordination and control. This balance of communication and needs of the district are addressed between the board of education and with stakeholders.

C3 described the necessary steps to avoid controversy when the leader wanted to make the change to the staff attendance policy. He explained the actions as,

I crafted policy language that would meet the needs of the building and was, in my opinion, fair. I shared the language with the administration; the administration supported this. I met with the union president at the time, and behind closed doors she supported it. I presented it to the Board, and they were supportive... we had to all get on the same page.

D3 implemented a change in the enrichment policy. He expressed that,

A shared vision results in program coherence. We all need to reflect on our core values and weave those values into a shared vision. We continually ask, 'How does this connect to our vision?' Educational leaders develop the voices of the staff that can influence others; they consciously engage supporters and build cohorts who will hang tough through new initiatives.

C1 shared two controversial policies, lateness and PARCC. When describing how the educational leaders on the board worked to identify align the different perspectives she stated:

> Our board and administration do a good job identifying the stakeholders. The stakeholders identify themselves, so we know who they are – we have a lot outside groups, like rec, PTA, and involved parents. We know they are the ones we meet with the most. The superintendent attends the meetings or has private meetings. We need to be clear. They can be the loudest at meetings or on Facebook so the superintendent tries to be open and upfront as he can. Get them on our side from the get-go.

Superintendents need to make sense of change and conflicts of change as they navigate through interactions. These interactions can be challenging to handle due to varying opinions of those involved. The leader however, must be able to pull everything together and navigate the various concerns, questions, and problems to maintain a shared outcome.

Desire to communicate clearly. To navigate the collaborative environment, participants highlighted that the communication must be an open and clear message. C1 expressed that, "To be successful we have to be open to what we are planning and all try to follow a similar path." Communication between the educational leaders and the various stakeholders allowed both the school and the stakeholders to discuss things that were working well, as well those that were not, and for both parties to develop resolutions for problems that occurred. C2 expressed board members met with members

of the community to "listen" when there were concerns, but "it is the superintendent to take the concerns and bring it together." When the controversy is addressed to the board of education, C2 indicated that it is "simply just letting them (the community) know - informing them of everything, that we reached out to them, heard them and you know everyone is coming to the same consensus."

> Participant D3 expanded the importance of collaboration as he specified that,
>
> I, along with the Board, worked to identify the stakeholders of the organization to create an environment where we are saying the same thing, the same vision. A solid district is built on a strong community network, by that I mean one that is involved as each group brings a different perspective to the table...The message has to be the same, so we need to work together.

Each participant was able to express times in which a district policy was not well received, making it a controversial policy. The participants in both District C and District D expressed that often it is because the message was "not clear." This occurs, according to C3, "Simply when the public perception conflicts with the known." In discussing the Student Code of Conduct Policy issue D2 had encountered, "We tried to be clear, but it was obvious the parents did not understand what we were saying. If they did they wouldn't have been so angry." Having clear guidelines or protocols further help establish effective communication is often beneficial. C1 stated, "There have to be protocols in general of how everyone who represents the school is going to respond… you don't want members to answer in different ways. You don't want the public to feel like they can't get

answers." D3 further explained that "Having clear spokesperson for the district allows for consistency." C3 explained that,

> It (the message) has to be to be consistent. It has to be the superintendent who provides the message to the board, to the community, to any agency. As the educational leader, they must lead - policy, curriculum, buildings or grounds - he is the leader. Clear and consistent messages should preclude a controversy.

Decisions are based on what helps the district meet the established goals, both in the moment and for the long-term functioning of the organization. This requires ongoing and open dialogue. As D1 identified the members

> Right now, I would say the PTA/PTO… specific union members who try to get to the BOE members to give their perspective on things, initiatives at the time. In previous years, I would have included administration, but things change. The Superintendent has to be aware of who the voices are and be able to address and adjust to the various needs.

All in all , the communication needs to be clear. With various stakeholders, communication needs to be understandable to ensure that the message it conveyed properly avoiding unnecessary opposition. A leader in these situations must spearhead the communication, expressing the change with the same language from all participants.

Reflective Practices to Move Forward

Theme 2, in Table 5, describes the practice of reflection that education leaders use to guide their decisions to move their organization forward when encountering controversy due to a policy. This theme emerged as the researcher reviewed the data from

research questions and sub-questions 1 – 3, 3a and 3b. Educational leaders must make sense, frame, derive, and interpret multiple messages to guide their management of future interactions. The participants in this study identified various ways he or she made sense of controversy by looking back at the environment to guide his/her leadership practice. Educational leaders stated that in order to move forward, they needed to face and acknowledge mistakes, failures and shortcomings, and had to create an environment where all stakeholders have a voice.

Retrospective. Public schools must adhere to federal, state, and local laws and regulations. When a policy becomes controversial, the educational leader must anticipate the uncertainty as opposed to reacting to it. D3 explained his retrospective approach as he discussed the controversy surrounding a new curriculum, "We made it through it, but I was not happy. I looked back and asked how did that go off track. I pulled the meeting notices, and kept reflecting." When discussing the bicycle policy, C2 explained that "(we) know we have encountered this complaint before. We were able to address it this time." Participant D2 shared during the Student Code of Conduct Policy issue the board "stood by the superintendent's decision and the policy." However, when more information was received, including legal opinion and parent push-back, "we had to step back to hear the different sides and try to look at the whole situation… then we were able to overturn the policy. We should have known how this was going to go."

C1 reflected on the controversy of the PARCC test and the confusion on why there was a controversy.

This could have absorbed all of my time. It was really unpredictable to what the

members would say, or post on Facebook. I had to stop and ask myself, why?

Why are the parents acting this way? Personally, I do not understand it. As a

leader, I do not understand. But as a leader, I knew I wanted to reach out to them.

You cannot take it.

The BOE members and the superintendents interviewed for this study shared how they

shaped their environments by taking specific actions that influenced the opportunities and

constraints within their districts. As C3 reported it was when he was able to stop and

reflect on how to move forward he summarized it as

To stop a controversy, we have to stop what we are doing, determine what is

needed. Be open what is taking place and have a strong rationale for why it is

needed. Is this supported by research, mandate, or a general reason why – we

have to have a sense of what is going wrong if we really want to move forward.

It was after the event settled that the participants shared they were able to retrospectively

identify where the situation went awry. As D1 described the superintendent's actions

following a controversy that impacted the board, "I find that the superintendent is very

reflective. He wants to make sure that everyone is happy or at least let's say informed

about what is taking place and why." To move the organization forward the leaders must

be able to stop, identify the controversy, and then move forward with a plan. Reflection

is essential to move forward with successful practice. In retrospective, superintendents

must control the narrative that will be observed by the public. The plans become clearly

identified and organized. Reflection is essential to move forward with successful practice.

Believing in actions. Perceptions found within the data set included the participants characteristically expressing comments regarding the leader's ability to maintain the course of action of the district during the controversy. Sensemaking calls for courage because while there is a need to understand and know what is going on in a changing world; illuminating the change is often a lonely and unpopular task. Participant C1discussed her actions and the actions of those opposed to the PARCC policy influenced the district. The educational leader explained that for several BOE meetings, and on social media, various members of the school community protested at BOE meetings and solicited others to sign their child(ren) out of testing. "Personally, they are not mad at you, it may feel that way but they are mad at you the leader implementing something that they do not agree with it, but it is not you." C2 expressed how members of her community "Initially they tried to say that we didn't care about them (the students) exercising and that kind of ridiculousness." Understanding the perspective of the community is needed; leaders must still maintain the focus of the policy.

When controversy arises there can be impact on the district, "pushback on this policy, or really any policy can impact a district." To stay true to the board's policy C1 expressed that the board and the superintendent needed to explain to the community the purpose of the mandate and answer questions, "We (the board) wanted to see what we could do and how we could get our own message across." As D3 identified the cues as

> … it has been my experience that when experiencing opposing views on policy it
> is most beneficial to ground the open communication, an open conversation at the
> most basic level. Taking on a UBD approach, or beginning with the end in mind

begins to unify all parties by showing the bipartisan support in working in the best

interest of our students. More times than not, the realization that policy itself is

not the area of contention, but instead the implementation of the policy is where

most discrepancies derive. But we need to stay true to it.

Knowing the culture of the school environment will assist the leaders with the ability to

make sense of the controversy. It will also assist with the leaders' ability to plan to build

a bridge between the vision and the current belief. As D1 expressed the actions of the

superintendent, she expressed that

Privately I know he is frustrated that parents do not attend committee meetings,

but that is the same no matter which district. I do think since he was willing to

meet with the parents and review the policy and the curriculum with them it

lessened a lot of the drama.

Identifying the current culture is important for the leader to identify how to share the

message out to the school community. Having the courage to address the issues and to be

able to make sense of the situation was further reiterated as C3 expressed,

We have to be prepared for anything. At any board meeting there can be a parent

upset about something, misinformed about something - but what I expect is that

the communication is clear and open, that we are prepared to address their

concerns or have a means to address it.

Participant D2 further expressed that leaders must be courageous in their actions, as she

indicated

I understand that there are significant steps to be taken and you have to make

decisions quickly, but we need to do so when we have all the facts. We know

there is going to be some pushback when parents disagree but if we have all the

information and we are transparent with each other along the way we can stand

our ground with the community.

Awareness. An educational leader must be cognizant of what is occurring around

him/her. Understanding people plays a key role in creating the environment in which they

identify cues in the community to make sense of what is occurring. The leaders need to

take cues from the community and from the reaction of members in district. C3 explains

this phenomenon in the following way, "A lot of times people are saying things that have

been whispered down the road, that have changed and are simply not true. We have to

stay true to our mission or vision." D2 clarified that when District D encountered

controversy surrounding student code of conduct policy a lot of the issues surrounded by

the superintendent's unwillingness to answer questions or address the parents. D2, "had

she answered the questions or even said I will look in to it and get back to you, it would

have helped. By not responding the line in the sand was there." People who act in

organizations often produce structures, constraints, and opportunities that were not there

before. This was demonstrated in District C controversy arose from the PARCC policy.

Since that time the superintendent meets with the parent groups on a regular basis. As

well, the Board now reads an annual statement that outlines their opinion on the test, but

rationale (state mandate) as to why the district must still administer it.

D3 was able to identify that parents were upset with the enrichment policy change. He took this as an opportunity to explain and expand the situation, "I presented the policy change to the board to the public. I was able to identify the steps that we took, why it was needed, and how it aligned to our vision." C1 also used the cues from the community during the PARCC policy implementation. C1 shared, "I met with the groups to explain. During Board meetings I took the opportunity to explain the Board's perspective." With taking the cues and expanding them into the explanation the participants were able to make sense of the situation while in the midst of the controversy.

All participants recognized that the school environment and issues are continuously changing based on outside factors. Therefore, relationships and their understandings of the world are fluid and continuously transforming. C3 expressed the need for creating an environment that "includes many partners from the teachers, to the parents, to the administration, we are the ones responsible to craft an environment for the students and prepare them to be the best they can in their post school endeavors." D2, the participant with the most years on the board of education, stated, "Things have changed, our kids have changed. Society changed. We have to be able to not just respond to it, we have to understand what is happening and why. It is our students' future." Within the educational organization Participant C1 discussed that the policy change shifted the focus into community building, she expressed that "the goal for the superintendent was to develop a sense togetherness, as our environment, relationships, and our understandings of the world are fluid and continuously transforming."

Being aware of the environment will assist with the leaders' ability to determine how a controversy occurred. C2 Shared when the board looked to maintain their "no bicycle" policy; the superintendent attended various parent group meetings. "We expect that the superintendent is meeting with the individuals, hearing the different concerns or arguments, and then can express the message to the district on where others are coming from." D3 explained that it is always best to "meet with the groups, the PTA, or the members one on one. This helps develop that relationship away from the table and keeps the dialogue open." Education leaders use their awareness of the school environment to make sense of how things have gone astray. Through reflective practice, leaders make sense, frame, derive, and interpret multiple messages to guide their approach to future interactions within the school environment and aligned to the needs of the policy.

Commitment to Move the District

Leaders are important decision makers when organizations are searching for solutions or to better understand a situation. This theme emerged as the researcher reviewed the data from research questions and sub-questions 1- 3, 3a and 3b. Leaders must lead and maneuver situations to move the organization forward, but the leader must recognize the situation and the environment to maintain a commitment to move forward. This is not always easy, as C3 expressed "The reality of this educational environment can be a daunting one. There are days when the vision is crystal clear without a storm in sight, and then there are days when there are tumultuous storms ongoing or on the horizon." But it is the leader's commitment to cause that will drive his/her ability to maintain the course and work to have others understand the cause.

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Beyond the vision. The participants stated that the driving force of the leaders'

actions was the vision of preparing students for their achievements. Simply stated, D2

expressed, "Our focus –our vision- is on student achievement. As a community, we need

to work together to make sure we are meeting that – that students meet their full

potential." C1 described the vision for the district to be

> One that is of the highest quality education focusing on every student… The
>
> Board is always looking – what is working for our population of that school, what
>
> do the teachers need, it's about the students and that we are all working to raise
>
> that. Our students must be ready for whatever they need.

Further exploring the vision of the district D1 expressed that the district, "is an

interconnected learning community committed to excellence in preparing all students to

become lifelong learners and productive, responsible citizens." District C and D visions

are forward thinking and student-centered.

Educational leaders need to understand their role as sensemakers in effectively

facilitating an issue and framing their leadership. Having the commitment to the

district's vision and being able to facilitate an issue are inseparable events. As D3

expressed, "Schools have projected course that is to have all functions of collaborative

work -together we look to arrive at a place where all students learn, value their education

and succeed." C3 further supported this as he specified, "To prepare students, educational

leaders must reflect on the current situations and have the ability to react to obstacles and

move barriers that would impede upon progress, but maintain a vision to move forward."

Leaders must identify who they are to move the organization forward.

Inside the data set, educational leaders identified that organizations must acknowledge the current ways, but maintain a focus on the need for change. D1 explained,

Reflection on where an organization is and how it can change is needed: Everyone has to be informed why there is a change or need for change… We need to keep things moving.

C1 focused on the need to acknowledge where things are: "We always have to bring ourselves back with all the distractions but we are very mindful of it and need to push through it." D2 further supported this claim as it was explained that,

as a community, we need to work together to make sure that our students are meeting their potential. We don't have time for controversy to stop the momentum. It is our job to get out and be clear why there is a change and make the change.

The creation of a clear, compelling vision is vital for a successful change. Such a strong, public commitment allows individuals to envision new organizational meaning that facilitate dramatic change.

Common message. As the organizations continue to act, they can change the story to fit the experiences and reflect on the growing understanding of the variables. Sensemaking is not about finding the "correct" answer; it is about creating an emerging picture that becomes more comprehensive through data collection, action, experience, and conversation for each organization. As D3 explained,

The best shield that a superintendent or board can use from any controversy is that

of open communication to what is taking place and strong rationale for the

change. The communication needs to be fortified with research and a deep

understanding of the facts as it applies or could apply to the school community.

This was further supported as D1 discussed the need for the superintendent to

immediately address the need, "We will rely on him for the answers; he's the expert."

Multiple members discussed the need to get information out to the community quickly.

As C1 reported on the PARCC policy,

The district wanted to take a stance and wanted to answer the questions from the

community. The longer we waited, the angrier the families would get. ... We need

to be able to articulate the situation to our members so they understand where

parents may be coming from, why a change, like PARCC, may be uncomfortable.

But it is my job to make sure that we remain calm, hear the various aspects and

concerns, but know just how far we can make changes.

C2 furthered this through her statement that members, "They stop coming to the

Board meeting but even if there are a few that are disgruntled we have to continue to

maintain our vision, but the superintendent will continue to reach out to meet – answer

emails, meet with them – we need to continue to push or sell what the new ideas are and

why it is needed.

Addressing a controversial policy, D2 reported that it was settled in the district

when the members were able to share all the information with the community and

maintain the common message.

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The Superintendent took action but would not explain herself to the parents. When this happened, the parents got angry. The got more parents upset, and it just became a mess. When we finally had a board meeting, and the parents all came to the microphone and expressed their anger. I couldn't blame them. All the superintendent had to do was answer them, provide the handbook, provide the policy, whatever – they just wanted answers. Without the answers, they became angry, spun things, and we ended up spending weeks and money on the situation, it wasn't necessary.

Superintendents must be transparent and must respond immediately. C2 explained for the district to move forward it would have to act within the following means:

Really it is addressing the people's concerns is really that is the answer. Letting people know they are heard, and what you are thinking – you as the board, which could be hard. But that is why there needs to be a leader. The leader has to respond but responds quickly. Otherwise, they will come up with their own conclusions of why you are making a change. Why the board can give clear answers provide clear information that reduces the change for controversy.

Participant C3 reiterated this statement within the data set by noting in his district,

When we can be open and people understand why a change or a policy is going into effect, it stops, or at least reduces the response. A public information letter or memo to the program that provides accurate information about the facts can diminish the hostility of the controversy and facilitate community support.

Leaders must maintain the focus to lead. D3 emphasized the need to take ownership of the decision,

> We have to lead; that is our job. We have to continue on our path on what is in the best interest of our students knowing our community. We don't have time to get wrapped up in drama.

Leaders in the midst of controversy need to pause and reflect on the situation and reframe unsuccessful change initiatives. To maintain the focus and commitment to the vision of the district, leaders must simultaneously address the needs of the organizations. It is the expectation that the educational leaders are clear on the goals, focus on the people in the organization, and preserve a common focus for all parties, while maintaining a vision that moves the organization forward.

Triangulation of Data

       Observation findings. The observation data collected advanced these findings in a number of ways. To document the behaviors and interactions of the educational leaders and the community, observations were conducted during a public BOE meeting at each school district. The physical setup of each meeting had the Board of Education Members, the Superintendent, and the Business Administrator seated at the front of the room seated at a long table with the school district's emblem on the front table cloth. The Superintendent was seated next to the Board of Education President in the middle of the table. District C held their public Board of Education meeting in an elementary school gymnasium with folding chairs out for the community to sit. District D held their public Board of Education meeting in a Board of Education conference room. District D had the Board of Education Members, the Superintendent, and the Business Administrator seated at the front of the room at a conference table setup in a "u" formation. The Superintendent was seated in the middle of the table.

       It was noted that it was the Board of Education President in District C who facilitated the meeting agenda. However, during the Community Forum questions, the Superintendent answered the questions from the community. Thus, supporting that theme of Performance Effectiveness, Educational leaders were able to identify roles of the leaders. The Superintendent was the voice of the district, answering questions and facilitating the dialogue to the rationale for the action of the district. This was further observed during the meeting when a BOE member had a question regarding the approval

of a policy. The BOE raised the question and the Superintendent was able to answer and address the concerns.

In District D it was observed that prior to the start of the meeting, the superintendent met with the various community members as they entered the meeting room. He appeared to connect and have various conversations with the members and address individual questions. During the BOE meeting the Superintendent read and directed the meeting. Also, it was the Superintendent and the Business Administrator who facilitated a presentation regarding the current budget needs. Again, this supports the members identifying key roles, Performance Effectiveness. Also, the Superintendent's presentation provided a rationale for the actions of the district, thus supporting theme two, Reflective Practices, as educational leaders to avoid future controversy must address their actions and address concerns of the community.

Document review of findings. Review of various BOE Meeting Minutes supported the research findings. The following areas were reviewed each document: (a) the reported interactions between the BOE members throughout the meeting; (b) the reported conversation between the BOE members and the community before and after the BOE meeting, (c) the reported subtle factors, which included how superintendent and BOE members interacted during the BOE meeting. Similar to the observations, the minutes from both districts noted that the Superintendent answered questions from the community. Questions posed by community members or by BOE members were answered by the Superintendent. The Superintendent in District D referred to the Strategic Plan, which was the outline for the future and upcoming events. The referral to

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the Strategic Plan allowed for the Superintendent to provide a rationale for his action-in-context, thus supporting Theme 3.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

      Validity. The same protocol and methodological protocol were applied across the different educational settings. To further support the credibility of the findings, external validity was reviewed. External validity examined the research design to determine if the research findings can be generalized or transferred beyond the immediate study sample (Yin, 2014). Multiple participants from two different school districts were used for the interviews, observations, and document reviews; thus expanding the opportunity to generalize the findings.

      Credibility. Member checking was also employed to support the data's trustworthiness. This allowed for participants who were interviewed to review the transcribed interviews and provide feedback, thus advancing credibility of the findings (Toma, 2006). The transcribed notes were dropped off at the Board of Education Offices in both districts. The participants were asked to review and to contact me with any questions or comments. To further support the credibility of the findings, external validity is reviewed. The use of multiple data sources ensured this study was robust and the results were accurate reflections of the participants understanding and connections as advocated by Stake (1995).

      Triangulation. By acquiring the data from the superintendent and data from the school board members, plus observations of the BOE meeting and review of BOE meeting minutes, data triangulation was completed to validate themes that were

identified. Findings were shared with study participants for feedback and member checking for accuracy. According to Maxwell (2005) and Stake (1995) the use of multiple data sources and employing member checking as done within this investigation to confirm emergent findings affirms triangulation within a qualitative investigation.

Transferability. The findings from this qualitative study were established using a thick and rich description framed in context and expressed by educational leaders in two districts. Merriam (2002) suggests the use of a thick and rich description in qualitative research is an acceptable way to allow others to determine transferability moving forward. In addition, according to Yin (2009) the multi-participant approach implemented in this study increases the likelihood that the findings are transferable. A cross section of superintendent and board members in NJ, but commonality between demographics of districts

Confirmability. Patton (2002) states confirmability requires the recognition by the researcher of their assumptions and its potential influence on findings. In this qualitative investigation I employed reflexivity to track influence and monitor emotional response, reflection, and impact on findings. In addition, study participants were provided a full and bias-free explanation of the study purpose, as well as any potential benefits and risks they may experience as participants. This combination approach ensured that the results were derived solely from the data collected confirming credibility.

Summary

The findings from this study give an overview of how educational leaders made sense of a controversial policy and were able to move the district forward. Findings

provide insight from educational leaders on how districts leaders are able to operate efficiently and effectively, it is essential that board members and the superintendent adapt to the given situations, reflect on the current setting, and be committed to move forward. The participants of this study indicated that they look to the superintendent to be the educational leader, but also the one to provide the guidance and means to create and share the vision that balances the requirements of the state with the needs of the local district. Educational leaders continuously strive to find the right balance of coordination and control as educational leaders must make sense, frame, derive, and interpret multiple messages to guide their management of future interactions. Leaders must lead and maneuver situations to move the organization forward, but the leader must also recognize the situation and the environment to maintain a commitment to move forward all parties together on a common vision.

The last chapter of this dissertation will contain an abstract of the study and will discuss further implications and outcomes of this study while addressing current literature. Additional discussion will include implications for educational leaders and key stakeholders within school settings when experiencing controversy.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

The purpose of this descriptive multiple-case study was to understand the actions of the educational leaders when implementing a policy that may be deemed controversial to the school community. This study considered the superintendents' and the board of education members' actions during a controversy of a policy. The case is bound by the sensemaking process that occurs when educational leaders encounter controversial Board of Education (BOE) policy implementation. The study sought to understand how educational leaders reframed a situation and were able to think about others, their situations, learn from experiences, and translate that into effective action and move the organization forward. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do board of education members and the superintendent describe the influence of adversity, challenge, and confusion of policy adoption and implementation?

2. How do educational leaders frame their organizations and determine the actions to lead effectively?

3. How did district leaders make sense of (understand, perceive, critique and/or experience) controversial policies impacting their district?

   a. What ideas experiences, conditions, school structures and/or policy tools influence the district leaders' sensemaking of, responses to, the controversial policy?

b. What did the district leaders say about their ability to lead during the time of implementation of the controversial policy?

The theoretical lens for this research included an emphasis on sensemaking theory, particularly involving how educational leaders were able to grasp what was occurring in their school community, thus facilitating other leadership activities to move the organization forward. Sensemaking is the activity that enables us to turn the ongoing complexity of the world into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words that serves as a springboard into action (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). A total of six participants from two different school districts in New Jersey participated in the data collection phase of this study. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and review of BOE minutes served as resources for this qualitative case study.

Description of the Case

A total of six participants from two different school districts in New Jersey participated in the data collection phase of this study. Districts that participated in this study are identified to be District Factor Group (DFG) "FG." The DFGs represent an approximate measure of a community's relative socioeconomic status. "FG" districts are considered those of moderate wealth. District D and District C enroll less than 3,000 students in grades Pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Both districts had encountered controversial policy implementation covered by local media.

The six participants were purposefully selected with the criteria being that they were in the role of educational leader from a K-12 Public School District in the state of New Jersey. The participants each encountered a controversial policy implementation as

identified through media coverage. Of the participants interviewed for this study three

members were from District C and three members were from District D. A total of four

participants were female Board of Education Members and two were male

Superintendents of Schools. All participants had a minimal of four years' experience

within the current educational leadership role.

The goal of this research is to identify how other district leaders make sense of

policies that may be controversial and realign the organization toward a common goal.

Through the lens of sensemaking this research explored how educational leaders came up

with an understanding and meaning; tested new approaches; and then refined the

understanding of the situation for a new approach that better explains the new reality.

After data collection, data was transcribed and analyzed. Three themes developed from

data analysis: (1) performance effectiveness, (2) reflective practices; and (3) commitment

to move forward.

This chapter will present a discussion of findings related to the study's research

questions. Finally, implication for practice, leadership and additional research will be

addressed.

Performance effectiveness. The first research question - How do board of

education members and the superintendent describe the influence of adversity, challenge,

and confusion of policy adoption and implementation? - yielded the finding that a school

leader should approach an educational change through effective open communication. To

make sense of a controversy in these challenges, leaders in this study identified their role

as it related to the broader community and the issue. Sensemaking requires us to

understand ourselves in relation to the world around us. Participants varied in their responses regarding how much a controversial policy impeded the leaders' ability to work and timeframe for the impact, but the six participants all agreed and reiterated that a clear message must continuously be provided to all stakeholders through open communication.

Policy implementation can be disrupted by unwilling stakeholders, therefore ongoing dialogue with all groups and individuals is important. Leaders in both districts expressed that establishing this environment was exhibited through strong leadership, specifically through collaboration, open communication, and transparency. Accordingly, it was the policymakers, the educational leaders of the districts that have an important role in facilitating sense-making processes. The participants in this study identified that the superintendent was the representative of the district who would address the issues of the community. The six educational leaders shared that it was the superintendent who must initially invest time communicating and working with the school community to help them attain a deeper understanding of the controversial policy. This adds clarity, and ensures priorities are implemented in alignment with the district's vision.

BOE are an integral part of the public school system throughout the U.S. Its role is to make certain local policies are implemented. Participants in this study revealed that these findings emulated work done by Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary's (2015) in which specified how school board policy making can be highly influenced by the social and political contexts. Diem, Frankenberg, & Cleary's (2015) qualitative case study supported the previous research of the role of school boards in implementing policies,

specifically diversity policies in a post- *Parents Involved* era (Fowler, 2013; Trujillo, 2013). This research supports the assertion that school board policy making can be highly influenced by the social and political contexts in which school districts are situated. Board members navigate the politics of their communities and the competing interests, deciding on policies that accommodate and appease their constituents (Mountford, 2004; Howell, 2005; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). The success of a policy depends upon the beliefs, relationships, politics, knowledge, and ability of the people that the policy affects, and the organizational culture of the places where they work (Honig, 2006; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012).

Board members navigate the politics of their communities and the competing interests, deciding on policies that accommodate and appease their constituents (Mountford, 2004; Howell, 2005; Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). As C2 specified,

I think the stakeholders like to identify themselves so we know who they are – we have a lot of outside groups, like rec, PTA and other involved parents. We reach out to them or they reach out to us. Together we need to share.

This was further supported as D1 explained how the school board policy can be influenced by various identified the members in their community,

Right now, I would say the PTA/PTO… specific union members who try to get to the BOE members to give their perspective on things, initiatives at the time… The Superintendent has to be aware of who the voices are and be able to address and adjust to the various needs.

All in all, the communication needs to be clear. With various stakeholders, communication needs to be understandable to ensure that the message it conveyed properly avoiding unnecessary opposition. A leader in the situation of addressing a controversial policy must lead the communication in an open and clear manner to address the questions and concerns of all the stakeholders.

When the educational leaders know their community and act in a clear and open means, adversity can be avoided. To avoid controversy, it is best for the educational leaders to include all stakeholders during the adoption process of a new or revised policy (Fowler, 2013). The participants in this study expressed how the success of addressing controversial policy implementation depends on how well the leader can identify and cope with the problem. D3 implemented a change in the enrichment policy, as he expressed

> A shared vision results in program coherence. We all need to reflect on our core values and weave those values into a shared vision. We continually ask, 'How does this connect to our vision?' Educational leaders develop the voices of the staff that can influence others; they consciously engage supporters and build cohorts who will hang tough through new initiatives.

As expressed by the Participant C3, "leaders must maintain an open, nonjudgmental approach to work with the members of the community." It is this approach that will assist with clarifying any confusion or misinformation. In a smaller setting, such as one to one meetings as both Districts C and D reported, they can further explain their thoughts and commitment to the policy based on norms, values and beliefs of district culture.

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Establishing buy-in prior to implementation may lessen the possibility of resistance and therefore increase performance effectiveness. The leader must continue to be transparent on the actions of the board and the rationale of how the policy aligns to the vision of the district.

The most common implementation problems can be categorized as program-related, people-related, or setting-related (Fowler, 2013). Often with new policies, or with resistance to an established policy, there is a gap between what is portrayed to the community, to the leaders, and the actual event. This study uncovered that leaders can bridge this disconnect by creating a shared open approach to engage the various stakeholders. Participants expressed that in order to address a controversial policy, the superintendent should meet with individuals in small groups, or one-on-one with members of the community in attempts to answer questions. Skillful leaders must detect the problems early and welcome open and honest discussion with the members.

Reflective practices to move forward. The second theme that emerged involved the leaders' ability to reflect on the situation and be able to move the organization forward. The literature review, observations, and the second research question - How do educational leaders frame their organizations and determine the actions to lead effectively? - yielded data suggesting that educational leaders need to be able to look at any situation they encounter from different perspectives and reframe it in order to deal with it effectively. Leaders must uncover the layers surrounding the controversy to help to explain how problems arise within an organization. The education leaders in this study expressed that to pull the community together they had to understand with "new eyes" to

reframe the situations and align with a new perspective. Organizations need a culture that aligns with its values, inspires individual and collective efforts, and provides the symbolic glue to coordinate diverse contributions (Bolman & Gallos, 2010). Leaders must deliberately review the situation and from multiple perspectives.

The BOE members and the superintendents interviewed for this study shared how they framed their environments by taking specific actions that influenced the opportunities and constraints within their districts. D3 explained his retrospective approach as he discussed the controversy surrounding a new curriculum, "We made it through it, but I was not happy. I looked back and asked how did that go off track. I pulled the meeting notices, and kept reflecting." When discussing the bicycle policy, C2 explained that "(we) know we have encountered this complaint before. We were able to address it this time." Research has shown that leaders often miss significant elements (Bolman and Gallos, 2011). Educational leaders must emerge through the situation taking various aspects into consideration, and not making the current situation fit the pattern they are most familiar with. Rather, they must examine all aspects and then move forward.

Academic leaders can develop their skills in reframing – requiring the leader to obtain a new perspective and determine the course of action. When controversy arises there can be impact on the district, as D1 expressed, "pushback on this policy, or really any policy can impact a district." To stay true to the board's policy C1 expressed that the board and the superintendent needed to explain to the community the purpose of the

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mandate and answer questions, "We (the board) wanted to see what we could do and how we could get our own message across." As D3 identified the cues as

> … it has been my experience that when experiencing opposing views on policy it is most beneficial to ground the open communication, an open conversation at the most basic level.

No one can anticipate and prepare for all that might arrive in a school community. However, by learning how to think and act in such diverse roles the leader can expand his/her mental maps and cognitive frameworks. By allowing for multiple frames, a leader is able to reframe the way they perceive a situation and adjust the way he/she responds. Educational leaders in both districts described that it was the superintendent in their various policy issues who had to take the lead to assess the situation and take the necessary steps to pull the organization back together. Successful educational leaders know not only how to develop a clear vision, but also to maneuver the political terrain. This is done by building a strong network and relationships with key stakeholders to negotiate with others to successfully work through, or more importantly avoid, controversy for the organization.

Commitment to move forward. The third set of questions posed to the participants were: How did district leaders make sense of (understand, perceive, critique and/or experience) controversial policies impacting their district? (a) What ideas experiences, conditions, school structures and/or policy tools influence the district leaders' sensemaking of, responses to, the controversial policy? (b) What did the district leaders say about their ability to lead during the time of implementation of the

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controversial policy? The literature review and research questions yielded the findings

that an educational leader must demonstrate a commitment to move forward. All six

participants expressed that it was the was the educational leaders' commitment to move

forward that assisted with making sense of the controversy and re-establish the conditions

to have the district move forward. The participants in this study shared that the district

leadership had to find a balance of urgency to realign the district, yet balance with

making sure all the various stakeholders had a chance to be heard. It is the leader's

responsibility to make sense of the situation and move the organization forward.

During controversial policy implementation time periods, leaders are likely to

face ambiguity and uncertainty (Weick, 1995). Ambiguous facets of crises are likely to

result in too many interpretations of events, while uncertain facets are likely to result in

no interpretations as leaders are ignorant of what is happening (Weick, 1995). Therefore,

as shared by the participants in this study, leaders should look to collaborate and create a

more cohesive team approach to the situation. Having different perspectives can enrich

interpretations (Huber & Lewis, 2010). When operating in management teams, leaders

are likely to share perceptions and gradually create meaning through communication so

there is a deeper understanding between the participants and will assist with building a

consensus among the organization (Huber & Lewis, 2010).

While the cases in this study examined very different policy controversies, they

provided important insights into the ways educational leaders behave and manage

meaning in times of crisis. The findings suggest that leaders must recognize and

understand facets of managing meaning in crisis, communication between all

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stakeholders, and intentionally guide the process and a vision to their communities.

Conceptual Framework Revisited

In public schools throughout New Jersey the relationship between the local board and the superintendent is one of the most critical factors in determining how well a school district operates. During time of crisis, it is important that the board and the superintendent maintain their roles and responsibility. Specifically, the board must trust the superintendent and be confident in his/her ability to administer the district, and request his/her recommendations on issues under discussion. The superintendent must provide the most competent management of the district, set clear vision, and work with all stakeholders to meet the diverse needs of the community and balance those needs with the crisis. The board and the superintendent must be clear about their respective responsibilities when working together to resolve a crisis. It is the responsibility of school board members to balance personal interests, local needs of all students, and state and federal mandates; they are obliged to work collaboratively with the superintendent to meet the goals of the district.

Framework for Educational Leaders During Controversial Policy

Policies that affect a school environment must be adaptable to each individual school community and must be clearly articulated to the various stakeholders that are impacted (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). Individuals in leadership positions face the challenge of adapting and managing change. School leaders in the 21st century look to develop opportunities for the community to have a voice (Fiore, 2011; Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young & Ellerson, 2011). This becomes even more complicated when

a local BOE is required to adopt policies from federal and state mandates, especially policies that do not align with the social climate or beliefs of the community. Educational leadership courses have to aid students in the development of skills to address controversy, understand how local and state or federal policy will impact the local culture, and align requirements while maintaining a cohesive school environment.

It is the leader's role to make sense of a crisis when it occurs, and to guide his/her organization through the situation (Combe & Carrington, 2015; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). This research project unveiled important concepts regarding the experiences of educational leaders during controversial policy implementations.

Themes emerged from my research, resulting in a methodology that can offer support to educational leaders: develop a deeper understanding of sensemaking, maintain open communication, understand the pulse of the community, and act quickly to resolve the issue at hand. Many of the ideas for this methodology came from conversations with educational leaders regarding advice that they would provide to a district leader addressing a controversial policy. With stronger training and mentoring programs for educational leaders, anyone interested in leading a school district would be able to apply this framework and successfully navigate the complexity of a crisis.

Actions during controversy. We make sense of our experiences and the events of life retrospectively, through observation of events. Reflection and negotiation about what these events mean to us help us to determine their importance. As educational leaders, we encounter this when members of the community disagree with policies, when they voice their concern, it disrupts the flow of our actions. Sensemaking describes the

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negotiation and creation of meaning, or understanding, or the construction of a coherent account of the world as we question what is happening and seek to create order.

When a controversy occurs, superintendents must stop – even if momentarily – to assess the situation. Cues often shape sensemaking as it unfolds and individuals "interpret and explain set of cues from the environments" (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21). Leaders should to be able to look at the situations they face from different perspectives. This idea of reframing a situation (Bolman and Deal, 2014) allows the leader to avoid bias and to gather information not previously considered.

As the reframing process suggests, leaders take time to find out what is "really" going on and then use that data to inform action. Looking at events through structural, human resource, political, and symbolic lenses lessens the likelihood of oversimplifying controversy (Bolman and Deal, 2014).

Sensemaking during a controversy is complex because, as the leader, the superintendent has to process and problem solve in the context of the situation (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). This reaction involves a sense of urgency, understanding the community for which he/she represents, and the ability to maintain open communication for others to understand (Combe & Carrington, 2015; Mumford et al., 2007).

Sensemaking is generally regarded as a social interaction because individuals make sense of their perception of the event, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the "actual, imagined, or implied presence of others (Allport, 1985, p.3 cited in Weick, 1995, p. 39). In this, the leader must grasp the pulse of the community,

gathering community information. This helps leaders develop an understanding that is rooted in the immediate context of a school and neighborhood and that also takes into account the wider political environment and impact the crisis may have on the organization.

Sensemaking must occur while the leader also maintains open communication with all stakeholders. He/she must be able to quickly respond to situations and questions. The superintendent of a school district sets the direction and tone of the district while responding to the often competing demands of the board of education, administrators, teachers, parents, students and the community. All stakeholders must maintain open, honest, and frequent communication. If a controversial issue arises, it is critical that stakeholders be able to express concerns and clarify expectations. This allows the superintendent to develop a deeper understanding and master the sensemaking process.

The educational leaders interviewed in this study stated that they look to the superintendent to make sense of the situation and lead the organization and address crises with minimal disruption to the goals of the district. The educational leaders shared that they look to understand why a situation had resulted in a crisis. More importantly, the superintendents responded that it was not just why one particular parent or group was upset, but they often had a broader reflection as to what was taking place in the organization – the environment, relationships, and understandings of the world – so that it remained fluid and continuously transforming to meet the changing needs of the organizations.

The leader in the middle of the crisis must bring in the members and bridge the

gap of what may be the root of the controversy; this can be accomplished using various means, such as small group meetings or one-on-one discussion, but the goal must remain for the leader to re-establish a means for the members to work together. In this collaborative approach, leaders are likely to share perceptions and gradually create meaning through communication and develop a cross understanding (Huber & Lewis, 2010). Clear, concise communication must be provided to the community in a timely fashion. Communication between all stakeholders must also be honest so that the members can address the issues with the goal of moving the organization forward.

As a leader, early actions in a crisis "do more than set the tone; they determine the trajectory of the crisis" (Weick, 1988, p. 309). Response to a crisis must be timely. Events are often rapidly unfolding, making it difficult for the leader to gather all relevant information. Often the leader will need to take action with incomplete information. Taking action during crisis must carefully include "dangerous action which produces understanding and safe inaction which produces confusion" (Weick, 1988, p. 305). Weick's study of Bhopal demonstrated the early actions and inactions can worsen a crisis while it is unfolding (2010). During a crisis, actions become much more public and irrevocable, strengthening commitment at precisely the time that flexibility is needed. Therefore, as supported by this study, the actions of the educational leader – the willingness to meet with others, to listen to various perspectives and to work to move the organization forward – help the members make sense of what is happening and can also alter what people encounter. As a result, it can change the very situation that prompted the crisis.

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Implications

This study validated the importance and implications for BOE members and superintendents to recognize that all members must work collaboratively and openly to maintain a common vision. Findings from this study added to the research surrounding sensemaking and educational leadership. Those working in education - policymakers, educational leaders, and other key stakeholders - can have a better understanding of how to make sense of a situation, as well as how working together to maintain a common vision can be achieved.

This research has affirmed my belief that leadership is not top down, rather a leader must be open to various opinions and work to streamline to a common vision. In making any significant change, such as implementing a new policy in standardized testing, district leaders need to be aware of the need to communicate effectively with multiple audiences the need and purpose of the change or policy implementation. Leaders must hear various perspectives and reframe the situation to meet the needs of each group. When a controversial issue arises, information shared must be clear, relevant, and timely to address the various needs of the community. While there is no perfect path to policy development and implementation, my research has identified a clear direction for policymakers and educational leaders to follow to more smoothly implement controversial policies.

Limitations

This study was limited to BOE members and superintendents in New Jersey public schools who experienced a controversial policy. For this study, superintendents

and BOE members were asked to reflect on controversial policies the district had encountered previously specifically in school years 2015-2017. Expanding the sample size to include other members within the selected site of this investigation such as parents, community members, principals, supervisors and district level personnel would broaden the understanding of how the policy controversy disrupted the school environment. Also, the research was based on events that occurred within a two-year period, thus, requiring the individuals to recall the events. The amount of detail that the participants were able to recall may have been affected or may have been inaccurate of events as it may have occurred, but rather how they are remembered. Interviewing during an event would assist with a more accurate portrayal of the actions of the leaders.

The participants discussed policies that caused a disruption to the school organization. It should be noted that the participants discussed various policies, but not specifically the policy or controversy that was covered by the media in the school years 2015-2017. The participants discussed controversies that did not demonstrate the organization to be blamed or embarrassed. Future research should align to a specific policy topics and highlight the areas that were covered by the media. Under those parameters, the participants may provide a different perspective of how the organization made sense of the crisis.

Recommendations

Research. It is the purpose of this study to understand the actions of the educational leaders when implementing policy that may be deemed controversial. This descriptive multiple-case study (Yin, 2013) analyzed how a purposeful sample of similar

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K-12 school district leaders in New Jersey reacted to controversial policies that disrupted the school community. Existing research has explored the concepts of leadership, sensemaking, and crisis. However, there has been limited research exploring the relationship of how these concepts relate to the ability of applying sensemaking effectively to move an organization forward.

The results from this study have both theoretical and practical implications for preparing educational leaders for the complexity of the role of educational leader. This study illustrates that enactment of leadership is more complex than a district policy, the relationship of the superintendent and a public board of education, or even educational leadership. This study demonstrates the complexity of leadership to local policy.

Future research should include how educational leadership programs prepare educational leaders to address and overcome barriers, specifically those that may be controversial. School administration professionals such as superintendents and principals require strong leadership skills, a deep understanding of school structure, and creativity to meet challenges directly. Therefore, it is important that programs prepare leaders to excel in these various responsibilities, but also how to work through unknown events.

To add to deeper understanding, future research should analyze the interactions within leadership teams to help understand more fully how consensus is formed. Interaction within the leadership teams as well as with external stakeholders could influence individuals to change their mental models. Further studies could examine the role of the community in this context because of the differences found between leadership teams. In this study, the participants were identified as educational leaders

during the time of a controversial policy implementation. The perspective of the community member was not examined. It would be interesting to determine how the community members made sense of the situation, and their feelings regarding the organization's ability to move on in a collaborative style.

Practice. It is required by the New Jersey Department of Education that new superintendents who have finished their graduate school coursework or those coming to work as superintendents in New Jersey from other states receive certificates of eligibility, enabling them to accept administrator positions. Candidates must complete a one-year residency program to obtain a standard certificate. This program consists of the appointment of three mentors whose role is to develop, nurture, and support the new school leader. Having been mentored as a new superintendent, and having been an unofficial mentor to new superintendents, I have found that there is a need for administrators to know how to respond during a controversy, and how leaders can intentionally work with individuals to guide situations. Though no situation is exactly alike in our districts, superintendents have experienced similar situations. Discussing the scenarios provide support and alternate perspectives that may assist with avoiding controversy, or at least allow superintendents to quickly address a situation when it arises. Through a network system, mentors can provide feedback, questions, and critiques so that the leader can summarize the information and determine the course of action that he/she deems necessary.

Mentors in educational administration play several roles, including providing support and feedback. Mentoring interactions can vary greatly, with their complexions

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and activities depending on various personal, relational, and situational factors (Hackmann & Malin, 2018). Mentors are more important to career success than just the simple actions of the mentee. Without support from experienced mentors and creative ways of thinking, new educational leaders are likely to repeat what others have done irrespective of rationale, context, and/or circumstances (Weingartner, 2009). Rather, it is the guidance and support of others who experienced the situation, or similar situations, to work with the leaders through the situations, considering different perspectives and frames to the given sitation (Anderson & Wasonga, 2017). This is an important message that I have utilized as I have worked with new superintendents. I also often reach out to my mentors during difficult times. It is critical that a mentor assigned to a new superintendent is appropriately trained to work collaboratively with him/her during the transition. This includes training to establish an entry plan, to connect with the community and to identify the various stakeholders. The early connection and means to develop a relationship with the community will benefit the educational leader.

As part of the mentoring process, leaders should examine table-top exercises where situations can be identified. In a table-top exercise, the mentors and the mentee meet to discuss a simulated emergency situation (Appendix B). The mentee can identify critical stakeholders and organize members that may be needed, establish a protocol for releasing information, and intentionally manage the vision and message to the community. The necessary questions and process is examined on the attached Tabletop Form. Members of the team review and discuss the actions they would take in a particular emergency, testing their emergency plan in an informal, low-stress environment. During

the exercises, mentors can play a pivotal role by asking critical questions, working with the mentee to reframe situations through various frameworks, and discussing how to create symbols and cues through actions and the behaviors of the leader. This type of low stress practice can allow a new superintendent to prepare for a crisis, should one arise.

Summary

This study uncovered the experience of educational leaders – superintendents and school board members –while handling controversy related to a policy. Educational leaders must play the leading role in making sense of a controversy that impedes the district. Educational leaders often frame an issue within an organization in order to have a better understanding of the issue. Educational leaders must be prepared to understand why a situation had resulted in a crisis. It is through sensemaking that leaders must maneuver the situation and build a collaborative environment.

Most importantly, superintendents leading an organization through a controversial policy must obtain a broader reflection as to what was taking place within the organization – the environment, relationships, and understandings of the world so that it remains fluid and continuously transforms to meet the changing needs of the organizations. To ensure consistency with the purpose and message of the policy, districts would be well-served by identifying a barrier and then identifying how to forge partnerships with all members of the school community to overcome it. It is then that the superintendent, board of education members, and the overall school community will be successful.

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Appendix A

Text of Recruitment Letter to Participants

Dear   :

My name is Donna Ambrosius and I am currently enrolled in studies for a Doctorate in Educational Leadership at Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey. I am seeking your permission, as Superintendent of Schools, to conduct research for my doctoral study in your school district. The study is titled "Superintendent and Public Board of Education Members Overcoming Controversial Policy Implementation." I will be collecting data from several New Jersey school districts as part of the research.

The purpose of my research is to understand the actions of the educational leaders when implementing a policy that may be deemed controversial. I am requesting to interview you and two Board of Education members who have experienced, or have knowledge about, the implementation of a controversial policy. Participation is voluntary and as such, anyone is free to withdraw participation from this study at any time.

If you and the Board of Education members choose to participate, they will be asked to complete an interview lasting approximately 40 minutes. There will be no compensation for participation. Names will not be included in the final study to ensure anonymity.

Thank you for taking the time to assist me in my educational endeavors. The data collected will provide useful information regarding district leadership. If you have any questions regarding the interview, or the research study in general, including the findings, please contact me at ambrosiud4@students.rowan.edu.

If you are willing to authorize my research in your district, I ask that you send a signed response to me on your school letterhead, with a brief statement acknowledging and approving the above mentioned research.

In gratitude,

Donna Ambrosius
Student, Rowan University

Appendix B

Table Top Scenario Walk Through

Sensemaking
1. Notice something
2. Decide what to make of it
3. Determine what to do about it

What is happening here?

What is the goal and where should you be heading?

Now, learning to make deep accurate, and quick situational diagnosis requires slowing down.

Is this situation, identify the stakeholders:

_____ _____ _____
_____ _____ _____
_____ _____ _____

For each group identify the frame asking yourself and the members, what is happening here?

|	
Structurally How do the school rules, roles and policies contribute?	**Human Resources** What are the people or issues at play?

Political What are the political dynamics and who are the key constituents to consider and reach?	**Symbolic** What's the meaning of this situation and options to the leaders and to the significant others?

Now how can you *reframe* the current situation:

Reframing – a deliberate process of shifting perspectives to see the same situation in multiple ways and through different lenses. Reframing is only possible when we have more than one leadership frame – when we can bring multiple, coherent ways of understanding the complex realities and requirements of the work.

Take each stakeholder group and identify it from a different frame.

Structurally	Human Resources

Political	Symbolic
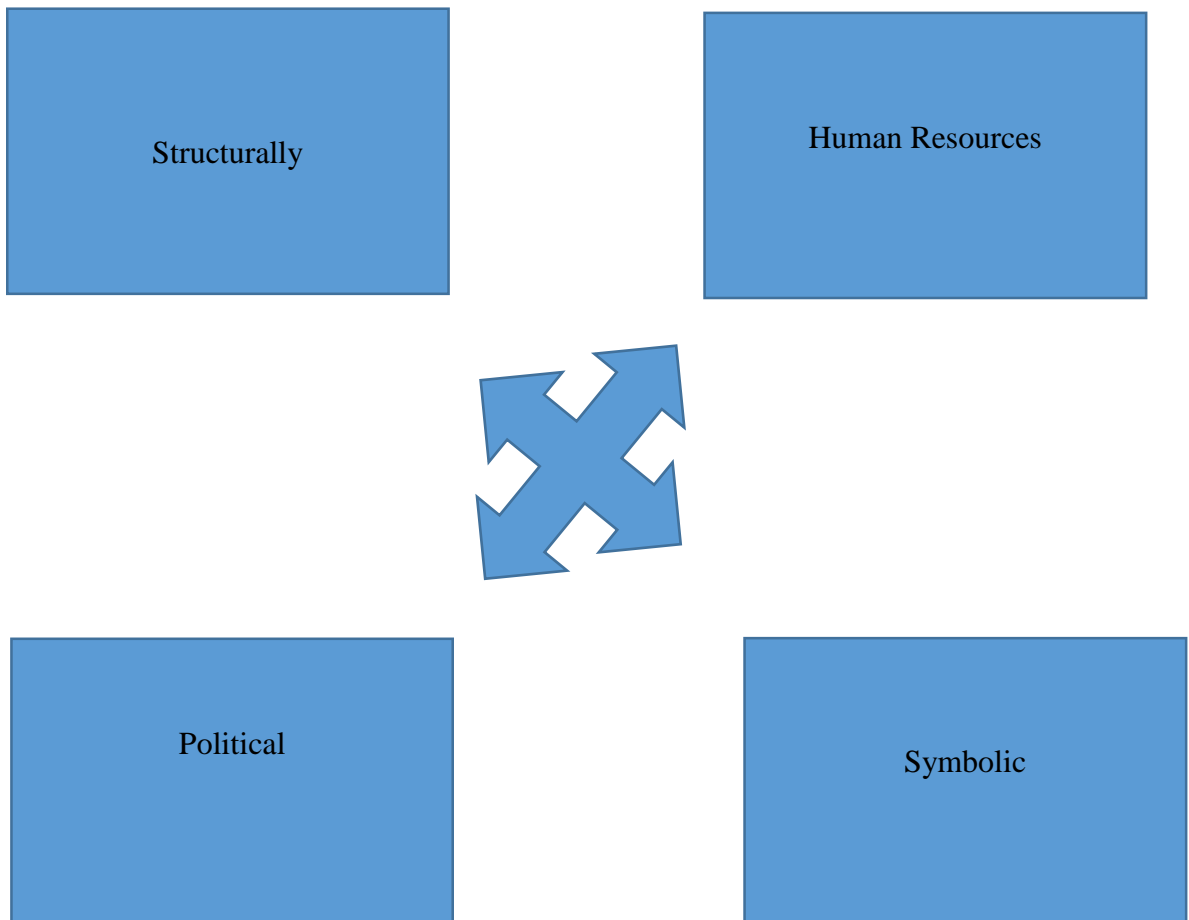
Examine the situation from the alternative perspectives, looking for a new way to understand perspectives, looking for new ways to understand and for new strategies to move ahead.

Discussion with mentor:
What strategies can you use to get align the vision and establish a clear message?

How are you going to share this message?

What steps are you taking to realign the district?

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little about yourself; share with me about your role within the school district. How long you have been a stakeholder in education? (Warm-up question.)

2. How would you describe the role of the Board and the superintendent as educational leaders?
   a.   Can you describe for me the structure of the board?
   b.   What is your role within the committees?

3. Can you identify or who are the influential stakeholders within the school environment?

4. How are policies set within the school organization? How do school stakeholders (community, teachers, and students) become aware of new or proposed policies?

5. What is the vision of the school district?

Roles

6. One of the roles of the board of education is to set school district policy. What is your experience with policy setting? (Probing: Can you give specific examples or a policy that stands out from others?)

7. How would you describe a controversial policy?

8. Has there been any friction with the community regarding a BOE's policy implementation? (Probing – Can you describe the situation in which there was some discomfort or push back from the public (or stakeholder group)?) Probing questions -Can you tell me more – what was the reaction of the board members? What was the reaction from the superintendent? Has anything changed moving forward?

Reflection

9. How did the relationship between the board of education and superintendent influence the adversity, challenge, and confusion of the policy requirement? (Probing what was the process to address the questions or concerns. Do you have any documents that you can share with me?)

10. How did district leaders make sense of (understand, perceive, critique and/or experience) controversial policies impacting their district? (Probing: were leaders able to speak with the community or outsiders openly regarding the issues? What steps/actions were taken to do so?)

11. What ideas experiences, conditions, school structures and/or policy tools do you feel influenced the district leaders' ability to make sense (sensemaking) of the controversial policy?

12. Within your time in this position (BOE/Sup) who primarily facilitates the resolution process? To what extent has this been successful in mediating a resolution? (Probing question -How did this impact the educational leaders' ability to lead during the time of implementation of the controversial policy?)

13. Moving forward, how would you recommend a district leader address a controversial policy requirement?

14. Is there any thing further you would like to share with me regarding policy implementation, the board, and Superintendent relationship?

Appendix D

Field Notes Protocol

1. What are the key take-aways from this interview?

2. Where there any questions that caused emotional [affective] responses from participants? a. If so, what questions or responses were they attached to?

3. Where there any noticeable changes to participants' body language or voice? a. If so, what questions or responses were they attached to?

 4. Were there moments during the interviews that my biases and assumptions may have interfered with my conversation with the participant?
 a. If so, what were they?
b. What can I do about it?

5. Are there things that I need to keep in mind for future interviews?

Appendix E

Observation Form

Site:
Date:

Observation	Inner Dialogue	Theory and Practice