

CONDUCTING THE SYMPHONY: HOW A SCHOOL DISTRICT  
SUPERINTENDENT USES COMPLEXITY THEORY FOR  
CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

by

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## **DEDICATION**

In memory of:

My Dada, Tomas M. Montemayor, who taught me the value and importance of family and hard work. I miss his guidance.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The analogy of an orchestral conductor is applicable to the ways in which a school district superintendent orchestrates ways to move away from long-standing practices within the educational system. Like a conductor, the superintendent works with an audience of multiple stakeholders while navigating multiple elements that affect teaching and learning. In this qualitative research study, using educational criticism and connoisseurship, I explored how a Texas school district superintendent employed creative leadership in his management of school systems while striving for change and growth. I modified an ecology framework using the areas of instructional support, school structures, administration, and the internal and external school community. I used interviews, observations, and existing artifacts as sources for data collection to make meaning of the superintendent's actions and decision-making process.

Results showed the superintendent used creativity in his everyday approaches to situations and his actions contributed to the development of a complex and adaptive school system. The research served as an inquiry of the school district superintendent as a catalyst for change within a complex adaptive school system. Results support that creative leadership can be a social interaction that is demonstrated daily by the interactions and decisions of the school district superintendent. Future research considerations include exploring a superintendent's creative problem-solving efforts in daily decision-making and the influence on knowledge structures in real-world scenarios,

and creative change leadership within the constructs of other leadership theories and fields.

## **I. PRELUDE TO THE SCHOOL DISTRICT LANDSCAPE**

The concert hall has a striking interior, a combination of wood and state of the art acoustic panels with a beautifully painted ceiling representing the evening sky. The red velvet cushioned seat hugs you as you sit and await the performance led by the renowned conductor. The excitement from the musicians fills the auditorium with a cacophony highlighting excerpts from the music to come. The lights dim and the concertmaster walks onto the stage and cues the oboist to play the tuning note. The tuning pitch fills the auditorium as the musicians begin to tune their instruments. The acclaimed conductor enters stage left, bows, and, with a decisive slash of the baton, gives the downbeat for the musicians to begin the performance. The energy flows from every instrument as the music immerses every space throughout the venue with invigorating overtones. The conductor lifts the orchestra's members from the daily routine of just a competent performance and elevates them to a higher form of musicianship. The conductor elicits and coordinates musical contributions from the musicians, collaborating verbally and non-verbally as they problem-solve together throughout the musical journey (Anderson, 2011).

### **Conductor as Leader**

Viewing leadership in creative ways can guide an individual's practice and personal growth. In a symphony orchestra, the conductor is generally responsible for all creative and artistic decisions, serves as the front-person for the organization, and has overlapping roles as musician, artistic director, and community liaison (Zander, 2009). No matter how much responsibility the conductor delegates to the staff, he or she remains the front-person for the organization. The orchestra environment provides a distinct

setting for studies on leadership. The process of music-making occurs before any production of sound or action with the leader conveying and interpreting the interactions of the group. The conductor assumes the role of the facilitator as he or she advises and guides the musicians through the complexities and discourses of the excerpts. The conductor allows for an awareness of ensemble-consciousness so the musicians may contribute to the collective endeavor (Anderson, 2011; Bathurst & Ladkin, 2012). Drucker (1993) used the conductor and orchestra analogy to analyze the relationships between workers involved in highly specialized tasks and a leader with an overall vision, noting that organizations, like orchestras, comprise four components: people, instruments, music, and conductor. The people in the organization are its most valuable asset and need resources and support to fulfill their roles. The art of making music occurs during the rehearsal, with the performance as the culminating event transpiring between musicians and facilitated by the conductor (Bathurst & Ladkin, 2012).

Great conductors understand the musical score and the genre and have a vision for how to shape and taper each musical phrase and do so through a shared approach between director and musicians (Nierenberg, 2009). The interplay between the conductor and the orchestra creates a “constructive, collaborative, and cohesive unit” (Zhou, 2016, p. 102) where solutions develop based on the experiences, skills, and creativity of the musicians (Anderson, 2011). The development of the performance transpires during rehearsals through the interpretation of the composition and musical understanding between the musicians and the conductor. The musicians begin to identify the causes of problems and develop an acuity for creative problem-solving to adjust to any imprecisions (Anderson, 2011). The conductor guides the musicians during the



performance through the nuances of the melodic and harmonic structures, while conveying and interpreting his or her interpretation of the composer. He or she provides feedback and insight into the interpretation of the composition so the players may take coordinated action (Bathurst & Ladkin, 2012), and remains an essential part of the musical performance, embodying the music and inspiring the musicians and audience. Zander (2009) noted that out of all the musicians, the conductor depends on his or her ability to influence others through the interpretation of the music. Great conductors do not demonstrate their virtuosic skills on their instrument. Instead, great conductors merge the artistry of the musicians to create an aesthetic experience for those contributing to and listening to the performance (Buller, 2010). The artistry and appreciation for the music and the music-making reflect on the leadership during the rehearsal and performance (Wis, 2007).

### **Superintendent and Conductor in Unison**

Like a conductor, the school district superintendent understands the school system (harmonic structures) and the members of the community (musicians), while communicating a vision for teaching and learning (musical interpretation). The conductor develops a shared vision of exemplary performance, establishes goals, and manages all facets of the organization. The same holds true for a school district superintendent. The superintendent “conducts” multiple aspects of the school system, ranging from the business and financial side to areas of human resources, including the administration and personnel. Additionally, the superintendent functions as the primary instructional leader, presenting different ideas to improve and enhance teaching and learning (Wagner & Friedman, 2010).

The role of the superintendent is in constant flux, like a conductor, as he or she works with an audience of community members, the school board, and the learning organization. As global economies evolve, school district superintendents must also adapt to new approaches and develop methods for students to acquire the skills necessary to meet the demands of the 21st century workplace while leading their schools toward higher levels of achievement. The school district superintendent then develops systems to implement new programs, new standards, and new curricula to align with the job market. The United States has advanced in the technological information field and plays an active role in higher paid information services employment, shifting away from manufacturing positions (Wan & Gut, 2011). By the year 2020, some believe 36% of all jobs in various industries will require knowledgeable individuals with the creative capacity to problem-solve (Leopold, Ratchevaj, & Zahidi, 2016).

According to studies of the workplace, new technologies and economic changes have caused shifts in organizational structures and leadership behaviors (Leopold et al., 2016; Wan & Gut, 2011). New technological and socioeconomic developments led to the disruption of conventional business practices, resulting in an increase in productivity, creativity, and innovation through the processes of information sharing, collaboration, decision-making, and networking with others in job-related fields (Wan & Gut, 2011). The development of advanced economics requires more educated workers with various skills to adapt to complex problems, communicate effectively, and produce new knowledge while working in collaborative groups. Many 21st century jobs will require the technological creative capacity of employees for job creation and development (Pink, 2005; Robinson, 2006; Wan & Gut, 2011).

## **Future Challenges**

Facilitating any changes within a school district challenges a system rooted in historical practices as superintendents orchestrate initiatives to support and achieve improvement while leading with passion and purpose to effect organizational growth (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Specific job requirements will shift to include presentations and data analysis with emphasis on consumer values and product offerings (Leopold et al., 2016).

**Interlude.** Throughout this qualitative study, I noted how the superintendent listened intently to others and made connections between the school system and the local job market. I inserted descriptive vignettes, referred to as interludes, throughout to depict how the superintendent interacted within the school district community and made meaning of his daily decisions. The interlude below shows how the superintendent engaged in a conversation regarding changes in the healthcare profession and the possibilities for redesigning school curricula.

I enter the Mexican restaurant and can smell the aroma of homemade tortillas. I see the superintendent at a booth having a meeting with the CEO of the local hospital. I walk to the table and quietly sit down. The superintendent briefs me on the conversation. He then turns and asks the hospital administrator, “Where do you see healthcare in the next 10 years?” The response is fascinating, and I immediately think of my research. The administrator says, “Technology in medicine is advancing. Hospitals are now becoming more for emergency visits and the extremely ill.” The superintendent listens intently, and then immediately asks, “How do we redesign our curriculum to meet these new advancements?” He reaches for his taco, takes a bite, and does not say anything. He

listens as the administrator discusses price transparency in the medical field. The superintendent quickly lifts his head and stops eating as the administrator claims, “The medical bills will now be similar to Travelocity. You can price shop for procedures and see the quality scores. It’s also referred to as health tourism, which is now quite popular” (Field notes, July 12, 2018).

Children in primary schools today face a future of new jobs with skills and functions that currently do not exist (Leopold et al., 2016). Employers now emphasize not only job competency, but also look for the most competent, creative, and innovative people who will contribute to the organization (Wan & Gut, 2011). The conventional views of leadership and management are based on hierarchical organizations with the stereotypical assumption that only a select few can attain leadership positions. These dominant practices in educational leadership are no longer adequate for the continuous changes in schooling (English & Ehrich, 2015). The classical leader depends on codified knowledge (Clarke, 2016), emphasizing great control over the organization with little collaboration (Obolensky, 2010). Educational systems that continue to operate based on obsolete models that emphasize the prevalence of school leadership competencies and management also hinder the progress and development of future labor markets (Clarke, 2016; Leopold et al., 2016).

As the face of the school district, the superintendent plays a critical role in fostering and sustaining partnerships with community leaders (Tekniepe, 2015). As such, no longer can the superintendent lead from the top. Rather, the superintendent must develop a reflective approach and evolve into a creative leader to lead all members of the school community, including those resistant to particular changes, through the changing

policies and the social and political landscapes that affect teaching and learning. These new approaches go beyond “best practice to implementing next practice” (Clarke, 2016, p. 354) in dealing with challenging situations and conflict between policy requirements and professional judgment. The complexity of educational leadership calls for the superintendent to remain flexible and synthesize the processes that are in place as he or she strategically assesses the varying diverse and dynamic abilities of all individuals.

### **Purpose**

This is a work of educational criticism meant to make meaning of the actions and decision-making process of a public school district superintendent in his adaptation to changes and accommodations to various cultural contexts, ideas, and perspectives. I used a pseudonym when appropriate so as not to disclose the identity of the superintendent. I used a single unit of analysis approach and the method of educational criticism and connoisseurship to explore one superintendent’s management of school systems while striving for change and growth. Though the superintendent selected for this study practiced various forms of leadership, such as distributive, transactional, and servant leadership, the focus within this study was on creative leadership (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). The questions that guided this research were:

1. How does a district superintendent interact within the school organization during conditions of change?
2. How does creative leadership manifest in the work of a district superintendent?

Through this study, I sought to understand how creative leadership manifested for the school district superintendent and to develop an understanding of the conceptual link

between the school organization and such leadership. Therefore, this study was intended to contribute to the literature regarding school district superintendents' use of creative leadership practices within the instructional support, human capital, business structural support, and community components of a school system.

### **Assumptions**

Creative leaders create opportunities for innovative solutions. These are the individuals who, when facing complex or changing situations, can still provide purpose and vision for their teams. Such leaders plan for, and even benefit from, the unpredictability around them (Vernooij & Wolfe, 2015). The need for creative leadership is multifaceted and is not merely a determination for surpassing competitors in any work arena; instead, it becomes a collective approach where creative leaders generate new possibilities through challenging systems. When examining the relationship between creativity and leadership, terms such as creative leadership, leading for creativity, and innovation leadership appear frequently and are used interchangeably (Mainemelis, Kark, & Epitropaki, 2015). Research surveys have shown a lack of creativity among new hires within the business industry, yet creativity is thought of as an essential leadership quality (Amabile & Khaire, 2008; Leopold et al., 2016; Lombardo & Roddy, 2010; Wan & Gut, 2011). As Palotta (2013) stated:

The best creativity comes from a desire to contribute to the lives of others, either by introducing something new that improves the quality of their lives or by showing people that something thought to be impossible is in fact possible. When you change people's perceptions about what can be accomplished or achieved,

you contribute to their humanity in the richest possible way. You give them hope for the future. (p. 1)

**Interlude.** The superintendent believed the perceptions of members within the organization would begin to change when provided opportunities to innovate and create new ways for teaching and learning. Superintendent Johnson (a pseudonym) stated:

I just had a principal, who is very recalcitrant, email me thanking me for some professional development opportunities, and she said how appreciative she and her team are about trying new things. I don't think that was creative. But perhaps the idea of the ISTE Challenge [technology opportunity for teachers and leaders], some would consider creative. I just thought it was an emotional way to incorporate good learning to produce a change in the organization that values innovation and the concept of adults as constantly evolving learners trying to make a difference for students. (Field notes, June 28, 2018)

### **Creative Leadership Research**

In education, a creative leader prepares individuals to adapt to an evolving system with dynamic and responsive approaches to multiple challenges, seeking opportunities to develop better solutions (Stoll & Temperley, 2009). The school district superintendent, as a creative leader, develops a style of questioning existing practices. He or she challenges assumptions, confronts key issues from different perspectives, and looks at problematic situations as opportunities for new practices to evolve (Puccio, 2010). Currently, school administrators must navigate an increasingly complex and uncertain world of standards and accountability, where the complex issues they face require leadership marked by high levels of creativity (Goetz, 2000). The external community of

families and business and civic leaders expects and demands that school organizations educate students and shoulder the responsibility of preparing students with the capabilities and skills to work through the internal and external changes that occur at the national and state level, as well as in society. Educational leaders now face the need to transition to a system of continuous demand with extended responsibilities placed upon school and district leaders (Davis, 2006). In studying creative leadership within the role of the school district superintendent, I assumed that a creative leader is one who ensures the success of all stakeholders while pushing against the norms of existing policies and inherited systems.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem addressed in this study was how a public school district superintendent met the demands of sustaining school improvement efforts alongside an evolving future of school systems. Conventional leadership in education remains tied to current bureaucratic structures that continue to emphasize trait-based models and leader–follower relationships that are based on hierarchical and linear structures. Such leadership can no longer accommodate the educational needs of students in the 21st century (Weberg, 2012). Weberg (2012), in a review of conventional leadership theories, implied that the goal of a leader is to “control uncertainty and work toward absolute stability” (p. 270). Weberg asserted that linear established leadership models have contributed to the inability of school systems to evolve to a new era of teaching and learning. When educators develop a framework of reference that is flexible and adaptive, they improve their capabilities to work through policy changes and any paradigm shifts in the learning environment that are now replacing conventional schooling (Cookson, 2009).



A rich body of research exists in the area of educational leadership regarding team dynamics, group composition, and organizational conditions (Marion, 2012), yet few studies contained a focus on team dynamics and their contribution to the emergence of creativity and leadership in education (Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002). The lack of understanding of group dynamics may contribute to learning organizations growing stagnant as they follow the same daily routines. Policies once designed as solutions now contribute to organizational problems (Elmore, 2010). The implementation of national-level policy initiatives in education, such as No Child Left Behind (2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015-2016), places value not only on high-stakes testing, but linking test scores to students' academic success. The accountability movement that was set in place to promote a solid educational foundation for all students instead generates a system of conformity that assesses a limited range of skills (Sternberg, 2010).

## **Rationale**

Creative leadership in the educational arena is essential if leaders plan to initiate paradigm shifts to improve teaching and learning. A one-size-fits-all approach to education is inadequate to meet the needs of today's diverse learners, teachers, and leaders with the current mandates set in place. The creative leader establishes a system to manage ambiguity, continuous change, and the complex challenges that may arise (Kahane, 2010). In this study, I examined the conceptual link between the school organization and the superintendent as a creative leader in sustaining school improvement efforts. This qualitative study involved using the methods of educational criticism and connoisseurship (Stake, 1995). My observations enabled me to personalize the study as a

critic and a connoisseur, but also as the deputy superintendent of the school district where I could interpret what was heard and said and how such matters and interactions affected the people within the organization. Through my position I could provide a glimpse into one superintendent's reality in a policy-infused system and how the superintendent dealt with his surroundings while refining his leadership craft (English & Ehrich, 2015). Finally, this study is important because the descriptive information alone provides a deeper understanding of a level of creative leadership in an educational setting.

**Positionality and access.** A researcher's background and position contribute to and affect what the researcher chooses to investigate as well as the method used (Malterud, 2001). For this study, I found myself navigating between two roles of researcher and subordinate in the role of the deputy superintendent, remaining conscious of the interpretations of the given scenarios (Creswell, 2013). I found it necessary to write this study in the first-person because of the nature of my roles as an observer, researcher, and an active participant in some of the situations. Wolcott (2009) stated researchers should "put yourself squarely in the scene" (p. 61) and that "recognizing the critical nature of the observer role and the influence of his or her subjective assessments in qualitative work makes it all the more important to have readers remain aware of that role, that presence" (p. 17).

I had access to the superintendent and the organization because of my district-level position in the district led by the selected superintendent. As a researcher and employee, I was careful to find ways to balance my dual roles and work commitments. My position in the district afforded me opportunities to attend events and meetings with different members of the community (Uhrmacher, Moroye, & Flinders, 2017). This

unique situation allowed me opportunities to focus on the interactions of the superintendent with members of the organization and the public.

I augmented my research with additional information from archived board meeting videos and a review of artifacts. There were inevitable circumstances that limited my time for continuous observations and interviews. Because of the existing relationship between the participant and myself, a relationship of trust had previously developed. I used my personal connection to the participant responsibly and carefully to inform the study (Eisner, 1991). I asked for approval prior to attending any unscheduled meetings with the superintendent. At the conclusion of an observation or interview, I used member checking to ensure accuracy in the description and the reflection. I remained attentive to my own subjectivity, understanding the personal dynamics and how these qualities could affect the research (Peshkin, 1988). I found artifacts to support the descriptions and findings and made connections to the literature to support the identified themes. I also acquired reflections from district administrators at public presentations given by the superintendent to determine whether there were consistencies between my interpretations and those made by others.

**Power dynamics.** The selected school district superintendent also served as my supervisor. There was an inherent risk that I would agree with the superintendent because of his hierarchical supervisory role. Power was circulating between the roles of the researcher and the superintendent. I remained focused on the context of his messages and did not permit the superintendent's position to influence the study as I collected information and data (see Creswell, 2013). As the researcher, I was mindful of the environment in deciphering the context of the educational setting, providing rich

descriptions to portray the superintendent in his role and the situations he encountered during the observations to enhance transferability. I have, undoubtedly, developed opinions regarding the superintendent as a creative leader that most likely influenced my approach to this study. I used my professional judgement as to what to disclose in the findings and exercised academic freedom to remain as impartial as possible. I recognized that I could not be without any biases because of my relationship with the superintendent, so I relied on my experience in the role of deputy superintendent to inform the readers of the happenings within the school district.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The study of creativity stems from research in psychology focused on the behaviors and thinking of exceptional individuals or creative elites (Guilford, 1950; Kim, 2006; Torrance, 1966). Mumford and Licuanan (2004) stated “leadership of creative efforts is an unusually complex activity” (p. 163) requiring “a new wave of research expressly intended to account for leadership in settings where creative people are working on significant innovations” (p. 170).

Creativity theories and research from social psychology influenced my use of the term creativity in this study. For this study, the term creativity centered on the everyday life experiences and interactions of the school district superintendent. Though a spectator or audience member might consider the routines mundane, the superintendent worked through daily decisions by selecting creative pathways (Tanggaard, 2016) that demonstrated creative processes in the context of the individual and the social situation (Glăveanu, 2014; Tanggaard, 2016). From the perspectives of creativity that emphasize the social, creativity is not an isolated act but more of a “concrete movement and ways of

making” meaning (Tanggaard, 2016, p. 97); these affordances of creative acts contribute to new pathways while others begin to follow (Gibson, 1977; Sartori, Straulino, & Castiello, 2011; Tanggaard, 2016).

An individual within the school organization has a greater chance of meaningful understanding within a system designed for creative leadership, creative teaching, and learning. The trajectory of participation by the leader presents creativity as a way of thinking and acting in new ways in a system that calls for unconventional leadership (Nielsen, 2006; Tanggaard, 2016). Therefore, in this study, the term creativity is not conceptualized as “novel” or “new and innovative” responses; instead, creativity represents the everyday approaches to situations in a setting that lead to the development of creative outputs (Simonton, 2013). For this study, creativity in leadership connected how the school district superintendent handled all educational situations and how his actions “contribute[d] to the valuable renewal of existing practices” (Tanggaard, 2014, p. 12) as unconventional practices unfolded.

### **Epistemological Stance**

The interactions of individuals with their surroundings and how individuals make sense of these situations ground the framework of creative leadership within a constructionist epistemology (Creswell, 2013; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). In the school context, people are creatively engaged in relating or constructing something meaningful to them personally or to others, drawing on experiences rather than merely receiving information. Crotty (1998) defined *constructionism* as an epistemology where “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human

practices, being constructed in and out of the interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42).

Creative leadership consists of multiple themes and styles as organizations face the uncertainty and changes within a school context (Guo, Dilley, & Gonzales, 2016). Complex, continuous change involves an adjustment of priorities and communication as new information becomes available (Pasmore, 2015). It was not my intent to develop a theory of creative leadership but to pose creative leadership as a concept by which a leader faces continuous and constant change and discerns what works and does not work as intended. The creative leader must then align change efforts with real-time learning and understanding to adjust actions along the way for future benefits. Complexity theory centers on how organizations adapt to their existing environments and respond to the uncertainties and challenges that groups, and individuals, may face in the workplace. Complexity theory offers a set of tenets, challenges, and proposals that can guide school district leaders in thinking and acting for changing schools (Morrison, 2010), contributing to creative leadership as a way to examine existing paradigms merging and unifying school systems to accommodate different contexts, ideas, and perspectives. Complexity focuses more on the flow and generation of ideas and less on the individual’s creative attributes (Marion, 2012). Behaviors become routine, developing patterns of interactions where the agents naturally form bonds and organize themselves into networks as the people in the group interact.

In this study, I used complexity theory in my examination of whether the superintendent enabled and generated conditions for self-organized emergence and change for organizational learning rather than requiring or mandating specific behaviors

(Morrison, 2010). Applying this body of theories with educational criticism and connoisseurship was intended to provide opportunities to witness the unexpected. I believed looking through the lens of complexity theory and aspects of social constructionism would allow me to observe the actions, behaviors, and communications that reflected how the district leader employed creative leadership (O'Neill & Nalbandian, 2018).

Figure 1 illustrates my original conceptual framework. The figure details creative leadership as a concept wherein the leader faces continuous change and responds to the external and internal environment. Each ring is a nested system of relationships representing the people within the organization, the networking and interactions between them, and the dissonance of chaos and crisis. The adaptive process within a complex adaptive system generates discourse where learning occurs and creates space for innovation, collaboration, and creativity. Complex, continuous change becomes multifaceted, overlapping between a series of planned and unplanned changes that are interdependent, difficult to execute, and needing immediate attention (Pasmore, 2015). One single change does not exist within this model. Change initiatives become intertwined, competing for additional time and resources with other changes within the organizational structure already in motion as they enter the complex school system. The school district superintendent navigates through the multiple areas of the organization that include the human resource department, the community, and the instructional support and business departments. From the complex adaptive system, strands emerge that show the connection between complexity theory and creative leadership with the band of social constructionism binding the two together.

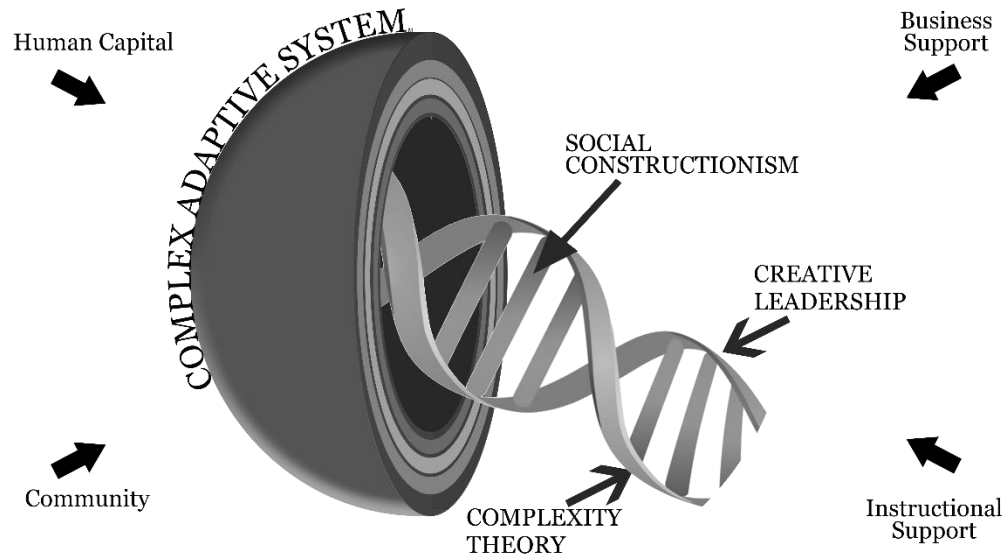


Figure 1. Researcher's original framework of study before data collection.

### Definition of Terms

An *autopoietic system* reproduces, self-makes, and self-manages operating as a unified whole while the individual components transform and create new relationships (Alhadeff-Jones, 2008; Semetsky, 2008).

A *complex adaptive system* is the basic unit of analysis in complexity science (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In this view, the organization is a nested system of relationships that work in tandem (Ivory, Hyle, McClellan, & Acker-Hocevar, 2015), where “multiple elements interact and adapt to one another’s behavior in self-organizing, non-linear ways that suggest the system is learning” (McQuillan, 2008, pp. 1773-1774).

*Complexity theory* is a comprehensive theory that provides a way to frame and analyze the dynamics within a complex interactive network (Marion, 2012). Complexity theory portrays leadership as an “emergent, interactive dynamic that is productive of adaptive outcomes” (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007, p. 299) while furthering the vision of the organization.



*Complex sociotechnical transitions* in leadership pertain to the whole system, not only an individual element or unit, to determine or find new ways of doing and creating. Every unit within the complex sociotechnical transition is interconnected with each solution, requiring creativity and innovation to problem-solve through collaboration and deliberation to create new ways of thinking and interacting (Newman-Storen, 2014).

*Creative leadership* is “the ability to deliberately engage one’s imagination to define and guide a group towards a novel goal, a direction that is new for the group” (Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011, p. 13).

*Creative pathways* demonstrate the creative processes within the context of the individual and the social situation (Glăveanu, 2014; Tanggaard, 2016).

*Creative problem-solving* is a process that deliberately stimulates creative thinking and generates creative solutions and change (Puccio et al., 2011).

*Creative thinking* is a search for diverse and novel solutions, and is also referred to as divergent thinking (Puccio et al., 2011).

*Creativity*, for this study, is an example of how an individual and his or her actions “contribute to the valuable renewal of existing practices” (Tanggaard, 2014, p. 12) within the contexts of which the individual is a part. The understanding of how people within an organizational system interact heightens the probability for creativity to manifest when working through the complexity of systems as networks teeming with human potential and diversity. The creative changes contribute to the development of something new or a new way to improve an existing practice or product.

*Educational criticism and connoisseurship* is a form of qualitative inquiry, developed by Eisner (1991), in which the researcher shares perceptions and reflections

with a larger audience to contribute to the evaluation and improvement of the educational settings, allowing the researcher to understand the events from various standpoints and perspectives (Uhrmacher et al., 2017).

*Indwelling* is stepping into a situation in order to know, understand, and reflect (Polyani, 1967).

An *interlude* is a portion of music played between selections (Kennedy, Kennedy, & Rutherford-Johnson, 2013).

A *prelude* is a piece of music that precedes something else (Kennedy et al., 2013).

*Social constructionism* is an epistemology where “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of the interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

A *symphonic poem* is an orchestral piece in which music is accompanied by a program (i.e., a text) that is generally poetic or narrative in nature, and is meant to be read by the audience before listening to the work (Kennedy et al., 2013, p. 831).

A *trajectory of participation* is a way of thinking and acting in new ways in a system that calls for unconventional leadership (Nielsen, 2006; Tanggaard, 2016).

A *typology of connoisseurs* is a classification of connoisseurs into three categories: connoisseurs of leaders (i.e., those who can make judgments regarding leaders but may not enable the individual to become or continue as a leaders), connoisseurs of leadership performance (i.e., leaders who are connoisseurs of their own leadership style), and leaders of connoisseurs (i.e., leaders who can make judgement on their own leadership practices as well as those of other leaders; English & Ehrich, 2016).

## **Delimitations of the Study**

This study involved one superintendent in a Texas school district. The selection criteria required the participant to have a minimum of 2 years of experience as a superintendent and 2 years of service in the current school district. Based on geographical proximity and availability, I used a convenience and purposeful sampling method. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated “the geographical area was chosen as a convenience sample for the researcher due to proximity and availability” (p. 73). Therefore, this study was delimited to an individual superintendent I was able to observe and interact with daily.

## **Organization of the Study**

I merged my background as a former music educator with that of my current practice as a district-level administrator to engage as the critic and connoisseur during this study. I contemplated how creativity intersected with leadership within the role of the school district superintendent. In keeping with the symphony conductor metaphor, the organization of the study replicated a symphonic poem, an orchestral piece based on an extramusical idea:

An orchestral piece whose music is accompanied by a program, i.e., a text, generally poetic or narrative in nature, which is meant to be read by the audience before listening to the work. As is true for other types of program music, the program may be rather brief and vague (and may even consist merely of a suggestive title), or it may be long and detailed. Similarly, the music may be related to the program only very generally or in a myriad of specific ways. Usually, the term is reserved for a composition in one movement, as opposed to

the multimovement program symphony; though many symphonic poems do contain several contrasting sections, these sections tend to flow into one another (through transitional passages) and are usually unified by tonal or motivic interrelationships. (Kennedy et al., 2013, p. 831)

The format for this study was inspired by Smetna's symphonic poem, *My Vlast*. Smetna composed a series of episodes in the symphonic poem using musical themes to depict specific images for a musical description (Sadie & Tyrrell, 2001). My intent for this study was to portray the daily reality of the role of a school district superintendent by this participant. Chapter 1 (or Movement 1) features the Prelude into the School District Landscape, and Chapter 2 (or Movement 2)—Down the Path of Creative Leadership—consists of a review of literature pertinent to this study delving into creativity, creative leadership, and complexity theory. Chapter 3 (or Movement 3)—Indwelling—is a detailed description of the educational criticism and connoisseurship method I used to gather, analyze, and interpret and share my findings. Chapter 4 (or Movement 4)—Creative, Complex, and Vulnerable—is used to describe the emerging themes of creative leadership developed from observations, interviews, and field notes. Chapter 5 (or Movement 5)—Interactions, Reflections, and Coda—is the finale to the study, and serves as a synopsis of the interpretation and understanding of the superintendent and my role as the researcher.

## II. DOWN THE PATH OF CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

This chapter includes a review of the literature informing this study of creative leadership. I highlight creativity research and creative models to describe the interplay between creativity and leadership. The recurring theme of complexity is emphasized in this section to provide a background of complexity and its relation to the creative leader's decision-making processes. Overall, this chapter clarifies how creativity, creative leadership, and complexity pertain to the questions of this study.

### **Creativity**

The word creativity comes from the Latin root of the word *create*, meaning to make or produce (Götz, 1981). A plethora of research exists on creativity and innovation in education and psychology, though it lacks a standard definition (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Guilford, 1950; Kaufman, 2016; Plucker, Beghetto, & Dow, 2004; Tanggaard, 2014). Some researchers continue to refer to what has been called the “standard definition” of creativity as originality, useful, and novel (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Although the concept of creativity remains a key topic in the debate on educational innovation, the definition of creativity itself requires further study (Plucker et al., 2004). Torrance (1966) stated “creativity defies a precise definition because it is largely unseen, nonverbal, and unconscious” (p. 43). The word creativity applies to all aspects of life, whether it be music, art, research, or, most recently, leadership (Cromwell, 2018; Puccio et al., 2011; Sternberg, 2008). Anything considered essential for living or anything that is a new idea stems from creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), understanding that creativity is useful and necessary (Fritz, 2003) and “neither [existing or new ideas] is sufficient by itself” (Kaufman, 2016, p. 5). Variations in the definition of creativity may be viewed as

hindering the progress of creativity research, yet most researchers in the field of psychology would agree that the key elements of creativity include new and novel approaches or ideas (Acar, Burnett, & Cabra, 2017; Simonton, 2013; Stein, 1953) that are useful and relevant to the task (Kharkhurin, 2014).

### **Historical Aspects of Creativity Research**

Modern creativity research gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s. The first wave of creativity research focused on the personalities of those deemed as exceptional creators (Sawyer, 2012). During this time, Guilford (1950) presented a presidential address to the American Psychological Association in which he criticized the educational system for stifling creativity and opportunities for children to develop their creative capacity. The lack of creative talent, according to Guilford, was linked to the quality of the educational systems that encouraged memorization and rote learning. Guilford stressed the need for creative change. Guilford created a well-defined conceptual framework that would inform the creativity research for the next 2 decades. His comparative model differentiated the traits, personality, and intellect a creative individual might possess in greater quantity than the average person.

Following the 1950 address by Guilford and the launching of the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957, the United States took a sudden interest in creativity as the public claimed a lack of innovativeness compared to the Soviet Union (Becker, 2011). During this time of educational reform, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act in 1958 (Spring, 2008), which provided funding to alter and improve instruction in math, science, foreign language, and the teaching of the creative arts (Esquivel, 1995). Educators began deviating from the more common methodologies of teaching literacy

and mathematics and focused on ways to stimulate creativity (Esquivel, 1995). As tensions began to rise after the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the cultural, political, and social events of the time led to the need for educational research in creativity and the creative process in education and psychology (Cummins, 2014).

The ways of thinking about creativity changed in scope and complexity through the last quarter of the 20th century and into the 21st century after increased speculation and concern for the reliability of creative assessments emerged (Cummins, 2014). The research community attempted to replace Guilford's (1950) framework with a new one (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner, 1994) based on an interest in measuring creative abilities through a creativity–intelligence distinction (Feldman & Benjamin, 2006). The Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (Torrance, 1966), based on Guilford's (1950) theory on divergent thinking, was designed to predict adult creative achievement. The psychometric tests developed during this period measured creativity as a specific skill or domain. The second wave of creativity research during the 1970s identified the cognitive approach, rooted in cognitive psychology, and the mental processes of those engaged in creative behavior (Sawyer, 2012).

Predominant views in the creativity literature indicate people share the implicit belief that the creative ideas embodied in products, processes, and proposals are characterized by novelty and usefulness; therefore, creativity is about creating something new (original) and useful (worthwhile; Plucker et al., 2004). Equally important characteristics of creativity not necessarily measured or considered by creativity tests include personal affect and attitudes as well as tangible ideas that represent real-life applications; all attributes that link creative strategies to problem-solving (Plucker et al.,

2004). The third wave of creativity research, referred to as the sociocultural approach, contained a focus on groups of people within the social and cultural contexts of a system (Sawyer, 2012). Creativity from this perspective is seen as a socio-cultural process where social transactions remain at the core of creativity. Innovation emerges from collaboration and collective exchanges among people, emphasizing the social dimension of creativity (Sawyer, 2012).

### **Creativity Models**

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) contextualized the understanding of creativity (Saltofte, 2013). In the systems model of creativity, Csikszentmihalyi described the relationships between three dimensions categorized as the field, the domain, and the individual. Csikszentmihalyi noted that creative processes and products must be identified by the social constructs of the domains (Saltofte, 2013). The people and community within these social constructs share ways of thinking and knowing. Creativity develops through an individual's imitation of actions during the learning exchange (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Csikszentmihalyi recast the field of creativity "not as a characteristic of particular people or products but as an interaction among person, product, and environment" (Starko, 2009, p. 76).

The history of the field of creativity includes various taxonomies of creative models and a multitude of explanatory models with different concepts, such as creativity, creativity to oneself, creativity within a group, and creativity that is subjective or judged (Thomas, 2017). Merriotsy (2013) argued that a long-standing conceptual dichotomy in the creativity research field between "Big-C," or eminent-level creativity, and "Little-C," or everyday creativity is a distinction that should be attributed to Stein (1987). Kaufman



and Berghetto (2009) extended this distinction into four levels of creativity in the 4-C model of creativity. “Mini-c,” focused on creativity in learning a new task and making meaning of the process. The addition of the category of “Pro-C” included individuals exhibiting creativity at a professional level with a passion for their work and expertise (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009).

**The Four Ps.** In a review of studies on creativity, Plucker et al. (2004) defined creativity as “the interaction among aptitude, process, and the environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel, and useful, as defined within a social group” (p. 90). Rhodes (1961) concluded that creativity research had focused on four different aspects of creativity: the person, the process, the product, and the press (the environmental influences). Rhodes noted the importance of future research that would attend to the whole rather than one part in isolation, stating, “Each strand has a unique identity academically, but only in unity do the four strands operate functionally” (Rhodes, 1961, p. 307).

**The Five As model.** The Five As framework, developed by Glăveanu (2014), expanded on the definition of creativity and the Four Ps theory (Rhodes, 1961). Glăveanu’s framework showed the interdependency of each part working together and not in isolation as opposed to the Four Ps theory (Rhodes, 1961). Glăveanu believed the dimensions of person, process, product, and press neglected the social and cultural aspects of creativity because, from this vantage point, creativity stemmed from only the individual. Glăveanu asserted that creativity should be viewed within the context of culture and redefined creativity in the Five As framework. This framework outlined creativity as regarding actors, actions, artifacts, audiences, and affordances rather than

aptitude, processes, products, and the environment (Glăveanu, 2014). The elements of this framework did not provide a standardized definition of creativity but described creativity in a sociocultural context: “Creativity is concerned with the action of an actor or group of actors, in its constant interaction with multiple audiences and the affordances of the material world, leading to the generation of new and useful artifacts” (Glăveanu, 2014, p. 76). The fundamental tenets of the framework provide an understanding of how creative actors interact with a series of audiences at different levels of the organization, produce tangible and intangible artifacts through such actions, and show the affordances of the processes within the organizational environment (Glăveanu, 2014). Glăveanu’s Five As model applies equally to the actors and the audience within a school organization. As such, the main actor in a leadership capacity is the school district superintendent and the audience consists of administrative staff, teachers, and parents. The actions within the learning organization occur through the communication and decision-making of all actors, leading to the collection of artifacts and affordances, such as the availability of resources within the environment. The affordances then stimulate or generate opportunities for additional action to shape future environments (Glăveanu, 2014).

### **Creativity and the Conceptual Link to Leadership**

The distinct contexts and experiences for each individual make it impossible to generalize creativity and its influence on human behavior (Houghton, Dawley, & Di Liello, 2012). Misconceptions arise around the word creativity as if only some people are creative, with artists being the ideal type of those who exhibit creativity and creativeness (Adler, 2011). It is human nature to produce creative ideas, but work environments

sometimes hinder and stifle new ideas (Weisberg, 2006). Creativity in leadership involves acting in a manner that pushes individuals within the organization away from their normal routines and existing paradigms and exposes them to other possibilities (Tanggaard, 2014). The changes that occur may seem chaotic as the individuals adjust to the different routines. The leader understands the discontent felt by the people with implementing the new approach in practice. The leader may set some limits for the members of the organization to work within, while also challenging and allowing for disagreements in order for creative work to emerge (Tanggaard, 2014). Effective leaders inspire those in their organizations to reimagine the possibilities, develop a broader purpose of enabling individuals to flourish, and make creativity a key tenet of leadership in the 21st century (T. Brown, 2009).

### **Creative Leadership Attributes**

The study of creative leadership is a relatively new field with some attention given to “the ability to deliberately engage one’s imagination to define and guide a group towards a novel goal, a direction that is new for the group” (Puccio et al., 2011, p. 13). A global construct in this definition refers to “leading others toward the attainment of a creative outcome” (Mainemelis et al., 2015, p. 393). There appears to be relatively few studies of what separates a creative leader from other types of leaders (Zacko-Smith, 2010). The lack of research stems from the nature of creativity and its association to risk-taking and the uncertainty in how to measure creative outcomes (Stoll & Temperley, 2009). According to Sternberg (2005a), creative leaders have a mindset that encourages behaviors that support creativity. They exhibit various characteristics, not innate abilities, but decide to be creative. These are divergent thinkers who value creativity,

often defying the crowd while advocating for their convictions and redefining problems. They are risk-takers who model new approaches and demonstrate behaviors that support and encourage new ideas. They continue to grow intellectually (Sternberg, Kaufman, & Pretz, 2001; Zacko-Smith, 2010). In working toward creative change, creative leaders may face challenges within the organization, yet they strive to “have a positive influence on their context (i.e., workplace, community, school, family, etc.) and the individuals in that situation” (Puccio et al., 2011, p. 28). They engage in a collaborative process and produce creative ideas, appreciating all aspects of creativity.

**The Creative Leadership Learning Project.** Stoll and Temperley (2009) explored how leadership teams in London approached creative leadership and concluded that “promoting new kinds of learning fundamentally depends on creativity” (p. 65). Asserting the need for creative leadership in education does not mean choosing between managing change and leading change, but doing both equally well, confronting the challenging issues of imagination and action, and providing the “conditions, environment and opportunities for others to be creative” (Stoll & Temperley, 2009, p. 66).

**Creative behaviors.** Creative leadership calls for a repertoire of behaviors that differ from conventional ways of managing and of organizational functioning (Mainemelis et al., 2015). Sternberg (2005a) and Puccio et al. (2011) placed creative leadership within the context of the individual guiding a group to a new goal. These individuals encourage new ideas and facilitate direction toward new concepts and opening the organization up to diverse perspectives to enhance creativity and innovativeness.

**Creative problem-solving.** The creative leader functions “as the catalyst for navigating change along its full spectrum” (Kerr, 2009, p. 181). He or she leads people through a collective process of finding and defining problems and implementing new solutions (Basadur, 2004; Guo et al., 2016). Creative problem-solving implies the creative process associated with the generation of new ideas, the identification of potential areas of concern, the acquisition of information, and the selection and implementation of planning solutions (Carmeli, Gelbard, & Reiter-Palmon, 2013; Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004).

Zacko-Smith (2010) suggested today’s dynamic work environment favors individuals with the ability to solve problems with original, novel, and appropriate solutions, skills considered prerequisites for creative leadership so organizations can develop and sustain innovation. Sustainability requires change and leadership to implement the change. Creative change requires innovation, adaptation, and collaboration on the part of the creative leader (Newman-Storen, 2014). When organizations and individuals create ideas, they take ownership and commit to change initiatives. This co-creation becomes a crucial aspect in the sociotechnical field of design thinking and sustainability. Interdisciplinary collaborations allow for all members to voice their ideas, identify needs, and develop innovative and adaptive solutions (Meinel & Leifer, 2012). The changes that occur contribute to the development of something new or a new way to improve an existing practice or product (Meinel & Leifer, 2012). Creative problem-solving entails looking at the whole system and its individual elements to find new and novel ways of approaching situations and creating ideas, thinking differently to become an active and generative creator (Newman-Storen, 2014).

**Relationships and perceptions.** Creative leadership emerges not only from the creative processes of the leader but reflects the relationships the leader has with followers and affects the followers' perceptions of their relationships with the leader. Grant (2013) suggested people want to feel appreciated and part of something significant, and as though they are doing important work and contributing to the organization. He emphasized the need for people to develop in their roles, excel in their craft, and experience new opportunities, while building trusting relationships and making a difference. Grant contended that "originality is taking the road less traveled, championing a set of novel ideas that go against the grain but ultimately make things better" (p. 3). In short, people within organizations want to make meaning, strive toward a collective vision, and have a positive effect on others while working to improve the systems within the organization.

### **Creative Leadership as a Process**

Leadership is a critical process for changing the kindergarten through Grade 12 educational landscape. As the pace of meeting the demands of school improvement increases, the response falls on district leadership (Anson, 1992; Loewenberger, Newton, & Wick, 2014). Change is an inevitable part of education, and the creative leader works to guide and manage all aspects of the school district environment. As an emerging paradigm, creative leadership provides another approach to leading people in organizations (Puccio et al., 2011). Creative leadership entails awakening the creative capacities of students, teachers, and leaders within a school system to improve education for everyone. As views on leadership evolve, an ingredient that connects creativity and leadership is change:

An essential job of the leader will be to continuously scan the environment and try to make sense of it. Leaders who find comfort and security in stability will have difficulty in surviving. Instead, tomorrow's leaders must find comfort in the mantra; change is constant. (Spreitzer & Cummings, 2001, p. 242)

Blending creativity and educational leadership can lead to changes in educational practices as leaders begin thinking of creativity and leading from multiple perspectives (S. F. Waite & Robbins, 2017). In the current educational system, the school district superintendent faces challenges that go beyond learning expectations. The policy changes that occur at all levels of governance and the demands from the internal and external communities require a leader who can articulate a vision to settle the uneasiness that develops within the organization in response to continuous changes.

### **Understanding Creative Leadership as an Effective Approach**

The educational leadership literature includes a variety of ways to solve problems and facilitate change processes in ways that are compatible with the demands of educational contexts (Puccio et al., 2011; Zacko-Smith, 2010). In reviewing the contemporary theories of leadership, Northouse (2010) concluded that one of the most commonly-held views is that leadership is a process. The creative leader works to deliberately bring about creativity in the organization in addressing situations differently. Rather than waiting for inspiration to strike, the creative leader actively fosters creative thinking by using proven methods, such as creative problem-solving, to clarify complex problems, generate ideas, select and evaluate plans, and make recommendations. Creative leadership entails using various leadership styles for different scenarios with the leader understanding the role necessary for the situation. The creative process leads to

change with the leader facilitating creative thinking for him or herself and others in such change efforts. Furthermore, some have argued that effective leadership requires the ability to solve complex problems for which there are no immediate and easy solutions (Camillus, 2008; Zacko-Smith, 2010).

Leadership is an interdependent process, making it difficult to assess, as it requires a collective, collaborative environment (McCauley et al., 2008). Puccio et al. (2011) conducted research on creative leadership and asserted that all individuals possess creative capacity and leadership potential. An understanding of the creative process allows for creativity to evolve naturally within an organization so members can discuss, question, and confront challenges that arise, such as within a school district (Puccio et al., 2011). Creative leadership taps into the creative process to address complex problems (Martin, 2011) by melding divergent and convergent thinking. Individuals can create and develop ideas based on their tacit and explicit knowledge to attain sustainable solutions that become relevant and transformative (Martin, 2011).

Results of a recent study of six organizations conducted by Carlgren, Rauth, and Elmquist (2016) revealed the various ways of using design thinking to restructure the workplace so employees can collaborate and contribute to generating new ideas in various and multiple contexts. When leadership encourages collaboration and fosters a creative climate, creative ideas develop to address complex problems (Martin, 2011; McCauley et al., 2008; Weisberg, 2006). The problems leaders face today are predominantly complex social problems that lack a single solution and require creative solutions in an innovative climate (Mumford et al., 2002; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Creative problem-solving is aided by a creative leader who is cognizant of the



perceptions affecting both individuals and the environment in response to change and demands for improved performance (Puccio et al., 2011). The leader engages in creative problem-solving to frame the problem differently, using his or her own judgment to determine the nature of the problem (Sternberg, 2002; Williams & Foti, 2011).

Research highlights effective leadership as providing direction to members of the organization while exercising creative influence to reach a shared goal. The influence of a school district superintendent allows for the community to establish a shared process of beliefs (Decman et al., 2018). The school district superintendent interacts and maintains clear objectives and known expectations throughout the learning community while also identifying the internal deficits and gaps (Hazy, 2006). Creative leadership becomes essential as part of an effective leadership approach throughout the change process. Leaders in this capacity encourage members to work toward the overall purpose within the organization rather than for personal gain, striving for balance and unity when tensions arise (Daft, 2016).

**Wisdom, intelligence, and creativity synthesized.** Sternberg (2005a) explained effective leadership as a synthesis of wisdom, creativity, and intelligence. Sternberg defined wisdom as the use of intelligence, creativity, and knowledge to reach a common good, one that requires adaptability and a balancing of the leader's interests with others in the organization (Sternberg, 2005a). He noted many leaders exhibit varying levels of creativity and intelligence, but do not always exhibit wisdom (Sternberg, 2008). Sternberg, Kaufmann, and Pretz (2004) developed a leadership model that combined the various aspects of Sternberg's (2005b) theory of successful intelligence; this research in

creativity and wisdom led to the formation of the WICS model (i.e., wisdom, intelligence, and creativity synthesized).

The WICS model of leadership identifies characteristics of effective leaders across professions and assesses their performance. In this model, every aspect of WICS contains the elements of successful intelligence, which consists of the ability to know one's strengths and weaknesses, and when to capitalize on the strengths and minimize the consequence of any deficiencies (Sternberg, 2008). *Wisdom* is an attribute determined by decision-making practices that benefit others as well as oneself. The *intelligence* component includes a triad model of academic, practical, and creative abilities. The individual must be confident in his or her ability to adapt and create opportunities to shape the environment. The individual uses wisdom and intelligence to determine whether decision-making practices benefit others before undertaking an objective (Sternberg, 2008).

*Creativity* in leadership is the ability to meet an organization's needs by exhibiting the appropriate type of leadership, generating new ideas, and obtaining consent from others within the organization (Sternberg, 2006). All three abilities (i.e., academic, creative, and practical) must be present for a leader to be creatively successful (Sternberg, 2006). For instance, the creative ability generates new ideas by reframing and seeing problems in different contexts. The academic or analytical ability acts as the filter that determines which ideas are worth pursuing. Last, the practical ability guides the methods for implementation (Sternberg, 2006).

The final part of the WICS model, *synthesizing*, involves bringing all three of the components together for success. The development of a leader in the three areas of

wisdom, intelligence, and creativity becomes evident by the possession of the skills associated with these areas and by the willingness of the leader to learn and use those skills. Sternberg (2005a) believed the WICS model incorporated all the necessary characteristics for success as an educational leader. Therefore, he proposed the application of WICS as a model of positive educational leadership.

**Creative contributions.** The propulsion model of creative leadership originated from the WICS framework. Sternberg (2005a) asserted that creative leadership consists of various types or traits, specifically, three types of creative leadership applicable to educational leadership: one that accepts current paradigms, one that rejects existing paradigms, and one that synthesizes current models. There are eight specific types of creative contributions embedded within the three groupings. The contributions that are considered acceptable depend on the interactions of the leader with the situation and the people. The creative leader analyzes the situation and determines the best outcome to propel or move the organization forward from one point to another, integrating practices from different aspects of leadership theories. The situation determines each type of leadership approach, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Propulsion Model of Creative Leadership*

General Kinds of Creative Leadership	Types of Creative Leadership
Leadership that accepts current paradigms	Replication Redefinition Forward Incrementation Advance Forward Incrementation
Leadership that rejects current paradigms	Redirection Reconstruction/Redirection Reinitiation
Leadership that integrates current paradigms	Synthesis

(Sternberg et al., 2001)

According to Sternberg (2005a) and further studies conducted by Makel and Plucker (2008), leaders who operate within the current paradigms demonstrate minimal creativity. They either replicate the system by continuing with current or existing practices, or they redefine the system by staying with the same structure and simply giving it a new name. The creative leader may keep with the progress already started and implement gradual changes, referred to as *forward incrementing*. The new leader may continue with the progress in place but implement additional practices that the organization has not anticipated. Sternberg (2005a) referred to this implementation as an *advance forward incrementation*. The creative leader may reject the existing paradigms and replace them with new assumptions and practices through a redirection of systems; a reconstruction of a previous model; or a reinitiation in an attempt to change practices from what previously existed, implementing a new vision and systems. Finally, the creative leader may synthesize and integrate the best aspects of the existing paradigms within the organization and merge them together (Sternberg et al., 2004). There are no guidelines or formulae for a creative leader to determine which creative contribution will

guide the organization best. Leadership is creative in different ways, and the type of creativity that emerges depends upon the leader and the readiness of the organization for change.

The creative leader analyzes the problem and determines the best type of creative leadership to use. The leader defies the crowd to go against the norm, generates new ideas that are essential for the task, and promotes the ideas to others (Sternberg et al., 2004). Therefore, the creative leader makes a concerted effort to develop expertise and learning by using wisdom, intelligence, and creativity together to achieve success.

Ultimately, it is not a matter of whether creativity can inform the field of leadership, but how to cultivate creative mindsets and skill-sets within educational institutions to bring about meaningful, sustainable, and lasting change. Creative leadership approaches are highly complex, interconnected, and collaborative (S. Davidson, 2010), requiring a school district administrator to facilitate the transition of old systems and develop a new context for work in which all stakeholders can maximize their ability to think critically and creatively (Cowan, 2007). The superintendent develops sustaining practices that push the boundaries of status quo leadership and strives toward innovation within the learning community (Loewenberger et al., 2014). Adding to the complexity of creative leadership is the reciprocity of theory and practice. Fullan (2011) stated:

Most effective leaders use practice as their fertile learning ground. They never go from theory to practice or research evidence to the application. They do it the other way around: they try to figure out what's working, what could be working better, and then look into how research and theory might help. (p. xii)

In this respect, practice informs theory and theory informs practice. The creative leader uses his or her ability to assess situations for an understanding of what is functioning and to identify any innovative solutions to navigate the school system's unpredictability. Using theory enables a school district leader to reflect on the interactions and operations to make educational practice accessible (D. Waite, 2009). The creative leader's role is not to have all the ideas, but to foster a culture where everyone feels valued, encouraging individuals to evaluate and assess the situation while working through the existing paradigm and strategically making changes to the organization's structure (Sternberg, 2005a).

### **Complexity Theory**

Complexity is a comprehensive theory that provides a way to frame and analyze the dynamics within a complex interactive network (Marion, 2012). Complexity theory becomes helpful to educators and researchers who are trying to make sense of the continuous changes within the educational landscape. It provides a framework for leadership that enables learning in a creative and adaptive capacity within complex adaptive systems in knowledge-producing organizations (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). It "is a theory of change, evolution, adaptation, and development for survival" (Morrison, 2008, p. 16). Complexity theory frames leadership as an "emergent, interactive dynamic that is productive of adaptive outcomes" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 299) while furthering the vision of the organization in establishing a guide for change. The analytic frames in complex adaptive systems offer a lens to help conceptualize the educational systems undergoing continuous change in areas such as policy, curriculum, leadership, and personnel management. These changes may have positive or negative effects and may

only be temporary, but the organization will never return to the status quo, because, within this systemic view, everything interconnects (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016). These system disruptions, whether intended for adaptive change or not, will prepare the school district members “for transformation experiencing new opportunities, new challenges, and new ways to understand the world” (Reigeluth, 2008, p. 27). Such disruptions then give rise to diverse viewpoints within a learning organization and the emergence of new ideas or other changes (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

Previous leadership studies focused on the individual as the leader and manager, together with the development of successful practices. The workplace context rewards those who can think through situations at an analytical level and direct others to initiate a plan. The existing paradigms of educational leadership only show continual verification of what is already known in conventional leadership capacities. Research is limited regarding new methods, such as creative leadership, that prepare leaders for the chaos and crisis that surround the education system (English & Ehrich, 2015; Puccio, 2010). However, as organizations evolve, long-established trait-based leadership models have become less effective, as environments and policies have grown more complex.

A major role of the school district superintendent is to create a culture within the school district setting that fosters relationships within the learning organization. While facing adaptive challenges in a school system, the superintendent is the one person in the organization who can lead change and set new directions from inside, or outside, the system (Crowell, 2011). He or she is not an external observer. The school district superintendent’s role is to work with stakeholders and the school board members who

establish school policy at the local level. As such, the school district superintendent fosters and builds on relationships with the school community so new patterns and ideas can emerge based on his or her interactions with other actors (Crowell, 2011). These adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1994; Petrie, 2014) require collaboration from the collective to share information, develop plans, influence one another, and make decisions (Petrie, 2014).

Complexity theory supports an innovative and emergent leadership model where there is a balance among all the components of a complex organization, such as a school district. Complexity focuses more on the flow and generation of ideas and less on the individual's creative attributes (Marion, 2012). Behaviors become routine, developing patterns of interactions where the agents naturally form bonds and organize themselves into networks as the people in the group interacts. These clustering mechanisms make it difficult for the leader to predict the dynamics of potential constraints (Marion, 2012). The leader must develop an ability to view the social dynamics from the top, like a conductor viewing the orchestra from the balcony, to understand how the members engage and perform with one another (Heifetz, 1994).

Complexity theory is relational, a "social construction" (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 484) that begins with processes and not with individuals. Complexity, then, is about the flow of information to the organization within those processes (Uhl-Bien, 2006) and the social mechanisms and interactions among the group and the effects on the system outcomes (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). A complex system adapts, thrives, and learns from a continuously changing environment. Changes occur from within the complex system through discourse and disagreement. The tension that develops causes uncertainty and



chaos, sparking new ideas and collaboration within the setting. The interactions among the people in the group are what create meaning and spaces for ideation of innovations (Fonseca, 2002; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). In complexity theory, leaders do not find quick, prescriptive fixes; instead, they see methods for creating and fostering an environment for knowledge growth, information flow, and change (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), developing a culture of learning within the community. Creative leadership displayed in the role of a school district superintendent goes beyond leading for change, it becomes a leadership style where the superintendent also leads the organization for adaptability in the midst of complex changes (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Therefore, the superintendent must model the willingness and ability to adapt to a variety of environments and situations (Sternberg, 2005a).

### **Complex Adaptive Systems**

The emerging research on leadership for adaptability has evolved through discussions of innovation, complexity, and collective leadership, citing how leaders enable people and organizations for adaptability. One of the primary tenets of creative leadership is the importance of creativity and its alignment within the organization. In a complex adaptive system there is no leader, conductor, or individual who coordinates the actions of others. However, leadership research has been influenced by complexity theory. When people do not feel suppressed in their role, creativity blossoms and contributes to sustaining a dynamic organization (Guthrie, 2012). Creative direction requires individuals in a leadership capacity to simplify the complex and look for new ways to achieve goals organically as opposed to incentivizing results (Guthrie, 2012).

Complexity science involves the study of complex adaptive systems, the basic units of analysis in complexity science (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Weberg (2012) suggested leadership based on complexity science can provide different and improved ways of leading organizations. In this view, the organization is a nested system of relationships that work in tandem (Ivory et al., 2015), where “multiple elements interact and adapt to one another’s behavior in self-organizing, non-linear ways that suggest the system is learning” (McQuillan, 2008, pp. 1773-1774). The structures may change through multiple overlapping hierarchies, yet the individuals within the complex adaptive system remain together in the dynamic, interactive network (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Complex adaptive systems are responsive and strengthen the environment in which they exist through constant adaptation, allowing the leader to “juggle multiple pressures” (Marion, 2002, p. 86).

The complex adaptive system cultivates a dynamic organization that communicates information with clear processes and policies. A hierarchy with designated structures remains in a complex adaptive system such as the superintendency. The hierarchy safeguards and preserves the internal processes for sustainability and interdependency, striving for a fluid organization where individuals become self-directed rather than controlled (Obolensky, 2010). The people within this setting share information for transparency and an understanding of all decisions (Obolensky, 2010). In a complex adaptive system, ambiguity is not viewed as problematic but as an opportunity for a creative space to emerge. English and Ehrich (2015) focused on educational leaders who acknowledged that ambiguity and complexity were part of the job. They showed these leaders believed the job required them to be “open, imaginative, responsive, and

proactive” (p. 15), while fostering a culture of trust and improving the life chances of the children within their communities. The school district superintendent ultimately accepts responsibility for the school district organization.

**Interlude.** The school district superintendent expressed not only his fear of failure, but the importance of building relationships and developing shared beliefs to foster trust within the school district organization. Superintendent Johnson stated:

I sometimes think I lead from the anxiety of failure because I know that if we get it wrong, we hurt outcomes for children. I don’t think it is necessarily creative; I think it is humanistic leadership. I find that the more you can connect with people, the easier it is to get them to want to change their behavior. (Field notes, June 28, 2018)

### **Complex Sociotechnical Transitions**

A *complex system*, also referred to as living system or ecosystem, is considered autopoietic. An *autopoietic system* reproduces, self-makes, and self-manages, operating as a unified whole as the individual components transform and create new relationships (Alhadeff-Jones, 2008; Semetsky, 2008). The transformations are facilitated through the communicative interactions between the elements and the system (Maturana & Varela, 1998). The interactions inform the reproduction and self-making of the autopoietic system, generating novelty and newness within the organization (Maturana & Varela, 1998). The social structures within the organization influence the actions that occur at the individual level and the interactions between members (Hazy, 2006). Creativity is an inherent characteristic in all individuals. The creative person has “the ability to produce ideas that are infrequent for the population of which he is a member” (Wilson, Guilford,

& Christensen, 1953, p. 363). Creativity in leadership involves using creative thinking to approach solutions through practical and meaningful decisions, while engaging the organization in new processes and practices (Newman-Storen, 2014).

Complex sociotechnical transitions in leadership consider the whole system, not only an individual element or unit, to determine new ways of doing and creating (Newman-Storen, 2014). Every unit is interconnected, and every solution requires creativity and innovation to problem-solve through collaboration and deliberation to create new ways of thinking and interacting (Newman-Storen, 2014). Aldridge (2004) asserted that organizations are social systems. The social aspect of the sociotechnical system develops into the habitual attitudes and the relationships and behaviors of the people in the organization (Lin & Lee, 2006). The technical aspect of the sociotechnical system focuses on the processes, procedures, and physical arrangement within the space. Conflict arises when a gap exists between the technical areas and the human organization (Byrnes, 2014; Wren, 2005). In a complex sociotechnical system, the people within the organization continuously interact as the establishment coevolves (Hazy, 2006). Leadership becomes the process for encouraging change within the social structure for adaptation and sustainability for optimization of the social and technical systems (Hazy, 2006).

### **Leadership Practices**

Over the last 50 years, leadership studies have focused on the individual as the leader and manager together with the development of successful practices. Hersey and Blanchard (1996) identified two types of leadership behavior: task-oriented behavior and behaviors related to developing relationships with people within the organization. The

leadership behaviors depend on the situation and the ability of the leader to work independently from followers (Obolensky, 2010). However, in the past 15 years, the leader as manager model has become less useful as school environments and policies have grown more complex. It is no longer possible for the school district superintendent to know all the solutions or even the definitions of every problem (Petrie, 2014).

Creative leadership from the standpoint of the superintendent captures a concern for change to create conditions that will allow for sustainability in the future (Jones & Maoret, 2018). A potential conflict may arise under creative leadership as members of the organization perceive this type of leadership as challenging the established order, routines, and stability (Loewenberger et al., 2014). These adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1994; Petrie, 2014) require collaboration from the collective to share information, develop plans, influence one another, and make decisions (Petrie, 2014). Therefore, the superintendent demonstrates the willingness and ability to adapt to a variety of environments and situations (Sternberg, 2005b). Creative leadership within the framework of complexity theory may enhance operational effectiveness through the emerging interactions, networking, connectivity, and relationships, allowing for employee empowerment (Morrison, 2010).

## **Summary**

Creative leaders establish organizational climates that encourage and facilitate followers' innate creative ability (Zacko-Smith, 2010). Leaders who cherish differences and embrace collaborative disruption foster a culture where people can share their ideas in a comfortable setting (Hewlett, Marshall, Sherbin, & Gonsalves, 2013). The school district superintendent can use creative leadership to recognize any educational inequities

that are detrimental to school improvement. The leader can show innovativeness by taking action on new ideas and approaches while challenging his or her own personal beliefs and assumptions regarding leadership, teaching, and learning. He or she leads with a sense of purpose and responsibility to use this position of influence for the betterment of the school district (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). This unconventional approach to leadership allows the leader to establish relationships within the community to attain deliberate change (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). Creative leadership can provide leaders with the tools needed to assist change processes, allowing them to have a greater influence on their contexts and the space in which they work.

Complexity theory contributes to the way in which I understand creative leadership. The theory provides a way to examine the existing paradigms of how creative leaders merge and unify school systems to foster creativity for different cultural contexts, ideas, and perspectives. Eisner (1991) stated “labels and theories are a way of seeing. But a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (p. 67). Theories provide different perspectives and approaches to inform perceptions. Applying this theory to the method of connoisseurship can open space for the unexpected, allowing space for “disconforming evidence” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 26). Complexity theory provides an approach to better understand how those in the educational field are affected by the diverse initial conditions that can directly or indirectly influence the trajectory of the school system. It is a theory of change and adaptation that focuses on the change process as opposed to its causes, emphasizing the power of relationships and communication to sustain the organization.

### **III. INDWELLING**

In this qualitative study, I used a symphony conductor metaphor to depict how a public school superintendent worked through the daily operations of tending to the needs of the school district and community. I used educational criticism and connoisseurship to understand the superintendent's actions and his attempts to adapt these actions to changes in the educational system. Concentrating on the public school superintendent as a single unit of analysis allowed for in-depth descriptions of his behavior and perspectives in determining the conditions that influenced his actions for a more intense study on creative leadership. The method of educational criticism uses thick descriptions of behaviors, beliefs, attitudes, and organizational structures (Eisner, 1991). Just as a conductor shares an interconnectedness of emotion, intuition, and performance with the musicians, this educational criticism was designed to reveal whether the same interconnection existed between the superintendent and the multiple parts of the organization (English & Ehrich, 2015). The relationship between the leader and the establishment contributes to the interconnectedness and the interactions with one another to form a whole unit in the organizational system (Briscoe, 2016). In this study, I found it necessary to address the following areas that comprise a school district: instructional support; the structural aspect, which included human capital and business support; the administration; and the community. One cannot make meaning of the operations of a school district, and the role of the superintendent, without understanding the elements that are inextricably linked within the school ecological system.

## **Educational Criticism and Connoisseurship**

Eisner (1991) developed the approach of educational criticism and connoisseurship, referring to *connoisseurship* as the “act of knowledgeable perception” (p. 215) and “the ability to make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualities” (p. 63). A connoisseur is an expert in a particular field of study (English & Ehrich, 2016) with an awareness and understanding of his or her experiences. Such experiences provide the basis for judgment. Connoisseurship is a private undertaking, whereas criticism is public by its very nature (English & Ehrich, 2016). Educational criticism “provides connoisseurship with a public face” (Eisner, 1991, p. 85).

Eisner (1991) first presented educational criticism and connoisseurship as a form of qualitative work. Connoisseurship, according to Eisner, is the art of appreciation, not a liking for, as connoisseurship is not an affirmative judgment or opinion. Instead, connoisseurship proposes that the experience is “complex, subtle, and informed” (Eisner, 1991, p. 69), and “appreciation here means an awareness and an understanding of what one has experienced” (Eisner, 1991, p. 40). The connoisseur gains an understanding of how the act, process, or interactions fit within a certain context. Connoisseurship requires “an ability not only to perceive the subtle particularities of educational life but to also recognize the way those particulars form a part of a structure” (Eisner, 1979, p. 195). The educational connoisseur works within a framework of personal experiences: “The primary function of the critic is educational. . . . providing material by which perception is increased and understanding deepened. To do this, the critic must be able to function as a connoisseur” (Eisner, 1991, p. 86).



According to Dewey (1934), criticism “is judgment” (p. 322). *Educational criticism* means the sharing of perceptions and reflections with a larger audience in order to contribute to the evaluation and improvement of an educational setting, providing the researcher multiple ways to understand the events from various standpoints and perspectives (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). Educational criticism can teach the intended audience new ideas of significance through raising levels of connoisseurship. Educational criticism is “the art of disclosure” (Eisner, 1991, p. 86) and involves reconstructing what is already known and presenting it to others in a new form. “One can be a great connoisseur without being a critic, but one cannot be a critic of any kind without some level of connoisseurship” (Eisner, 1991, p. 86). The critic’s task is to reveal the aesthetic qualities of a setting and describe these attributes to enable others to view the environment through a different lens. Using educational criticism and connoisseurship as a method can further the study of educational leadership by moving it into the realm of the aesthetics of leading (English & Ehrich, 2016). An effective critic then uses connoisseurship as a framework to give attention to the relationships within the learning community and the types of experiences the relationships and interactions evoke.

Educational criticism and connoisseurship, referred to as educational criticism, is an arts-based qualitative inquiry intended to inform and improve education through a reflective process of multiple perspectives (Eisner, 1991). A form of interpretive inquiry, educational criticism shares similarities with ethnographic research because of the fieldwork needed to help the connoisseur contextualize and interpret data from the interviews and observations of the educational critic (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). The criticism is narrative in format, calling for thick descriptions of the setting so readers may

gain a thorough and descriptive understanding of the environment and situation (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). Educational criticism is now considered a legitimate qualitative method in the field of education.

I used educational criticism and connoisseurship to organize and classify my data into a meaningful structure, one that permitted me to see how the superintendent performed as a creative leader in a school district setting. Using this approach offered another way to reimagine educational leadership in the context of a school district superintendent:

Leadership studies must move beyond the sciences and recognize that effective leading is about drama and performance. Artistry! Artistry involves the whole human, not simply the head, but the heart. Human action contains vision, emotion, and belief embodied in artful performance. (English, 2008, p. 166)

**Interlude.** School district leaders interact with people daily to convey the purpose and need for decisions. The school district superintendent frames scenarios with a clear purpose and understanding of the effect of the conversations on people in the organization. Superintendent Johnson stated:

I don't know if I am creative when making decisions or when interacting with stakeholders. I think of what the other person must be thinking, or I think of the audience members, and I try to get to their emotional side. I try to make people feel valued; I know that what drives people is making a difference for kids and being loyal. I think that when you can provide specific examples that resonate with people's emotions, you get them on your side and stakeholders will change. (Field notes, June 28, 2018)

Leadership that moves away from the conventional management style incorporates elements of human understanding, drawing on the realities that influence the collective organization and take shape through the interactions of people within the organization and the situation. The school district superintendent guided the organization based on his experiences and worked with the administrators, teachers, students, and community to move the system toward a new model of leading and learning. Leadership becomes inseparable from human interaction, it as an awareness based on seeing, listening, and engagement that is interpretive and requires a method for understanding the aesthetics, theory, and interactions of a creative leader (Kelehear, 2006). Creative leadership becomes a mosaic of different leadership models that involves subjective and tacit knowledge rooted in human understanding.

### **Typology of Connoisseurs**

English and Ehrich (2016) established a typology of connoisseurs that involved three categories: connoisseurs of leaders (i.e., those who can make judgments regarding leaders but may not enable the individual to become or continue as leaders), connoisseurs of leadership performance (i.e., leaders who are connoisseurs of their own leadership style), and leaders of connoisseurs (i.e., leaders who can make judgement on their own leadership practices as well as those of other leaders).

I used my positionality in my role as a district-level leader to corroborate the findings from the observations and interviews. Through the findings, I attempted to enrich the meaning of creative leadership and inform educational leadership practice as a leader of connoisseurs (Eisner, 1991). My position afforded me opportunities to interact with and observe the leader. This continuous interaction with the superintendent led to

fluctuations in the framework and leadership model. Through my observations, I saw a need to refine my model. Originally, I had depicted the departments of the school district administration as external agents of a complex adaptive system. Through the observations, the model changed, and the departments became part of an adapted school ecology framework in which the creative leader, and at times the creative change leader, worked. In this way, and as an educational critic, I believe I was able to see and comprehend a different, more complete picture of what others may not see, “not by looking at things but by dwelling in them” (Polyani, 1967, p. 18).

Connoisseurship draws upon tacit knowledge, apart from the explicitly cognitive such as kinesthetic or emotional knowledge (English & Ehrich, 2015; Polyani, 1967). Eisner (1991) referred to this as the creation of the “discerning eye,” engaging in what can be seen and using tacit knowledge for explanations at the surface level while using subtleties in order to gain more insight and notice “what others may miss seeing” (Eisner, 2002, p. 187).

My greatest strength is that of discernment, with my ability to recognize, appreciate, differentiate, and evaluate situations within the environment. Eisner (1991) referred to the “discerning eye,” yet I attribute my skill not only to seeing but to hearing what occurs around me. I call this my “discerning ear.” Just as a conductor immerses him or herself in a performance by providing visual cues and observing the musicians, the conductor must also use his or her aural ability to hear any pitch or rhythmic imprecisions to guide the musicians through the musical rendition. Through listening and seeing, I used my aural ability and immersed myself in the moment, hearing the conversations that surrounded me while listening to the superintendent and observing his

actions. I continuously dwelled on the interactions at the moment and reflected on them later as if humming a melody, the “indwelling” (Polyani, 1967) of taking part and reflecting on the moment as I attempted to make meaning of what happened internally within the organization. I used this approach to identify patterns, narratives, discourses, and themes from the experiences to fully describe creative leadership. A revelation of biases can connect the researcher’s values to the study’s findings (Eisner, 1991). Through educational criticism, the researcher can communicate meanings better than through other forms of investigation and can expand the perceptual capacity of both the researcher and reader (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

### **Dimensions of Educational Criticism**

There are four dimensions of educational criticism: description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematic (Eisner, 1991). As the critic, I perceived the superintendent’s qualities and interpreted the significance of his actions as might a connoisseur, thinking about whether creative leadership was necessary in leading a school district.

**Description and interpretation.** In the critic’s role, there is an overlap between description and interpretation. Eisner (1991) stated that “if description can be thought of as giving an account of, interpretation can be regarded as accounting for” (p. 95). The application of description and interpretation allows the critic to offer insight and understanding of the significance of the observed phenomena, their nature, and their representation or representativeness (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). The descriptions are more than detailing the observed behavior; the critic imbues them with meaning so readers may imagine and interpret the situation for their understanding (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). The critic provides an “attempt to identify and characterize, portray, or render in language the

relevant qualities of educational life” (Eisner, 1991, p. 226). The language I used in the educational criticism provided a clear understanding of what I was attempting to portray within the school district environment, describing abstract characteristics such as the relationship between the school district superintendent and members of the organization and community.

As the critic, I provided descriptive aspects of the phenomena based on my interpretations to describe the interactions within the contexts of which the superintendent was a part. I corroborated the data throughout this study by reviewing the interviews and publicly assembled artifacts for a holistic understanding of the school district superintendent’s role and for making connections to the literature. My interpretations emanated from my critic’s perspective, using my experience and identity/identities to inform my interpretations.

**Evaluation.** The application of evaluation in educational criticism determines the significance in the educational environment. Evaluation, as regards this study, was not used to measure findings against external conditions but to show the educational value in the school setting. The evaluative dimension can provide value statements perceived, described, interpreted, and portrayed regarding the various events of the creative leader. Eisner (1991) asserted that the intent in educational criticism is “to improve the educational process” (p. 233) based on the educational criteria (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). When the creative leader operates in an educational setting, he or she engages in both reflection as a critique and reflection as an aesthetic.

When analyzing the data, I was mindful to interpret from the *emic perspective*, which involves seeing and learning from the insider’s point of view. I was also mindful

of the *etic perspective*, or outsider's point of view. Because of my dual roles as researcher and practitioner, I reconstituted and refigured my positionality, drawing on its differing constructs or manifestations. I tried to remain neutral while evaluating my interpretations of recurrent messages, subduing any feelings considered positive, negative, or discomforting.

**Themes.** Within the thematic dimension of educational criticism, I attempted to seek and deepen the understanding of creative leadership for the reader (Eisner, 1991). As themes emerge that substantiate an atmosphere of inquiry, artistic expression, and exploration, the researcher moves from the craft of teaching to the artistic, and to an aesthetic view of teaching and leading as a connoisseur (Kelehear, 2008). Leadership styles considered as craft and art contain elements that support a range of successful strategies that are relevant and responsive to a broader range of needs in an increasingly diverse society (Kelehear, 2008). The identification of themes and recurrent messages serves as a guide for creative leadership in the superintendent's role. Using thematics developed these themes through analysis and my insights of what I saw happening with the superintendent in the educational space of the school district (Uhrmacher et al., 2017).

### **Ecology Framework**

An educational connoisseur attends to all aspects of a school system through employing an ecological framework (Eisner, 1991). In using this framework, the connoisseur or critic aims to "learn about schools from the inside, that is, from the perspectives of those who spend a major portion of their lives there" (Eisner, 1988, p. 25). Eisner categorized five major dimensions needed for school improvement: intentions, curriculum, pedagogy, school structures, and evaluation (Eisner, 1991).

*Intention* refers to the goals leaders of school systems want to accomplish. These goals may be general or specific (Eisner, 1991). The *curriculum* dimension focuses on the quality of the content, goals, and activities employed to engage students. Eisner considered curriculum to be one of the most important categories in the framework as the curriculum contains more than just content. The curriculum includes not only what is learned in the classroom, but also learning in other spaces such as the home or the community. Another essential form of curriculum is what Eisner (1991) referred to as the null curriculum, which covers what is not taught, yet is equally important.

*Pedagogy* refers to the delivery and presentation of the curriculum by the teachers. *School structures* refer to the organizational framework and how it influences student learning. Finally, the *evaluation* dimension centers on the outcomes that influence practice. Eisner (1988) warned against using test assessments as sole indicators of student learning and teacher evaluation. Instead, evaluations should support and not undermine educational aspirations (Eisner, 1988).

Researchers have used Eisner's ecology with modifications. Uhrmacher and Matthews (2005) noted that each of the ecological components are interconnected, so any changes affect the interactions within the system. They both later modified the framework by adding the school and classroom community relationships, and later, administration. These dimensions became part of the critic's modified structure for the study.

## **Study Design**

As the researcher, I framed this qualitative study using educational criticism as a method to observe one school district superintendent and how he navigated his routines



and responsibilities. I observed how he enacted his role through his interactions within the school system while striving for change and growth to meet and surpass local and state mandates. I purposively selected the participant in order to address creative leadership. The purposive sampling technique is the purposeful selection of a participant based on the qualities the participant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants (Bernard, 2002). The researcher determines what needs will contribute to the study and seeks out willing participants because of their knowledge or experience (Bernard, 2002). Maxwell (2005) defined purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which “particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 87).

Revising Eisner’s (1991) ecology framework for this study, I wanted to make a connection between the social and technical aspects of the school district for a more holistic understanding of how the school district superintendent interacted with and employed creative leadership in the various departments. I combined the technical aspects of the organization into two parts: instructional support, comprising curriculum and pedagogy; and structural support, comprising the business support department. The social aspects within the school district were made up of the human capital department, the community, and administration. I included Uhrmacher and Matthews’s (2005) administration as a social element because of the superintendent’s interactions with the learning organization and the external school community.

## **Selection of Participant and Site**

The participant I selected met the specifications of having a minimum of 2 years of experience as a superintendent and 2 years of service in the current school district, as noted in the recruitment e-mail message shown in Appendix A. The superintendent's school district devised a vision that reflected a desire to change the district's leadership practices for the betterment of adult leadership and student learning. The district leader articulated working knowledge of various responsibilities within the human capital, business and finance, school community, and instructional support sectors. Based on geographical proximity and availability, this study qualified as using a convenience and purposeful sample. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated "the geographical area was chosen as a convenience sample for the researcher due to proximity and availability" (p. 73).

The district superintendent I selected worked in a region with the following district criteria: (a) met standard rating as reported on the state accountability; (b) prior action plans that evidenced a lack in the areas of instructional and operational protocols; (c) school district demographics of 5,000 students or more; (d) a minimum of 45% economically disadvantaged and at-risk populations; (e) an existing assessment of the district's climate and culture regarding school and district leadership; (f) a willingness by the participant to be observed in the context of his performing school district duties; and (g) the participant's ability to engage in dialogue regarding the four constructs of human capital, business, instructional, and community.

These criteria supported the selection of a superintendent who could demonstrate the attributes of creative leadership when circumstances potentially inhibited the

possibility for improvement. The school district selected had an enrollment of 8,073 students, with 70.6% classified as economically disadvantaged based on the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch, and 47.7% classified as at-risk of not graduating. All campuses within the district met the standard rating for the state accountability criteria.

### **Data Analysis During Collection**

As the researcher, I worked to understand creative leadership in the role of a school district superintendent. For an educational criticism, it would have been inappropriate to use the more common methods of validity and reliability within this study, but it was necessary to set reasonable standards of credibility (Eisner, 1991). Eisner (1991) determined that trustworthiness for credibility involves three aspects: structural corroboration, consensual validation, and referential adequacy. As the critic, I employed all three components to bolster the credibility of the study.

*Structural corroboration*, Eisner's (1991) term used for triangulation, provided a more thorough picture of the case using multiple methods of data collection. Structural corroboration "is a means through which multiple types of data are related to each other to support or contradict the interpretation and evaluation of a state of affairs" (Eisner, 1991, p. 110). The criticism portrays the situation supported by evidence based on the impressions of the critic (Uhrmacher et al., 2017); because of the subjectivity of the study, researchers may find various interpretations of the same event.

*Consensual validation*, a form of member checking and agreement, was obtained by asking the school district superintendent to read the descriptions and respond to the data if necessary. Consensual validation may also enlist multiple critics who may

independently prepare a criticism on the same event (Eisner, 1991). For consensual validation, three critical friends in leadership positions from within the organization shared their critiques from various events.

*Referential adequacy* discloses what normally would go unnoticed by others. Educational criticism allowed the reader to view the educational practice from the perspective of the superintendent, providing insight and a different light to the daily operations of leading a school district. Therefore, as the critic, I used observations, interviews, and artifacts to contribute to the understanding of the study's participant and the context of the participant's surroundings. I was also a participant observer as I worked in the same school district as the superintendent. I attended the same executive leadership meetings and contributed opinions to topics discussed. In my role as the deputy superintendent, I could make meaning of the superintendent's interactions and interpret why he made certain decisions for the improvement of leadership practice.

**Semi-structured interviews.** I observed the superintendent in various settings (e.g., meetings, presentations, campus visits) and based the semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the superintendent on these observations. There were instances where casual conversations occurred between the two of us where I could ask for clarification regarding the day's events or ask a follow-up question from the interview. The interviews allowed for open-ended responses to enhance the study and contributed to the "rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth" of the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). As the critic, I used vignettes to convey the educational criticism from the observations, highlighting the recurring themes that emerged (Moroye, 2009).

The interviews took place at a location of the participant's choosing, usually at the district office, and lasted a minimum of 30 minutes. Interviews after the initial engagement included clarification and additional probing of questions that arose as a result of the conversation. This process, known as member checking, took place within 3 weeks of the initial interview. After the completion of each transcription, the superintendent reviewed the transcript. The interview questions (see Appendix B) were crafted before speaking with the participant; however, based on the data gathering process, some questions changed, some were not used, and new questions emerged. I recorded the interviews using a digital audio recorder, and then securely transferred the recordings to my password-protected computer. After transfer, I deleted the original recordings from the audio recorder by reformatting its memory.

**Observation.** I observed the superintendent within a time frame of 150 hours total to determine how, and if, he exhibited any attributes of creativity or creative leadership in his daily routines. The purpose of the observations was to focus on the superintendent's interactions within the learning organization and whether his actions contributed to the betterment of adult learning. The observations occurred from June 4, 2018, through November 5, 2018. Based on the research of Stoll and Temperley (2009), I observed how the superintendent approached situations, analyzed with a frame of reference, affected the learning organization, demonstrated flexibility and adaptability with policy and policy changes, and built capacity within the organization. These observations focused on the interactions of the superintendent within the school system structures of instructional support, human capital, business support, and the community of the district. My intent was to provide insight as to how and whether components of

creative contributions and complexity theory factored into the daily operations of the school district. The observations included the following methods: audio and video (public domain) recordings and field notes. As the critic, I used description, interpretation, evaluation, and emerging themes to identify any commonalities or innovative approaches (Eisner, 1991; Kelehear, 2008; Moroye, 2009) to provide multiple perspectives to readers and educators in identifying and describing pervasive qualities (Eisner, 1991).

**Document and artifact review.** Documents and artifacts used by the superintendent that demonstrated creative contributions and complexity theory were helpful in fostering an understanding of the complexity of this study. The artifacts and documents selected described the daily operations of the school district. Public documents included the core commitments and school district vision, minutes of school board meetings, photographs, educational manuals and curricular material used by the superintendent, and additional artifacts and documents as needed. The superintendent's engagement on social media, specifically Twitter, spanned various topics, from teaching and learning, leadership practice, educational politics, and sports interests. I downloaded any social media posts to corroborate the findings.

### **Data Collection**

Once collected, I transcribed the interviews and entered the field notes into a Word document, and labeled the transcripts using the comment box found in the editing feature of the program. As suggested by Saldaña (2016), I labeled emerging themes and action-oriented codes. I categorized the codes as instructional support, structural support, administration, and community. I kept any artifacts and related documents together,

including downloaded videos of the superintendent that I reviewed multiple times. I compiled and coded the data based on the revised ecology framework of instructional support, school structures, administration, and the school community. I labeled and categorized any emerging themes using Eisner's (1991) dimensions of description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics to interpret the findings in the detailed vignettes.

My analysis of the documents and artifacts provided ways of understanding the superintendent's leadership implementation within the context of the public schools. I kept reflections on the process of the inquiry that occurred and any emergent patterns. I labeled these memos as *critic's notes*, where I would process and write about the participant and the setting (Saldaña, 2016). The notes were used as a brief summarization of the data and as a reflection on the happenings where I could notate any unanswered questions or insightful connections (Saldaña, 2016).

## **Summary**

Collecting the data became difficult at times throughout the study. The unexpected demands placed on the superintendent were quite frequent, whether an impromptu meeting with members of the school board, a meeting with city or state officials, district tasks needing immediate attention, or an unexpected medical appointment. When he arrived for a brief interview after an observation, his demeanor was casually intense with a hint of sarcasm, which he claimed was his "trademark." He reminded me of Leonard Bernstein, one of the most revered orchestral conductors. His demeanor was one of confidence and brilliance, with a passion, intensity, and enthusiasm to do "what's best for all kids," as he often said, by developing systems for opportunities to educate the whole child. Bernstein, an advocate of education, did not think about

education and music as being separate entities; for him, they were part of a systemic, organic, whole-person educational approach (Shawn, 2014). Like Bernstein, the superintendent was vocal in advocating for causes that would change the current educational setting (Ross, 2018).

**Critic's notes.** Superintendent Johnson knew of our meetings, but it was sometimes an improvised duet. Though I formulated the questions in advance, I was always uncertain of the tempo he would take. Would he proceed slowly, almost *largo* in nature, or would he be abrupt, almost *staccato* in his articulated responses? One designated afternoon, he was disgruntled over the continuous interruptions that occurred during the online state assessment. The online tests affected over 600 students in his school district, especially the most “marginalized student groups” (i.e., English language learners and students with disabilities), he yelled. He was extremely passionate in expressing his opinion with colorful words; then he took to social media during our meeting to express his opinion regarding the state accountability system:

What was the cost to kids? We have had nothing but problems. Lost tests, tests not being scored, connectivity glitches. Schools won't get this leeway with the new accountability system, but we are supposed to accept it. Do districts get to rate you (state agency)? (Personal communication, June 13, 2018)

He excused himself and left the room. The interview was over.

Readers of this study may find it disappointing if seeking a specific formula on educational criticism. I do not offer a codified approach for how to conduct such a qualitative study. Instead, the study evolved into gaining access to the superintendent's world and what I interpreted regarding the superintendent's interactions and motives



behind his decisions, comments, and ideas. The superintendent would read the transcripts and one day asked, “Do I really sound like that?” I smiled and replied, “Yes, sir.” He clenched his teeth and stated, “I might need to make some changes when I speak to people” (Field notes, October 2, 2018). Creswell (2013) stated both parties (i.e., researcher and participant) may change as they learn from the experience. The transcriptions were insightful for the superintendent. As events unfolded during the observations, I noted how the actors in the situations responded to him. I remained aware of any emerging conditions and adjusted accordingly (Eisner, 1991). In Chapter 4, I present the data in the form of vignettes to inform my findings. I use the heading of critic’s notes as a brief interpretation and evaluation to discern and unpack the intention of the decisions, comments, and interactions of the school district superintendent. I also identify emerging themes based on the modified ecology framework used for this study to help readers understand the findings.

#### **IV. DESCRIPTION OF THE SUPERINTENDENT: CREATIVE, COMPLEX, AND VULNERABLE**

In this chapter, I present my findings on creative leadership through the lens of social constructionism and complexity theory. Complexity and education are interrelated because of the complex and dynamic cultural and structural settings of educational institutions. The people within the school community (i.e., teachers, administrators, learners) and the human interactions within the structures are multidimensional, interconnected, and unpredictable. Using a complexity and social constructionist approach acknowledges that the setting and activities within a school district are complex adaptive systems created through social interaction and discourse (Kuhn, 2008). Through this inquiry, I intended to show whether creative leadership manifested in a school district superintendency when interacting within the school organization during conditions of change. Finally, though Superintendent Johnson practiced various forms of leadership, such as distributive, transactional, and servant leadership, I focused on how he used creative leadership in practice.

The vignettes, referred to as interludes, depict how Superintendent Johnson made meaning of his daily decisions in the form of the revised ecology framework. The components I selected within the modified ecology framework worked in harmony as the instructional support, the structural (business and human capital), the administration, and the community are necessary factors that constitute the whole school district (Eisner, 1988). Creativity becomes a way of thinking and acting in a continuously changing system, one that calls for unconventional leadership. The stories told around the selected themes came from the observations, interviews, and collection of artifacts. After

spending 150 hours observing the superintendent, conducting interviews, and reviewing all documents, I sought out three critical friends within the organization to share their reflections on the superintendent's presentations at various meetings and conferences, serving as another mode of structural corroboration. The three administrators had various leadership roles: one was a veteran principal, the second was a new principal, and the third was a district-level administrator. I believed it was necessary at this point to compare their conclusions to my own to ensure I was accurate in my interpretations.

I began looking for patterns and themes in relation to the research questions, transcribing the interviews and videos of the board meetings and the superintendent's presentations. The artifacts I reviewed provided me with material for interpretation and analysis. Eisner (1991) suggested "information becomes data only if the researcher is able to make meaning of it" (p. 185). These social products reflect the interests, ideological perspectives, and the values that as the critic and connoisseur I feel represent creative leadership. I highlight the formulation of themes and recurring messages here, distilling the material and identifying emerging themes. Prominent themes noted were equity, vulnerability, and complexity. Though the interludes provide descriptive accounts, "No narrative that seeks to portray life experience can be identical to the experience itself" (Eisner, 1991, p. 190).

### **Creative Leader in a Complex Adaptive System**

Creative leadership in a school district environment is sensitive to and dependent upon the initial conditions for interactions that affect the community. School organizations are social systems that survive in changing environments. The implementation of new ideas and innovations requires an understanding of the multiple

interactions that occur as changes and innovations are introduced into the system (Goldstein, 2008; Hazy, Goldstein, & Lichtenstein, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009; Weberg, 2012). These changes occur in increments over time as the individuals in the school district organization adapt to environmental pressures. The pressures in a school district setting may be financial, social, cultural, or related to the community job market, all of which require adaptive changes (Weberg, 2012). The school district superintendent faces unpredictable conditions on a daily basis that are caused by internal and external factors. External pressures come from the outside community and any regulatory entity. Examples of external factors are policy changes at the state and federal levels that affect education. The school district superintendent can use these external influences as guideposts for changes to innovate within the organization. Internal pressures can include the organizational culture and climate, hierarchy structures, staffing, and budget. The internal and external environments can shape the direction of any change efforts in the school district. The attitudes of the staff and the community can have a positive or negative effect on the superintendent's ability to implement and encourage the development of new ideas in the school system. The members within the school district organizational structure essentially carry out the work of the superintendent and the school board through the different departments (Weberg, 2012). By understanding the challenges and attitudes within the internal and external communities of the school district, the superintendent can influence and create the necessary social and technical conditions for innovation, change, and adaptation to occur.

**Interlude.** The superintendent felt it necessary to understand the relational dynamic between school board members and upper-level administration to guide how he

would lead the school district and influence the members on the internal and external community. Superintendent Johnson stated:

When I first started researching this school district, I watched old board meetings and saw a major disconnect between the superintendent and some board members and their professional relations. It was a tense and combative environment, so I knew there would be issues going in if I was selected. The board–superintendent relationship was chaotic and from the outside seemed to be driven by the board president and superintendent. When I was selected, one of the first things I implemented was the agenda preparation to mitigate the lack of trust there seemed to be between the board and superintendent. I believe that it helped calm the chaotic environment and would allow the community to see that there was transparency in the relationship between the two. It was clear from the data that systems needed to be implemented but that required an audit of every major department so that I could then report back to the board what the issues were. Coming into this organization, I was hesitant to listen to any input from within this organization based on the data [standardized testing data] and based on the problems within the organization [lack of systems, student grade adjustments]. I think the first year was about bringing change and I heard that from the outside community. Many within the organization thought everything was great even though we were doing our students and parents a major disservice. I found in that time that a curriculum and special education audit had taken place, but nothing was implemented to fix the issues. The audit findings created a sense of urgency when we had a cheating scandal at the high school that gave me some authority to

implement some much-needed changes. It also allowed the board to see me as a person who meant what he said. If you harm students, you will not have a place within this organization. This was a key moment that galvanized the board around academics. I also worked hard, based on the audit, to get the board to adopt the core commitments [see Appendix C] so that we had a starting point with which to fix some of our systems. It continues to guide us. (Interview, August 2, 2018)

**Critic's notes.** There seemed to be a long history of poor leadership, incompetent systemic decision-making, and a negligent level of acceptance of mediocrity passed off with a “not much we can do about it. That’s just who we are” within the school district as evidenced by the curriculum audits, community feedback, and the high turnover of superintendents as noted in Table 2. Not surprisingly, this tradition led to a public perception of the schools, one that was quick to criticize and slow to recognize the many gardens that managed to bloom despite the neglect. The common thread seemed to center on mediocrity and relied on the attitude that students in a low socioeconomic area could not attain higher levels of learning. Superintendent Johnson referred to these issues during the interviews and presentations.

My initial interpretation in Chapter 3 showed how Superintendent Johnson dealt with the following areas: human capital and business services (structural), allocation of resources and materials (instructional support), accountability changes from external entities such as the state education agency and internal changes (administrative), and community influences and partnerships (community). The complexity of these environments determined the complexity within the district organization. School

organizations become entangled within the environments in which they interact and the influences of past interactions and decisions made. These past interactions and decisions affected the school district, causing Superintendent Johnson to move with a sense of urgency. Table 2 represents decisions made by the previous administrators that required immediate attention from Superintendent Johnson. The review of programs from the Texas Curriculum Management Audit Center cited areas of concern regarding the following: curriculum, special education, English language learners, budget and finance, administration, and community relations. The reviews began in 2014 under previous leadership, and continued under Superintendent Johnson in the fall of 2016.

Table 2

*Texas Curriculum Management Audit Center*

Area	Findings
Instructional	<p>Long-range planning inadequate to guide the district in identifying initiatives to support academic achievement and district operations.</p> <p>The scope and written curriculum is inadequate in both core content and electives at all grade levels, K-12.</p> <p>Student achievement results from assessments reflect limited academic improvement and an achievement gap among racial student groups.</p>
Structural	<p>The district's budget is formula-driven and not aligned to a curriculum-driven budget.</p> <p>Program interventions to improve student achievement are not systematically selected, planned, or implemented for long-term effectiveness.</p> <p>The design for management of interventions and programs that enhance productivity does not meet standards of adequacy.</p> <p>The school district should adopt rules, regulations, and or policies that allow it to adjust the number of staff as enrollment changes. Campuses should be comparable in staffing, number of students taught per day, program offerings, and flexibility depending on the needs of the specific campuses.</p>
Administrative	<p>Governance dysfunction coupled with superintendent turnover limited sustained positive growth for the district.</p> <p>Governance by state agency continues to make changes to state assessments and implements and A-F rating.</p>
Community	<p>Determine factors that contribute to challenges faced by students and families.</p> <p>Community outreach and meetings needed to change perceptions of the school district.</p> <p>Build relationships and partnerships to improve and support local agencies.</p>

(Texas Curriculum Management Audit Center, 2014)

**Dynamics of a Creative Leader**

The school district superintendent has an enormous potential for enhancing cultural transformation by adapting policies and implementing processes for the



betterment of the school organization. The school district superintendent strives to improve upon the past but also works to develop a creative path for the future among all facets of the school district organization (Burr, 2015). As Superintendent Johnson discussed approaches and potential solutions on a daily basis, his creativity manifested through his fast thinking, wit, and sarcasm. He encouraged people to engage in the dialogic process throughout the organization by sending invitations for staff and community members to participate in the community dialogue exchanges and committees. He was an agent for progressive thinking outside of the existing paradigm of the system, searching for new perspectives and advocating for change. An example of such thinking was evidenced in Superintendent Johnson's approach to addressing the social and emotional learning needs of students as well as teachers. Superintendent Johnson partnered with a non-profit corporation outside of Boston, Massachusetts, to provide a program for teacher self-care and student mindfulness strategies. These sessions focused on creating a culture of care for students and teachers within the learning organization. The sessions involved demonstrating breathing techniques and strategies to deescalate anxiety in students and adults. Superintendent Johnson supported all aspects of social-emotional learning and eventually requested a position for an individual to oversee wellness and social-emotional support in the district. Superintendent Johnson discussed the partnership he and the local university established for social work interns to work with students and families within the district as part of their required internship hours. He used the social-emotional platform to also stress the political climate in Texas:

While the constitution is pretty clear about the schools being a safe place, the kids bring with them all the trauma they experience outside of the learning institutions. All our district leadership can do is attempt to insulate students from the outside noise and ensure that the kids are in a safe place to learn. The powers that be on the state level have to understand that education and social services are not separate. They're all tied together. We all live together, and how one goes, so goes the other. (Field notes, July 9, 2018)

The following vignettes are based on my observations that support the rationale for the ecology framework and the emerging themes of creative leadership in the superintendent role. The themes show the creative leader as vulnerable, an innovator, a political driver, and an equity leader.

### **Creative Leader as Vulnerable**

Creative leaders demonstrate a high level of achievement and develop an adaptive style of relating to any problems in their environment (Marion, 2012; Mumford et al., 2002). The way the school district superintendent interacts with the organization involves not only cognitive skills but a balance between intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. Some superintendents and conductors have the creative capacity to engage and perform at a higher level, demonstrating competence, technical proficiency, and cognitive knowledge with passion and emotion as they lead the members:

Intellect and emotion go hand in hand, both for the composer and for the performer. Rational and emotional perception are not in conflict with one another, rather each guides the other in order to achieve equilibrium of understanding in which the intellect determines the validity of the intuitive

reaction and the emotional element provides the rational with a dimension of feeling that renders the whole human. (Barenboim, 2008, pp. 46-47)

Every endeavor taken up by the school district superintendent has a combination of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure (Ito & Bligh, 2016). The vulnerability that Superintendent Johnson displayed had signs of strength and courage as he shared personal accounts regarding his children and his fearless approach toward making the best decisions for students in the school district. His honesty generated a space for adaptability toward change initiatives within the school setting. According to B. Brown (2014), vulnerability leads to innovation and creativity; innovation cannot exist without vulnerability. Vulnerability then is a condition of the work that gets done through the sharing of candid information with the people who have earned the right to hear it and who are striving for the same goals and outcomes (B. Brown, 2014).

**Interlude 1.** Superintendent Johnson walked into his office, impeccably dressed as usual in a suit with a hint of purple, which is the school color. His half grin can become a smile or a scowl in a blink of an eye. He is not intimidating, but very intense. I sometimes wonder if he is bothered or preoccupied, either way. This is his norm and what his administrative staff has become accustomed to in meeting with him. I asked him, “Why education and the trajectory that led you to a superintendent position?” He thought before he answered:

Education is really the byproduct of my inability to get my act together in undergraduate school. I thought I was smarter than the system and my first semester, the professors showed me otherwise. I think I was very immature and not prepared to go from a campus of 123 to 45,000. My chemistry class had 500

students. I had poor time management, poor study habits, and I partied too much. It was a shock to the system. Because of the poor choices I made, I was not able to even seek law school as an option, so when I graduated late, I had to find a job. I started working at an amusement park in Texas as a supervisor, and during that time I kept complaining about the high school kids' lack of work ethic, ironically enough. My girlfriend at the time was a teacher and said, "Why don't you get into education if you want to make a difference?" Education was the furthest thing from my mind, but it was the only option available to me. I entered an alternative certification program, and the rest is kind of history. I never sought to be a superintendent. Honestly, I did not know what they did, but when I became a high school principal and I saw the inequities within a school district, I thought to myself that someday I want to control the narrative around what happens in schools. It was really the work as principal of a high school that allowed me to get noticed by the superintendent in one of the largest school districts in the state. It also helped that my former superintendent and associate superintendent advocated on my behalf. When I transitioned to the large urban school district as one of the chief academic officers and coached over 42 principals, it reaffirmed that I wanted to have a bigger impact and work with a board to develop what I knew could work for all kids, but particularly those kids from marginalized communities. (Interview, August 2, 2018)

**Critic's notes for interlude 1.** I think it would be helpful here to address what Superintendent Johnson meant by controlling the narrative. I reflected on what he said and was reminded of observations of Superintendent Johnson addressing various groups

within the community. He always stressed that “every leader has their own story,” emphasizing the importance of sharing that story and staying true to one’s belief system. Storytelling became the narrative through which Superintendent Johnson’s creativity was revealed. He captured his audience through the stories he shared of himself, his family, and his experiences. Stories cannot be removed from their social and historical contexts (Newman-Storen, 2014). Superintendent Johnson mentioned controlling the narrative of each and every story. He believed it was his responsibility to communicate what occurred within the school district and to show the happenings within the classrooms and throughout the learning community, providing details of every aspect within the district, both positive and negative, for transparency and to develop trust within and outside of the school district organization. In doing so, Superintendent Johnson explained facts and data through his stories to make connections to school district and community issues.

As I have noted throughout this narrative, Superintendent Johnson gained the trust of those within the organization as he showed vulnerability and sincerity in investing in the community. Superintendent Johnson shared his concerns through the connections he made with other teachers. He winced as he spoke about the demands made on public school educators regarding state assessments and how to address such mandates. He tied the stressors of the profession to the importance of social-emotional health not only for students but for teachers, and the importance of self-care:

You can see the tension on the teachers’ faces. They have highly stressful jobs.

We cannot take that stress away from them. We cannot take away the demands of their jobs. But we can provide and give them techniques for taking better care of

themselves. When educators learn to make their own self-care a priority, they become better prepared to take care of others. (Field notes, June 6, 2018)

Superintendent Johnson's empathetic nature enabled him to understand the human environment and assess what teachers in the organization felt and experienced. Because he confronted uncertainties and found ways to assist teachers, he generated support within the organization for his ideas and goals. Superintendent Johnson's authenticity allowed him to be open and honest about his beliefs and values, including the management of the school district, never hesitating to admit to mistakes and being accepting of other foibles and flaws. Showing vulnerability through leadership permitted Superintendent Johnson to develop a space of authenticity and trust, sharing his perspective as a parent and as an educator.

**Interlude 2.** As Superintendent Johnson addressed the district and campus leaders at the yearly leadership retreat, his voice cracked and his eyes began to water as he shared that his oldest son was agoraphobic (Field notes, August 1, 2018). His son was 18 and trying to complete the graduation requirements, even though he only missed two questions on his state assessment. His son was attending an alternative school until he could complete his credits in another school district. The younger son had been identified as gifted and talented and was involved in numerous sports. Superintendent Johnson said, "We did everything right as parents. We are both educators. We read to him every night. I failed him. The district I worked for failed him. I feel like I didn't fight hard enough." The audience of leaders became silent. I could hear the sniffing. Then someone from the back of the room shouted, "You did nothing wrong. You're helping him now!" The superintendent continued to share that his stepdaughter had a

learning disability, which made learning very difficult for her. Each one of his children had very different needs, resulting in different school experiences. He ended by stating that education should be focused on providing opportunities and individual plans that meet the needs, social and academic, of all students: “It is the system’s responsibility to ensure that all students are successful” (Field notes, August 1, 2018).

**Critic’s notes for interlude 2.** A key indicator of creative leadership is the sharing of stories of how the leader has endured similar experiences and can help guide the practice of the group (Kelley, 2015). Superintendent Johnson held extremely high expectations of himself and demanded the same of others. He held himself accountable for finding the potential in all people within the organization and developing processes for sustainability. His creative leadership style allowed him to develop strategies and shape the culture at every level by fostering relationships and showing vulnerability. Superintendent Johnson’s leadership provided conditions that stimulated a sense of urgency, exposing his colleagues to new ways of thinking and approaching situations, setting high expectations for all members of the community, and using failure as a learning opportunity. Superintendent Johnson stated:

We only have one chance to get it right with our students. They go through our system one time and we have to get it right . . . Each day we are not maximizing on the students in this district is a wasted opportunity to impact our community, our democracy, and our very future. There is no room for not acting with a strong sense of urgency. (Field notes, August 1, 2018)

Superintendent Johnson modeled risk-taking just as he stepped out of his comfort zone to share personal accounts that challenged existing educational paradigms (Sternberg, 2005a).

**Interlude 3.** It was a difficult Father's Day weekend, as Superintendent Johnson's beloved 12-week-old Corgi passed away unexpectedly. Administrators throughout the district had heard, or had seen the social media post, of the beloved Corgi's passing by the time the staff arrived in the office on that Monday morning. Superintendent Johnson was visibly upset as he arrived at the office. As the week progressed, a scheme began to take place. Everyone in the school district would contribute and purchase another Corgi for the superintendent and his fiancé. It would be given to them at their wedding shower breakfast the following month. The morning of the breakfast, there was extreme excitement. People had stayed after hours to decorate. The puppy had traveled 400 miles to his new home. The superintendent and his fiancé were called into the conference room for a makeshift "emergency." Superintendent Johnson seemed confused but walked toward the conference room. All 80 people jammed in the conference room shouted, "Surprise!" Both the superintendent and his fiancé were still confused, not understanding what the celebration was for, and then the dog was presented. At first, it did not seem like either knew how to react. Both were in shock. Both he and his fiancé began to cry. They were surprised and overwhelmed with joy and the sadness that remained from their loss. They hugged and thanked each person in the room.

**Interlude 4.** Superintendent Johnson took to social media (Twitter) that night and posted the following:



We are very blessed to work in a district where all central office staff and principals concocted a scheme to get us a new puppy. They came together to give us a wedding present they knew would help heal our soul from our loss. I am simply humbled to work with such great people who you can hold to a high standard and provide guidance for, and they will take you in like family. Culture drives change in organizations. (Personal communication, July 17, 2018)

**Critic's notes for interlude 4.** Superintendent Johnson was not afraid to show his human side, his vulnerability. A lack of vulnerability can lead to a stagnant culture and procrastination from the organization (B. Brown, 2014). Superintendent Johnson shared personal stories regarding his family as a way to advocate for all students. He challenged people's beliefs, interrupted their patterns of thinking through his constant questioning and probing, and made people nervous at times. He exclaimed, "You have to be comfortable with the uncomfortable! Get out of your automatic ways of thinking and get unstuck" (Field notes, August 6, 2018). The group of administrators attending the school district retreat began to look at one another. A principal got up to get a bottled water.

Superintendent Johnson expressed multiple times that he did not believe in relying on the predictable and familiar educational practices and solutions. To make a difference, the organization must be "willing to leave those that feel comfortable with the status quo behind" (Field notes, August 2, 2018). Superintendent Johnson continued addressing the campus and district leaders during the retreat. He seemed perturbed as he had just received an unofficial report predicting the district to earn a possible "D" rating. He expressed his frustration and asked the audience, "Does anyone else in the room,

besides me, have a sense of urgency to improve what we do for our students?” (Field notes, August 2, 2018). The superintendent did not tell people what to do. Instead, he had an intense focus on the next situation, creating a space where individuals could collaborate and gain self-awareness and insight in determining a solution for sustainable results. In doing so, he had established an atmosphere where multiple voices could express disagreement and opinions as a way of making meaning of actions and decisions.

Superintendent Johnson fostered trust by engaging the community with his personal experiences and by giving all an opportunity to share their stories as observed at the community dialogue exchanges. Families attended these collaboratives to discuss special programs in the district through “community *platicas* [talks] with our parents, staff, professors to understand how we need to adapt to meet our students’ and parents’ needs” (Personal communication, October 13, 2018). Superintendent Johnson’s pivotal creative leadership style changed to fit in any given situation. The various levels of leadership and management generated a space for individuals to feel safe and confident. Superintendent Johnson’s willingness to collaborate and speak with all members of the learning community created opportunities for teachers to take risks in the classroom. As one teacher stated, “We’ve never had a superintendent expect us, or allow us, to try things differently in the classroom. He encourages us to go into the community and learn from our families and surrounding districts” (Field notes, August 10, 2018). Superintendent Johnson’s actions helped teachers move beyond their present situation of fear and anxiety related to educational mandates to implement new ideas and new approaches for the learning community.

## **Creative Leader as an Innovator**

Creative leadership entails knowing which leadership style works for creating conditions that encourage innovation and creative thinking. The leader who employs creative leadership understands when to make the final decision for the organization and when to support employees. A creative leader searches continuously for ideas and programs that can better the organization over the current or established practices. The initiatives set in place allow the staff to develop and implement new ways of approaching teaching. The leader mentors and assists by sharing his or her professional and personal experiences that contributed to the work at different levels. Superintendent Johnson shared his experiences, positive and negative, with the members. He believed his narrative influenced people and could enable people to adapt to change when it occurred in small increments in shorter terms. Superintendent Johnson demonstrated his belief in offering students opportunities through the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. During his first year as superintendent, he assigned an instructional coach with a strong AVID background as the AVID coordinator. The coordinator gradually introduced a cohort of willing teachers at the secondary level to the strategies used in the program. As Superintendent Johnson observed the excitement from teachers and students, he began sending additional people to AVID schools across the country so they could observe and bring new ideas back to the school community. “What a great AVID training at the middle school this morning. Excited to be training with our dedicated staff from across all schools. AVID strong” (Personal communication, July 11, 2018). By the end of his first year as superintendent, two elementary school leaders

asked if they could pilot the program on their campus. At the time of writing this dissertation, the school district was named an AVID designated district.

The forward incremental approach embedded in creative leadership (Sternberg et al., 2004) allows for progress through continuity and incremental change toward a new and improved system within the educational setting. As an innovator, Superintendent Johnson could facilitate the nonlinear and social processes that led to improved organizational outcomes. The school organization serves as a resource for the community, providing information on opportunities to promote student growth and encourage community–parent partnerships. Because the needs of the families are great within the district and the city, addressing all known situations in the school district becomes difficult. Superintendent Johnson worked to manage the tension in the school district that was sometimes caused by district-level initiatives, policy changes, or community demands. Though he strived for sustainability of the organization, he also worked on regulating the performance of the learning organization:

I think personally that we have done a great deal to build up teacher leadership and support teacher efficacy. There will always be teachers that resist change or new ideas, but we will need to assist one another and assist the teachers. It's not about me. It's about our students. (Field notes, August 8, 2018)

As the creative leader of the organization, Superintendent Johnson facilitated his team in working together and in creating the necessary dynamic change in the organization. He stressed that for innovation to occur, people must work through the complexity and practice adaptation and change and no longer isolate themselves in individual silos: “We are all a system tied together. We all affect each other” (Field

notes, August 8, 2018). He provided teachers the autonomy to determine how they wanted to teach the content and what problems to solve by advocating for teachers and students to attend professional learning conferences in Chicago and Boston. He empowered the leaders and teachers to explore ways for creative problem-solving and approaches to advocate for themselves and the students. “I think this is the year that everything comes together” (Field notes, August 8, 2018). “We’ve put an assessment system in; we’ve provided a curriculum framework; we’ve given teachers and students laptops and devices. We have invested so much in our teachers. Now we must invest in our students” (Field notes, August 8, 2018). He encouraged everyone to use research to collaborate, practice, present, justify, and align resources to support their ideas.

I think the innovation is the idea of allowing the teachers to determine what they wanted to solve and empowering them to explore ways to solve that problem. So many times, we tell people, instead, I chose to ask campus staffs to advocate for themselves. They had to research, collaborate, practice, present, justify, and align resources to the problem. I think that is what we want for our students. (Field notes, August 6, 2018)

Superintendent Johnson believed this ideation process would delve into the classroom and provide the same learning opportunities for students.

A creative leader enables members to make strong and meaningful connections within such complex adaptive systems, such as a school, so the learning organization and community can adapt, innovate, and sustain within the complex environment (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Superintendent Johnson supported the ventures of the teachers and district leadership team; in doing so, he was developing a positive work environment

conducive to change that stemmed from within the organization (see Keamy, 2016; Sergiovanni, 2005). He took to social media and tweeted, “Thank you Ms. Pointe [pseudonym] for sharing with me the strategies you are using to create writers. Culture changes when the professionals in the building drive that change” (Personal communication, October 2, 2018). He used his engagement on social media as a tool to communicate with the learning organization and promote his district.

**Critic’s notes 1.** As I met with Superintendent Johnson and observed him throughout this study, he was always thinking ahead in anticipation of what may come next. I asked him at one point, “Do you ever slow down?” His response was, “Students only get one chance to get through our system. You can’t ever slow down.” He said it with such intensity, the left side of his face twitching upwards, I wondered whether he was angry or anxious. The minute he walked out the door of his office, his demeanor changed. He was approachable, with a larger than life flamboyance. He smiled as he walked into the various departments, “How’s it going today? Do you have everything you need? Let me know if you’re available to walk campuses with me. I’d like to hear your thoughts.” People smiled and shook his hand. I reviewed my notes and recalled his presence at the AVID Summer Institute, a national conference that promoted strategies to improve teaching and learning, as shown in the following interlude.

**Interlude.** Superintendent Johnson enters the conference room and 75 teachers and administrators break into applause. The atmosphere was electrifying and loud. I have grown accustomed to how people reacted toward him. One teacher reached out and thanked him for the positivity he brought to the district. Superintendent Johnson welcomed everyone:

I support teacher professional learning opportunities and innovations that affect teacher and student outcomes. I think I've proven that through the teacher laptop distribution, the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) known as the ISTE Challenge and pay raises. You are the ones that drive the change.

We push all kids to be the best. I know what works. I've experienced AVID and know how crucial it is for teachers to know the role they play in opening the doors for our students. It's not just about teaching the content. It's building the relationships with the students, so they trust us when we challenge them to get outside of their comfort zone. (Field notes, July 11, 2018)

**Critic's notes 2.** I sought to show through the depictions of the observations Superintendent Johnson's vulnerability and innovativeness. I illustrated how the superintendent approached situations differently and promoted individual and collaborative thinking at one of the professional learning conferences. He advocated for the ISTE challenge while setting high expectations for student learning and engagement:

It [ISTE] was a unique experience. We took a total of 60 teachers and administrators. The people involved learned something. They are going to innovate and help our students think of new ideas. Asking their students, "What type of problems do you want to solve in the future?" (Field notes, August 8, 2018)

Throughout the observations and interviews, Superintendent Johnson went between accepting existing paradigms and implementing change in a continuous forward direction, or rejecting certain paradigms and defying what others think by "shocking the system" as he claimed he did. He matched his leadership approach to the needs of the

people within the organization by the way he interacted and communicated with them. In one of his messages he stated:

I am like a Polaroid camera. I take a snapshot of what I see. If I see the data showing a low graduation rate, high school dropout rates, our students who need remediation in college; I try to think of ways on how we can improve. For the last 3 years I've tried to model what I think engagement looks like. I've tried to get teachers engaged. Instead, I have gotten hell from you and some of your teachers [complaints to the school board and the local newspaper] about innovating and changing the system to do what is best for our students and our community.

(Field notes. August 2, 2018)

His message left the leaders quiet. He quickly transitioned and said, "When you get back to your campus, review your data. It will tell a story. How you write the story is up to you. You are what drives the change in the district" (Field notes, August 2, 2018).

### **Creative Leader as an Equity Leader**

The educational practice of the school district superintendent can lead a school district toward sustainable change or toward a decline in students' academic performance. School reform at the state and national levels focuses on closing the achievement gaps, decreasing the dropout rates for at-risk students, and increasing the focus on student groups based on race, ethnicity, and economic status (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). These continued practices imposed by state and national agencies further marginalize many students living in poverty, emergent bilinguals, students of color, and students with disabilities. The emphasis on student achievement measured through standardized assessments marginalizes students from high-risk backgrounds such as those living in



poverty, having limited English proficiency, being a person of color, or having a disability. Students who are the furthest behind academically must also show the most progress on standardized tests (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016). Superintendent Johnson recognized these educational inequities as a detriment to school improvement. He challenged his own and others' assumptions regarding teaching, learning, and their administrative leadership, stating:

I think I empower people and challenge people to understand that we are here for kids and families and we should not be shackled by systems that we all know have some implicit biases against certain groups of students. It is my job as the instructional leader of this district to fight for the equity issues. (Interview, June 28, 2018)

He chose to work in an underserved community of teachers, students, and families and led with a sense of purpose and responsibility in using his position of influence for access and to create better educational conditions and experiences for students.

**Interlude.** It was time to meet with Superintendent Johnson. My heart always raced when we had these meetings. My questions were scripted, but he was not one who stayed on topic. He segued to get his message across and make his point. I began with the topic of administrative support for instructional services, asking, "How do you know you're impacting, or affecting, the organization?"

I don't know if you ever think you are impacting, or having an impression on, the organization but qualitatively, when I hear students and parents commenting about the visible changes, whether curriculum or activities or programs, it validates what you think you should be doing. Everything we have done has been

for the benefit of teachers and students. I also hear from the community members, whether elected officials, chamber members, or grandparents, who are appreciative that we have started showcasing the work our students are doing. Finally, we have students who are now telling our story, the story of what they can achieve in this district. If our kids feel valued and are successful in whatever they choose to do, it says that we are doing what is right for students. I also look at what the complainers are complaining about. When you see patterns around their complaints, holding people accountable for their behaviors, refusing to bow to negativity, exiting those that do not fit the culture, then I know we are all starting to speak the same language and have the same set of expectations about professional conduct and what we aspire to as a district. [He takes a sip of his water and wipes his brow before he continues]. The easiest thing to do is not to change, and we have taken the uncomfortable step to say status quo is no longer a viable option for our kids. We have touched every department to see if our resources are aligned to affecting student outcomes. We have analyzed everything from curriculum and how we deliver professional development to purchasing a curriculum framework and assessment system. We have audited every program from the gifted and talented, advanced placement, bilingual, special education, fine arts, athletics, and dyslexia to see if we are doing what is right for all of our students. We have shifted the schedules to put kids in core content classes every day. We continue to push forward, and we are starting to see teacher leaders stand up and say, “We do what is best for kids, PERIOD!” We have replaced several leaders who were a part of the problem, people who

were not willing to collaborate and better their practice, and we did so without embarrassment. That is not easy in a small town. In doing so, we have provided opportunity and access for our most marginalized student groups. Opportunities and access to taking the SAT college entrance exam, placement into advanced academic classes and gifted and talented classes, and the restructuring of the bilingual program with the addition of dual language and restructuring of the special education for more inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities. (Interview, August 2, 2018)

**Critic's notes.** Equity is addressed in the school district setting in the interactions between the leader and the group members as they explore the dynamics within the social mechanisms that contribute to system outcomes for more opportunities (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Superintendent Johnson had mentioned to the district leaders his concern regarding equity: "When it comes to equity, we have a mindset of trying to punish out behaviors, trauma, poverty. We cannot punish out behaviors. Instead, we need to address the social and the emotional" (Field notes, August 8, 2018). I ask Superintendent Johnson to clarify what he means by "punish out behaviors." He responded:

Children come to us with trauma and sometimes aggressive behaviors. We cannot expect them to leave their experiences at home when they come to school. We need to help our students cope, listen to them. Their [students] experiences affect their learning. The social-emotional learning, in my opinion, outweighs the academic. (Field notes, August 20, 2018)

Alluding back to the AVID conference, Superintendent Johnson asked the AVID coordinator to show the video where eight students from his school district applied to

attend a tour at Harvard, a trip the superintendent paid for with district funds at a cost of \$14,000.00. Students were selected based on grades, attendance, an essay, and a presentation. One student expressed the following:

Going to Harvard helped me realize my dreams. When I came to high school, I could not speak English. I joined the AVID program and I learned English and how to speak to people. I have become a leader and I will be the first to attend college.

The superintendent began to sniffle (another display of emotion). I did not want to turn around, but I could hear him behind me crying. He said he always “looks at things from the lens of the student” (Field notes, August 10, 2018). He knew the students selected had never traveled beyond this small community. He advocated for them to explore other opportunities. Superintendent Johnson made it known that his vision was to develop programs and systems for sustainability that could outlast his tenure. He made an effort to know the students’ families and the neighborhoods he served. He also stressed the importance of accessibility for parents, being visible and available himself and extending invitations for families to come to the school.

The trip to Harvard was important to him as the leader of the school district to show that he supported ideas that enhanced the overall learning experience for the students. When addressing this opportunity with local leaders, he stated:

Students do not know life outside of their community. If you have no point of reference, like going out of the city, out of state, away from your parents, one cannot physically see themselves in that environment. Harvard seems beyond their reach based on what they have read or heard, beyond their realities. But to

experience the campus opens up more possibilities to breaking down barriers and providing different avenues they did not see before. (Field notes, August 10, 2018)

As a creative leader, he worked to develop and foster trust with the families and learning organization by providing professional learning opportunities and family engagements that centered on cultural relevance. He attended the community *platicas* presented by the dual language and special education departments where families shared what was needed to support their students. “I attend our *platicas* [talks] with our dual language and special education and listen to the parent voice in the community express how the district can be more efficient and effective for their children” (Field notes, August 8, 2018). Superintendent Johnson also showcased the various family engagements occurring within his school district: “One of our middle schools celebrated community night with a full crowd of students and parents this evening! Teachers shared early successes and shared strategies to extend the learning at home” (Personal communication, September 19, 2018).

The school leader, particularly the school district superintendent, develops an understanding of the social, political, and economic factors that affect the well-being of students and families. Superintendent Johnson used creative leadership to develop ways to communicate with members of the community to better equip them with what they needed to make informed decisions.

### **Creative Leader as a Political Driver**

The district Superintendent Johnson led has struggled to overcome the longstanding challenges of socioeconomic segregation. The disproportions and inequities

noted in the program audits pertained to enrollment patterns and equal opportunity for all students in advanced academics. The disparities cited in the program evaluation included ethnicity, economically disadvantaged, and gender as indicators of presumed academic success (Texas Curriculum Management Audit Center, 2014). The inequities evolved from the use of labels that identified and categorized student group performance measures with terms such as the achievement gap, dropout rates, and turnover rates, all terms educators use frequently when discussing student information (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Again, restating Eisner (1991), educators use these labels to place order in their area of expertise, which prevents them from understanding the social contexts because they develop stock responses and stock perceptions that may contribute to the lack of student achievement (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Change and disruption exist within school systems, generated by internal and external factors such as policies that impose performance on standardized testing. The data collected from the standardized assessments measure a school district's value placed on teaching and learning.

The school district superintendent is appointed by the elected officials on the school board (Roth, 2016). The role of the school district superintendent generally involves leading and managing the school district and not political advocacy (Matthews, 2018). Leadership, though, is a political process where the leader must understand the political interests and have the ability to express the impact of educational policy changes (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). The school district superintendent is considered a “politically statute entrepreneur and an expert leader” (Grogan, 2000, p. 117). Superintendent Johnson's role extended beyond the administrative realm (Matthews,

2018). He positioned himself to advocate and transform what he considered unjust policies that resulted in marginalization. He used his creativity to articulate his frustrations with the politicizing of the educational system as he wrote a letter intended for the state governor and used Twitter to also express his concern (Newman-Storen, 2014). He challenged such policies to protect the system from political decisions that threatened the adaptive processes (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009), as described in the interlude below.

**Interlude.** Taking his criticisms to a higher authority, Superintendent Johnson had previously sent a letter to the editor of the local newspaper addressing the state governor's lack of support toward public school educators and the governor's accusatory remarks toward the Texas Education Agency failing to hold school districts accountable in providing students with special needs the appropriate services. Superintendent Johnson wrote:

Since our Governor expresses the right to criticize, perhaps as a public-school superintendent, I have the right to express some sentiments that would help the public in their perceptions of this pernicious attack on school districts. As a reminder to the Governor, public school districts serve our students and will serve our students based on their disability, but it was the Texas Education Agency that mandated pushing students into the box and not planning based on the student's needs. As a reminder, it was this current fixation with standardized testing which forced districts to test all students on the regular assessments regardless of what was best for the student. If you want to criticize anyone, criticize politicians who have politicized the educational system and have continued to absolve themselves

of any responsibility for the current state of the educational system. (Letter to the editor, January 31, 2018)

Superintendent Johnson continued to express his frustration with the new accountability grading system of school districts. Districts would receive a letter grade in three areas that averaged to an overall letter grade. He immediately used Twitter to express his dismay at how this one particular test could negatively reflect upon the work of teachers and students:

This is a disingenuous video. An “A” school doesn’t mean that a school provides better academic support to all of its students than others. It’s a misleading video that confuses and doesn’t tell the whole story. The system relies heavily on standardized testing . . . It is a snapshot of one testing day. Never thought the state agency would become propaganda machine for testing. Video = F.

(Personal communication, August 18, 2018)

**Critic’s notes.** There is limited research regarding creative leadership and complexity theory in politics, but it was important to identify it as an emerging theme. Superintendent Johnson used his political skill to influence others. He discussed how the accountability system only used standardized testing as the primary source for assigning A through F grades to school districts, which to the superintendent’s dismay was an inaccurate reflection of the work and accomplishments of students, teachers, and communities. The policies made and implemented in school systems disregarded the fact that education is a complex system. Those in the learning organization and the community agreed and discussed ways to build a community-based accountability system that focused on areas other than test-centric measures. Superintendent Johnson used the



political approach to facilitate change within the accountability system as this new form of measurement conflicted with the values and goals of teaching all students.

### **Key Findings**

Superintendent Johnson created the initial conditions in which teaching and learning were enhanced on a daily basis, creating a culture grounded in authentic interactions, personal and professional experience, and collaborative inquiry for resolving issues that could affect the sustainable future (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Stoll & Temperley, 2009). Superintendent Johnson embarked upon the new school year by sending words of encouragement to the staff via e-mail with the subject, *The best year*. He wrote:

On the eve of another school year, I would like to wish everyone a wonderful year. Day one starts the beginning of making a difference every day for our students. Our goal is to be better than the day before for them. Our students rely on you because you are the difference makers for their futures. I wish the best for each of you as you take our district to the next level. (E-mail, August 28, 2018)

The interactions with the community started with Superintendent Johnson's commitment to "visit every classroom in the district" (Field notes, August 29, 2018) and engage in additional correspondence with teachers and leaders regarding motivation and social-emotional learning. He attempted to build confidence within the organization as the school district leadership reorganized and worked toward building a stronger learning environment.

Educational structures evolve to meet the demands of not only society but the job market, yet the system itself is not designed to be agile and support changes.

Superintendent Johnson said, “If we do not produce a good workforce through the school system, then we impact our community, our workforce” (Field notes, August 14, 2018). One of the challenges became learning and adapting to new structures. The previous patterns of district leadership that did not address the issues listed in Table 2, previously shown, affected the development of a complex adaptive system by not addressing the needs of the learning community and not supporting the organization with systems to address state mandated policies (Fidan & Balci, 2017).

When substantial changes occur within the social milieu of an organization, people experience a sense of uncertainty and upheaval during the implementation of any new processes (Jacobs, 2018). These periods of uncertainty are simply transitions, as adaptation and change occur continuously between the individual and the environment. Individuals who undergo deliberate changes hold on to previous beliefs but can become newly organized, re-identifying their purpose within the organization to develop new ideas (Jacobs, 2018). Tension and ambiguity emerge as crucial components for collective creativity and renewal for the organization. An urgency remains to address any critical issues that may affect the entire school district population. The school system now becomes a complex adaptive system: an interdependent network of interacting elements that learn and evolve in adapting to the shifting context. The diverse agents (the school personnel) constantly act and react to what other agents do (Van Beurden, Kia, Zask, Dietrich, & Rose, 2013). The implication was for Superintendent Johnson to create dialogue-rich environments that fostered authentic conversations regarding achieving and sustaining performance capability within the complex adaptive school system of the school district setting.

## **District Convocation**

During the data collection and observation period, there was one particular instance where Superintendent Johnson was to address all 1,000 employees in the school district at the beginning-of-the-school-year convocation (Field notes, August 14, 2018). The convocation was a single event during the study that could serve as a means for interpretation, approach, and thematics, demonstrating how the school district superintendent performed as a creative leader. This event seemed similar to a motivational state-of-the-union address by a politician. The congressman representing the United States 25th District attended the convocation and addressed the crowd, wishing the best to all for a successful school year. Superintendent Johnson told his public relations associate to make certain that the congressman did not make any “political statements” that may further upset any school board members. The superintendent reflected on the congressman’s previous visit to a community event a few months prior. The congressman publicly supported a school board member running for re-election but did not acknowledge one other who was also running for a district seat. Superintendent Johnson had dealt with the political backlash from this omission of the re-elected board member: “If he says anything political, I’m walking out” stated the board member (Field notes, July 9, 2018).

Superintendent Johnson had listened to the board member’s concerns and over the next 30 days made certain that the message was communicated to the congressman’s press secretary. Superintendent Johnson directed the school district communication director to contact the congressman’s public relations manager and express the concern. “Tell the congressman we appreciate how he advocates for our public schools. Let the

public relations representative know not to endorse anyone or if the congressman can acknowledge the work of all of the school board members” (Field notes, July 9, 2018).

**Interlude.** It is convocation day, August 14, 2018. As I walked into the high school cafeteria, I immediately noticed the people congregating in lines to receive goodie bags from various local vendors. Teachers were greeting one another and inquiring about their summers; the loudness of the voices echoed throughout the room. I made my way into the auditorium to find my seat. The event did not begin for another 45 minutes, and already it was a full house. There was energy in the auditorium as evidenced by the live Twitter feed displayed on the large screen showing tweets from the various departments and individuals in attendance eager to start the new school: “Looking forward to making a difference! It’s going to be a great year!” (#Convo18, Twitter, August 14, 2018). The auditorium sat 1,000 employees and was decorated with banners and signs. “Super excited to be back” read one tweet. Another read, “We make a difference” (#Convo18, Twitter, August 14, 2018). The district spirit stick, a token given to the most energized, creative, and spirited campus or district department, was awarded to a new campus this school year, and various campuses and departments were practicing their spirit chant routines before the event began. Another tweet said “Ready to get LOUD and win the spirit stick!” (#Convo18, Twitter, August 14, 2018)

**Critic’s notes.** The climate was upbeat and people seemed energized and excited. The convocation was organized by the communication department. Over 500 tweets were recorded during the event. The communication director was amazed, tweeting, “All I can say is WOW! I had a blast today at #Convo18! Thank you to everyone!” (#Convo18, Twitter, August 14, 2018). The impact the communication director had on

the organization supported Superintendent Johnson in changing the dynamic and mindsets of the school district personnel. The communications team was a difference-maker for the school district organization. In the complex system of a school district, the communication director was not aware that he too served as a leader in a shared capacity on this particular day with the superintendent.

Superintendent Johnson exclaimed, “My vision for a communication director position was for that individual to tell our story. What we do in the district. What our kids do. I wanted them to share the message,” though the final product was greater than he ever expected (Field notes, August 14, 2018). Superintendent Johnson provided a vision for changing the image and culture of the community through student choice in what each wanted to learn, “by giving students a choice, we motivate our young people to take ownership of what they learn, how they learn, and to express what they need” (Field notes, August 14, 2018). Superintendent Johnson gave the communication department the autonomy to create and develop that vision aligned to the district’s core commitments of student achievement, culture, and community. “Our communication director understands that people learn through images. Mr. Andrews [a pseudonym] is a master storyteller and can tie emotions through the images and the stories” (Field notes, October 30, 2018).

The dignitaries from the community had arrived. The mayor and the president of the City Chamber of Commerce attended the event annually. This year they spoke. There was also representation from the education foundation, the local credit union, and the Lion’s Club. All in attendance were recognized for their support and contributions to the school district. I believe this spoke to the momentum created by Superintendent

Johnson. Themes about the district, such as free lunch for all, new facilities, partnerships with the city, and an increase in advanced academics, resonated in their speeches.

After a dance challenge and the announcement of the recipient of the spirit stick, Superintendent Johnson took the stage. His demeanor was polished. He looked like a distinguished executive in his dark grey suit, white shirt, and purple silk tie. The employees jumped to their feet in applause. The convocation was a pinnacle moment for Superintendent Johnson. He used it as an opportunity to challenge long-standing practices and mindsets by showing a video by a psychologist on trauma and the impact on student behaviors and learning. He then showed a video of a father advocating for adults to accept students and their differences without making judgement. At first, I thought the decision was a missed opportunity, but as Superintendent Johnson conveyed how trauma affected teaching and learning, he used his voice to shape the actions and beliefs of those around him as he described the trauma students, and even employees, endured; “It’s our responsibility to be aware, listen, and develop a plan of support for each student” (Field notes, August 14, 2018). The audience reacted by tweeting, “Video – How childhood trauma affects health across a lifetime” (#Convo18, August 14, 2018). Another tweet followed, “Childhood trauma isn’t something you just get over as you grow up” (#Convo18, August 14, 2018). Superintendent Johnson then transitioned to the upcoming fiscal year. He approached these topics as he told his story and how his experiences shaped how he led the organization. Superintendent Johnson showed his vulnerability, stating, “We are here for each other. You were here for me when my family was hurting” (Field notes, August 14, 2018). His investment in the community and the learning organization showed a connection with all of spectators. The audience

applauded Superintendent Johnson for sharing his story and the video: “Our kids are only limited by our fear of change. Superintendent speaking truth” (#Convo18, Twitter, August 14, 2018).

The convocation highlighted Superintendent Johnson’s creative leadership. As I observed him, I made connections to other observations and realized he also addressed equity, social capital, and politics in his conversations with his actions supporting his decisions and comments. Like a conductor analyzing a musical score, I began looking for patterns, chord changes, and tempo changes, highlighting the various categories. These expressive indicators, interpreted by the performer and the conductor, convey the pace and the volume of the musical work and affect the mood and the emotional response of the audience.

I have divided the convocation address into parts, pulling in other observations to support the interpretation of vignettes. I used Superintendent Johnson’s recurring messages to formulate the themes from this particular event observed. I refer to this adaptation as my version of a modulation into different keys. I identified aspects of the adapted ecology framework of instructional support, structural support (business, social, and human capital), administration, and community; as well as the emerging themes. I notated the identified themes at the beginning of each vignette, providing a description of the convocation address and the response of the audience members as Superintendent Johnson spoke to the organization.

**Convocation part I, August 14, 2018.** Superintendent Johnson began his yearly address to the learning organization on the first day that district personnel returned to work.

***Interlude.*** Superintendent Johnson stated, “The innovation you have shown here today carries over to our students. Your energy is what our students need to excel in school” (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018). Superintendent Johnson wiped his brow. He took a step back, paced in front of the screen, and then proceeded.

***Vulnerability and authenticity.*** According to B. Brown (2014), a vulnerable leader is one who willingly accepts uncertainty and challenges. Rather than choosing to hide information, a leader who confronts brutal realities and shares his or her experiences can inspire teams and generate support from the organization to perform better. Authenticity enables trust to develop as the leader shares his or her beliefs, values, and experiences; admits to mistakes; and does not hide behind a façade of authority. Authenticity and vulnerability lay the foundation for the members of an organization to develop a collaborative association. Through his personal accounts, Superintendent Johnson demonstrated his openness and his beliefs on how to better the school system.

I have mentioned my 18-year-old son in the past. We as parents live with the trauma, the emotional issues, and the guilt. We never stopped to ask him what was wrong. We both were educators. We told him to get up and go to school. As I’ve gone through my educational career as a leader, one thing I’ve learned is to stop pushing the system onto children because I did it as a parent. Surely my son would fit the system. (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018)

***Critic’s notes.*** Superintendent Johnson referred to his children when discussing educational practices. He displayed vulnerability throughout the observation period in the workspace. He confronted his personal realities in dealing with his oldest son’s schooling and the loss of his pet. On a professional level, Superintendent Johnson’s



vulnerability surfaced during the external academic audits. The recommendations from the auditors showed the school district had students inappropriately placed in classes and teachers not using any type of curriculum (Texas Curriculum Management Audit Center, 2014). Superintendent Johnson used the information to conduct meetings with teachers and the community for feedback on how to address the issues. Superintendent Johnson developed trust by communicating a clear purpose for addressing the situations. His honesty and authenticity demonstrated to the learning organization how his vision aligned to the district's core beliefs.

***Equity and social capital.*** Schools can promote outcomes for students by implementing activities that can raise individual attainment and develop purposeful and constructive relationships (Nicholas & West-Burnham, 2016). Superintendent Johnson understood the lack of resources within the community and expressed how educators must also understand the influences that affect student learning. He noted research that documented how poverty and educational achievement are associated with a lack of confidence and disempowerment for students (Kendall, Straw, Jones, Springate, & Grayson, 2008). Superintendent Johnson stated:

We know the realities of the data regarding our student population, 76% of our students are economically disadvantaged. You cannot punish poverty out of a kid. We have to figure out the story and design a program around it; you have to help them and their families. That is why we are providing free breakfast and lunch to all our students. I can talk about the academic data, which I will, but the academic data is symptomatic of all the other issues. (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018)

***Critic's notes.*** Superintendent Johnson was passionate in providing breakfast and lunch for all students in the district. He believed providing access to free meals for all students was another opportunity for students and families to benefit from a district program. Superintendent Johnson advocated that for students to learn and engage in learning opportunities, their basic living needs must be met. He stated, "It is the school district's responsibility to provide student support in all areas" (Field notes, August 2, 2018). Activities in the school district centered on providing resources for families such as instructional support for the home, postsecondary preparation, and adult education. Developing relationships with the families and community remained essential as a core belief in maintaining partnerships and providing opportunities for the students.

***Instructional support, social, and human capital.*** Thinking of the school district as a school ecology implies that relationships are shaped by the environment. An ecology of schools model acknowledges the content, context, and physical infrastructure and the curriculum as important components of a school system (Daly & Finnigan, 2016). Superintendent Johnson shifted his attention from policy focused on standardized testing and made connections between learning and the social ties necessary for school improvement. Creative leaders ask questions and pose problems not limiting the space for those to share potential answers, but also sparking ideas that lead to multiple questions (Perkins, 2009). Superintendent Johnson stated:

When we solve the other issues, the social and emotional concerns, then the academic side will take care of itself. Our words matter. The things we do with kids everyday matters. One thing I try not to mess up is making decisions for kids. Ask yourselves the following questions: 1. Are students literate? 2. Are

students college and career ready? 3. Are we, as a district, changing fast enough?  
4. Are we, as leaders, paying enough attention to equity concerns? (Convocation fieldnotes, August 14, 2018)

***Critic's notes.*** As an insider within the organization and an observer for this study, I noticed that Superintendent Johnson connected social-emotional well-being and equity to student learning and understanding. Each component of the organization within the instructional, structural, administrative, and the school community were interrelated and contributed to the school ecology. Superintendent Johnson explained the importance of understanding the different dimensions of the district, posing questions and asking for solutions on addressing such issues and implementing change to affect students and the whole learning organization.

***Complexity in a complex adaptive system.*** The changes that occur in a complex adaptive system become evident as individuals seek new resources. The coordinated actions between the superintendent and the organization, and the resources and tasks, must all change concurrently to create a sustainable school system (Hazy, 2006).

Superintendent Johnson stated:

We are the answer. Change is difficult. When we start challenging the system, things get messy. People resort to previous behaviors and tell me, "This is how we have always done it." But after the messiness comes all the glorious connections, we make in this district. The school board believes in me and the work we are doing. The data is what the data is, but we are the change in the data. The reality is the kids get one chance to get through the system. We must make it a good one. (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018)

***Critic's notes.*** Superintendent Johnson depended on his team to implement initiatives and provide resources to enhance student learning. He believed that if educators moved quickly and coordinated programs with professional learning opportunities and instructional support, the attitudes and beliefs of the learning organization would change to benefit the students. In this complex adaptive system, the challenges set forth by the superintendent were met with new perspectives or not accepted. Some individuals became uncomfortable with the new approaches and chose to leave the organization. Superintendent Johnson felt it was necessary to lead on the edge of chaos, reconsidering the current reality and identifying the challenges to disrupt the system and spark innovation from members of the learning community and the students. Leadership in a complex organization can foster learning, encourage adaptability, and develop new ways of understanding and working through instability (Ambrose, Sriraman, & Pierce, 2014).

***Political.*** The role of a school district superintendent primarily addresses improving schools for the benefit of the students. The school district superintendent possesses the capability of building strong coalitions by taking action in exchange for other deeds (Hill & Jochim, 2018). The school district superintendent can no longer ignore politics in his or her position. The interrelationship between politics and the superintendency calls for the school district superintendent to engage in political issues and discourse in pursuing school improvement (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014). Superintendent Johnson stated:

The accountability system is just a measure at that particular moment in the grand scheme of things. As a district, we need to look at ways of improving instruction,

so our students can reach the higher levels of meeting and mastering the state standards. The reality is we cannot control the current accountability system. What we can control is who to vote and support in office. (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018)

The teachers erupted in applause. I heard a few whistles, and someone blows through a horn—the congressman even clapped (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018).

*Critic's notes.* Superintendent Johnson worked collaboratively with the school board and elected officials in the community to advocate for the school district and the students. He spent time meeting with key players in local politics, civic organizations, and the state education agency to discuss funding for public schools, future district growth, and contributions to the local workforce. A point of contention for Superintendent Johnson was the state accountability system and the emphasis on standardized testing to determine student and campus performance. Superintendent Johnson voiced his dismay regarding policies and funding for education at the state level, informing teachers that a change in the system begins with each vote (Personal communication, October 31, 2018). He creatively articulated his frustrations with the politicizing of the educational system to challenge policies and protect the system from political decisions that threatened the adaptive processes.

**Convocation part II, August 14, 2018.** During the second part of the convocation address, Superintendent Johnson identified changes in the structural aspects of the organization.

***Interlude.*** Superintendent Johnson paused for a moment and took a sip of water. He then segued into the budget, state accountability system, and the upcoming school district ratings. Superintendent Johnson stated, “We have a unique opportunity to align our curriculum at the 11th and 12th grade levels to address college, career, and military readiness standards” (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018).

***Community and instructional support.*** The school district superintendent promotes community empowerment as an essential component for the success of students and their families. Actively encouraging communication and collaboration leads to the reciprocity and mutual support from not only families but other community agencies that can provide access to appropriate services for students. The facilitation of such communication promotes community cohesion through decision-making and informal learning approaches (Flint, 2011). Superintendent Johnson stated:

Our city will not thrive if only 45% [displays state test scores] of our students are college and career ready. It is no longer okay for a student to earn a high school diploma. They must leave our system with a career and technology certification or credits earned towards a college diploma. The culture of the community has shifted to expect that we will have meaningful and reciprocal community partnerships. We have many parent meetings to seek feedback on how we are doing. We have a solid partnership with the Chamber of Commerce that is expanding opportunities for students and teachers. Our community expects us to be proactive in meeting our kids’ needs. We have a better culture of teacher leadership that is starting to advocate and showcase each of our school

communities. They are also placing higher expectations on those who do not fit the culture. (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018)

***Critic's notes.*** Superintendent Johnson made the community expectations a priority as he referred to the district's core commitments, which were developed by the school board with input from the community. He developed an infrastructure to address the specific commitments that emphasized student performance and community partnerships. He allocated resources to create bonds between schools and homes to communicate information via newsletters, advertising, neighborhood walks, phone calls, and e-mail. Conveying the information proactively and honestly set the foundation for developing trust and gave the community an opportunity to provide feedback.

***Interlude.*** Changing practice reverberated throughout the convocation address. As mentioned previously, the term was used to seek understanding regarding student learning and equity. In the following vignettes, Superintendent Johnson referred to "change" to inform the audience of developing new approaches within the system.

***Complex adaptive system, administration, and discourse.*** In a complex adaptive system, the actors choose to move between the various parts of the system or not, which places change practices at the discretion of the individuals and how each chooses to interact among the other actors within the organization (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014). Superintendent Johnson stated: "Are we changing fast enough? The school board and administration working together have provided you the opportunity to move fast enough. The issue is, do you choose to move fast enough?" (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018).

***Critic's notes.*** As noted in Glăveanu's (2014) Five As model framework, each part of the organizational system worked together and not in isolation. Superintendent Johnson created systems and established a case for change with all actors (i.e., students, parents, teachers, and the internal and external community). He encouraged members to share ideas as they worked through the process together, giving meaning to the members' ideas, actions, interactions, and relationships to assist in guiding change efforts. He also acknowledged the resistance to reform initiatives and reminded people of their choice to remain part of the organization.

***Administration.*** The school system comprises different actors, with the campus and district administration as contributing groups working in the school district to transform and create new relationships (Alhadeff-Jones, 2008). Results stem not only from the initial conditions but from the previous choices made by school district administration (Fidan & Balci, 2017). Superintendent Johnson stated:

All our campuses and the district “met standard” according to the state accountability system, and that is a celebration. But we need to change the narrative. We change it by pushing to be above the state average. All of us are in this [situation] together. If I need to make a change, then my executive staff must make a change, which leads to the principals making a change; we all change together and do what is right for kids. (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018)

***Critic's notes.*** Superintendent Johnson referred to changing the narrative, a message he frequently shared. The negative perception in the community stemmed from previous decisions made by past leadership teams. Storytelling becomes the narrative in which creativity emerges. The stories from the narratives cannot be removed from their



social and historical contexts (Newman-Storen, 2014). Superintendent Johnson creatively, and humorously, conveyed the story of how decisions were carried out by everyone in the organization.

***Complexity and discourse.*** Discourse in a complex adaptive system is characterized by what occurs, sometimes leading to an unintentional outcome or unsuccessful attempt to transform the educational landscape (Wood & Flinders, 2014). Meaningful discourse refers to what is said and heard, resulting from the social interdependence and coordinated actions and efforts from members of the organizational system (Harrison & Muhamad, 2018). Behaviors emerge within the complex system where the collective acts in unison as if there is an agreed upon agenda or principle. These actions and processes may become creative and destructive, or caring and harmful, necessitating a restructuring of the existing model for new methods and learning processes (Griffin, Shaw, & Stacey, 1999; McLean, 2017; Rodríguez Romero, 1998). Superintendent Johnson stated, “If you are an instructional coach, the current model is not working. You need to fix the model, give feedback, and help teachers.” The silence became deafening after this comment, and he drank another sip of water. The instructional coaches were seated in the front of the auditorium, and one of the instructional coaches placed her hand to her face. Superintendent Johnson reiterated, “We are all in this together. The change affects us all” (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018).

***Critic’s notes.*** Superintendent Johnson used the convocation address to foster order and disruption to manipulate the interactions between all the agents within the educational setting, developing a sense of chaos and discourse for a brief moment (see

Fidan & Balci, 2017). The talk among the instructional coaches and administrators stemmed from the comment that the instructional coaching model was no longer working. This brief comment stimulated a sense of urgency for new ideas and innovations, causing a shift from stagnation within the status quo to a more adaptive approach that aligned with the superintendent's vision (see Fidan & Balci, 2017). I understood what Superintendent Johnson tried to convey because of my role in the school district. Superintendent Johnson would reference the work of the instructional coaches in meetings. He looked at the whole system and the individual elements and asked district leaders, school administrators, and teachers to find new ways of reshaping the instructional coaching model.

Previously, instructional coaches would develop lessons for teachers requesting assistance. Emphasis was placed on designing and planning lessons for certain aspects of the curriculum but the lessons, and instruction, had not evolved to align with the recommended state requirements. Lessons were recycled and used throughout the years, and the only difference was the students that entered and exited the classroom. Superintendent Johnson aimed for a model of instructional supervision that included feedback and teacher support to improve lesson development. The discourse, or tension, was created by the beliefs of the instructional coaches that their work, or position, did not require any modifications. This disruption called for a reconsideration of developing a new foundation, new roles, and new perspectives for the instructional leaders.

***Administration in a social complex system.*** The individual actors and the members of the group operate independently and at the same time interact consistently with the principles of the organization. The interactions of the individuals striving for

change intentionally try to relate to the other members to sway any limiting behaviors and attitudes (Griffin et al., 1999; McLean, 2017). Superintendent Johnson stated:

There needs to be a change in leadership behavior, peer coaching, teaching behavior, and student behavior, if we are going to affect and impact student achievement. [As] the teachers who attended the conference in Chicago [may have] learned, we have to iterate, iterate, iterate. You figure it out and change the behaviors in teachers to change the culture. (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018)

***Critic's notes.*** The message throughout the convocation was not about change leadership or change management. As I listened to Superintendent Johnson, his message to the audience emphasized that change in the system began with each individual and the influence of each actor on fellow colleagues. His message was reflective of an autopoietic system where the individuals transform and create new relationships (Alhadeff-Jones, 2008; Semetsky, 2008). Superintendent Johnson stressed that the interactions and relationships of the audience members were most important in revitalizing the school district.

***Structural support, budget, and human capital.*** Key management responsibilities of a school district superintendent include budget development, standard operating procedures, and personnel management (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). The superintendent works on developing relationships and building coalitions within the school district for positive outcomes and to overcome resistance (Hill & Jochim, 2018). These associations are necessary to accomplish educational goals and to retain talented teachers and leaders. The strategic management of human capital means aligning support

systems to instructional practices (Odden, 2011). Superintendent Johnson displayed his support for teachers as he reviewed expenditures and acknowledged the work of the school board and central office administration: “The school board has allocated \$6,869,199.00 in resources. They authorized \$478,000.00 for every teacher to have a laptop if we are going to impact 21st century learning” (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018).

Superintendent Johnson read every budget amendment to discuss the investment in people and resources, including the investment in hiring social-emotional crisis counselors, supporting fine arts and athletics, and investing in administrators and teacher leaders for graduate degrees. He continued:

I think we, central administration and the board, have put our money where our mouth is. [More applause]. We have adapted well. The only thing we ask is for our teachers and administrators to adapt just as fast. We invested in all of you, approving a raise at a total of \$3,565,170.00. This raise addressed the compression issues and gave all employees a raise including our auxiliary and noncertified personnel. (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018)

***Critic’s notes.*** During this portion of the convocation address, Superintendent Johnson showed that his position entailed more than making systemic changes. The social aspect of the sociotechnical system contributed to the attitudes and the relationships and behaviors of the school organization (see Lin & Lee, 2006). Superintendent Johnson’s responsibilities and decisions were connected, each influencing the technical aspects of the system. The technical aspect of his position focused on the processes, procedures, and physical arrangement within the space (see Lin & Lee, 2006).

Teacher support included allocating and providing resources to attain educational goals. Though Superintendent Johnson stressed change throughout his message, he showed how he worked with the school board to support the change. As a collective group, the district leaders were changing to foster an environment that supported the instructional practices and valued all employees.

***Equity and budget.*** Eliminating educational inequities requires redesigning and shifting resources, efficiently allocating funds for the schools and students most in need (Rubenstein, 2016). Reframing requires an ability to break from obsolete practices and paradigms (Bolman & Deal, 2013). A creative leader is fluid and sees more than one possibility for reorganizing the system (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Superintendent Johnson stated:

This is what I mean about equity. Every student has access to the right resources they need at the right moment in their education, despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, or income. We must provide resources based on individual students' needs and circumstances. We changed the way we budget for our schools.

Providing additional funds for our campuses with higher economically-disadvantaged populations and the school board approved funds for student devices. We have shifted our budgeting to look at each campus and the risk loads they carry. We recognize that campuses have very different needs. We restructured transportation and have a former principal who has brought a new perspective on service to campuses. We are doing things differently: our food service department shifted their belief system, and we are now feeding all

students breakfast and lunch. [More applause and whistles]. (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018)

***Critic's notes.*** Superintendent Johnson was capable of understanding that the school district was able to adapt to the changes necessary in the redistribution of resources. The restructuring of the transportation department and allocation of funds was an innovative response that promoted flexibility and creativity, allowing for everyone to share their voice and ideas through social interactions and fostering a shared understanding of the purpose behind the process. The redistribution of funds based on the percentage of the economically-disadvantaged population who qualified for free and reduced lunch was an approach not taken before in the district. The information used to justify the decision was based on data collected from the previous year. The district was coded as having a population of 69% economically disadvantaged families for the 2017-2018 school year and budgets were redesigned based on those figures.

At the time of this study, district-level leaders had not realized that administrative leaders would need to take a proactive approach in collecting data to support the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) for serving free meals to all students, as we no longer collected school meal applications. The economically-disadvantaged data were used as a factor in the state accountability system for rating school districts. As we communicated with each family via phone calls, home visits, and conferences, we asked them to submit information on the district form. The collection process revealed that our percentage of families that were economically-disadvantaged had increased to 74%. The personal interactions with the community helped us identify a greater need for the 2018-

2019 school year. Families had not provided accurate information for reasons unknown until we made an extended outreach effort to communicate with them.

***Closing remarks.*** Superintendent Johnson concluded the convocation by stating: I say this as simply as I can. The future of our school district lies in the personnel within the district to expect that change and evolution are a continuous part of the process so that we can continue to meet our kids where they are and move them to where they have the choices to be successful (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018).

He then showed the last slide of his presentation, which has a quote by Jim Kelly, National Football League quarterback: “Be a difference-maker today for someone who is fighting for their tomorrow” (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018).

## **Summary**

In this chapter, I described the interactions Superintendent Johnson had with the members of the learning organization and the community. Some may claim his approach to leadership relied on traits that others follow in an attempt to innovate and improve the organization. According to Sternberg et al. (2004), these assumptions are the same but differ with regard to the efforts of the organization. Superintendent Johnson displayed emotional intelligence and possessed an ability to work with people who may have impeded his work as the change processes occurred (see Sternberg et al., 2004). Superintendent Johnson emphasized the importance of reshaping the narrative of the school district while staying true to his belief system. The observations, review of artifacts, and interviews revealed the many substantive changes that have taken place from top to bottom during his 2 years as superintendent. He acted as a reinitiator to

rejuvenate the system with a new coherent vision. Whereas before high ideals were espoused but little was done to create working systems to make them a reality, Superintendent Johnson laid out core commitments developed by stakeholders and aligned the systems for the service of the community (see Sternberg et al., 2004).

Superintendent Johnson inherited a school district with people who were reluctant to change and content with the previous ways. Superintendent Johnson chose not to accept the existing paradigms as he began redirecting and changing the current practices to move at an advanced pace. He restructured the organization using his experience, motivation, and creative thinking for decisions (see Amabile, 1998; Sternberg et al., 2004), bending and breaking the system into a new prototype that could be rebuilt and reshaped to strengthen the learning organization (see Eagleman & Brandt, 2017). He problem-solved as he assessed situations and referred to data as he sought to make informed decisions. He was mindful and attentive as he tried to understand what was happening within the organization. Superintendent Johnson understood that change is a constant condition within a school system and he quickly responded with new ideas for any situation (see Puccio et al., 2011).



## **V. INTERACTIONS, REFLECTIONS, AND CODA**

In this chapter, I describe and analyze creative leadership through the role of a school district superintendent. The purpose of this study was to make meaning of the actions and decision-making process of a public school district superintendent in his adaptation to changes and accommodations to various cultural contexts, ideas, and perspectives. I observed how the superintendent worked through daily decisions by selecting creative pathways (see Tanggaard, 2016) that demonstrated the creative processes in everyday life experiences and interactions (Glăveanu, 2014; Tanggaard, 2016). In the first part of this chapter, interactions, I revisit the research questions and how each was addressed through the study using complexity theory and social constructionism as my theoretical framework. In the second part of this chapter, reflections, I analyze the observations through the leader of connoisseurs typology. A leader of connoisseurs can make judgement on his or her own leadership practices as well as those of other leaders (English & Ehrich, 2016). I use my subjectivity in my role as a district-level leader to corroborate the findings through interpretation and artistic liberty. I then attempt to clarify creative leadership in the coda section and how it relates to other leadership styles in an effort to inform educational leadership practice as a leader of connoisseurs.

### **Interactions**

The interactions of individuals with their surroundings and how individuals make sense of these contexts frames creative leadership within a constructionist epistemology (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). In the social constructionist context, people are creatively engaged in relating or constructing something meaningful to them personally or to others,

drawing on experiences rather than merely receiving information. My intent was to use this epistemological stance within complexity theory to answer the following questions:

1. How does creative leadership manifest in the context of a district superintendent?
2. How does a district superintendent interact within the school organization during conditions of change?

I explored these questions through educational connoisseurship and criticism in an attempt to describe, interpret, evaluate, and thematize creative leadership. The data in this research were gathered from observations, semi-structured interviews, and a review of artifacts that entailed curriculum audits, board meeting recordings, and presentations given by the superintendent. Using a modified version of Eisner's (1991) ecology framework as discussed in Chapter 4, I showed how the elements within the school district ecology worked in concert as the instructional support, the structural support (which included the business and human capital aspect of the district), the administrative, and the community components (Eisner, 1988).

### **Research Questions**

As I conclude this study, I reiterate the research questions to address how each question was addressed within the work.

Research Question 1 was: How does a district superintendent interact within the school organization during conditions of change? I addressed the question of interactions during conditions of change through the lens of social constructionism and complexity theory. Complexity theory and its collective components, such as complex adaptive systems and chaos, offered a perspective for exploring sustainable change within an

organization for understanding human systems such as an educational environment (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Complexity theory shifts from objects to one of patterns and relationships (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014). All complex systems, whether physical or social, are creative and capable of learning in new ways and shifting to new structures. When the systems operate in a state of transition to a point of disintegration, the progression becomes known as chaos (Gharajedaghi, 2011; Reigeluth, 2008). The creative process cannot be determined at this stage because of the unpredictability, but out of chaos creativity and innovation can emerge (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Meaningful discourse that arises from these complex environments is a result of social interdependence and involves coordinated efforts and actions from members of the organizational system. Discourse includes not only what is spoken but the behaviors, symbols, and artifacts that support what is and is not spoken (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014).

**Interlude.** Superintendent Johnson showed an awareness of his behaviors and actions as he chose not to verbally respond and led in silence, contributing to the uncertainty in the discussion. His actions were in response at a special called school board meeting. The board of trustees discussed a building proposal for renovating an existing structure. Members of the board continued asking questions regarding why the facility needed to be renovated, who used the facility, the cost to the district for the renovations, and the contribution from outside entities using the facility. Superintendent Johnson remained silent. At one point he was asked for his opinion. He responded, “This is your [school board] agenda item. Administration will not get involved” (Field notes, June 4, 2018). His response sent a message that his main responsibility was to

guide the learning organization in making decisions in the best interest of the students and community. The agenda item did not enhance student performance. His statement and silence allowed for the school board to decide and move past their disagreement.

Research Question 2 was: How does creative leadership manifest in the context of a district superintendent? Creative leadership plays an important part in leading a school district as it “fuels vision, spawns novel ideas, crafts diverse methods, and produces innovative output” (Sohmen, 2015, p. 1). Creativity becomes a way of thinking and acting in a continuously changing system that calls for unconventional leadership (Puccio et al., 2011). Researchers have tried to identify the essential qualities of an outstanding school district leader in the 21st century (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Shaked & Schechter, 2016). The quality of education in a school is related to the quality and expectations of the district leadership (Azam & Hamidon, 2013). School district leadership, together with knowledge of how school systems function and problem-solving skills, can enhance the development and the professional growth of the members of the learning environment (Turnbull, 2012).

Stoll and Temperley (2009) claimed that creative leadership can improve student performance and guide and build toward school effectiveness when the leader approaches matters differently. I addressed Research Question 2 using the research of Stoll and Temperley as a premise for my observations. I noted how Superintendent Johnson analyzed with a frame of reference, affected the learning organization, demonstrated flexibility and adaptability with policy and policy changes, and strengthened the understanding and capacity of members within the organization. The observations I conducted focused on the interactions of Superintendent Johnson within the school

system structures of instructional support, human capital, business support, and community of the district. My intent was to provide insight into the components of creative contributions and complexity theory and how they factored into the daily operations of the school district. Superintendent Johnson used creativity to handle situations and make decisions that contributed to creative outputs. He combined the known elements of the school district and the school system with perspectives not previously considered, such as providing technology for teachers and students, the implementation of teacher choice for professional development, and the redistribution of funds and reorganization of employee positions (Field notes, August 14, 2018).

Social constructionism implies that a complex adaptive system is created through the interactions and meaningful discourse within the group (Hawkins & James, 2018). Superintendent Johnson established change from within the system, producing and encouraging deeper interactions among the teachers, students, school and district leaders, parents, community members, and even policymakers. He shifted away from previous practices used within the school district and reworked past decisions to destabilize the environment so he could develop a reenergized system that was more resilient and had an increased capacity for innovation, feedback, and adaptation (Gilbert, 2015).

### **Intersection of the Research Questions**

In viewing creativity as a complex system within the context of creative leadership, the logic of everyday creativity is no longer limited to specific domains or creative contributions (Richards, 2007). Everyday creativity does not refer to artistic creations. Instead, it is about how people make their way in a new place or practice and approach different situations and respond to different perspectives (Richards, 2007). In

everyday life, the leader can use creativity as he or she adapts flexibly, trying various approaches and options. The leader's originality manifests in the originality of everyday life through decisions and actions (Richards, 2007; Tanggaard, 2016).

The complex adaptive school becomes an open system of interactions and relationships among the diverse agents in the group (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016). This holistic view of creativity allows for resilience to develop in the system. The more diverse the system, the better the chance to respond with innovative practices to input from the external environment of the learning organization (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016). Complexity theory does not provide the exact tools to solve complex problems, but shows exactly why the problems are so difficult (Cilliers, 2010). Superintendent Johnson made decisions about what to include and exclude as he conveyed the messages to his group, making the process manageable to understand. He did this as he explained the purpose of restructuring the transportation department: "We restructured transportation and have a former principal who has brought a new perspective of service to campuses" (Convocation field notes, August 14, 2018). Through his explanation, those in the school district community understood how Superintendent Johnson identified and used people's strengths for the betterment of the organization to build capacity throughout the district.

As the leader of the school district, Superintendent Johnson exhibited exceptional capabilities for identifying, defining, and anticipating problems within and outside the learning organization (see Runco, 2014). Superintendent Johnson demonstrated his ability to identify negative possibilities or unrest within the community so he could address the concerns and take proactive measures. A point of contention within the

community pertained to the recent bond funds and use of the expenditures.

Superintendent Johnson sought out individuals who opposed the bond election to become members of the bond oversight committee to provide input. His reasoning for this decision was to “let them have a voice. In the end, they are part of the decision-making process, and they will message what we are doing in this district” (Field notes, July 16, 2018).

### **Creative Leadership and Complexity**

School organizations are social systems that survive in changing environments (Kershner & McQuillan, 2016). The ongoing change and disruption in school systems stem from the internal and external environments. The internal and external pressures vary from policy changes, curriculum, finances, organizational culture, and community demands (Fidan & Balci, 2017; Kershner & McQuillan, 2016). The complexity of the environment then determines the level of complexity within the organization (Daft, 2016). Whether it be in implementing a new program to support student learning, restructuring the budget to support teacher pay raises, to making, or not making, instrumental changes to key positions, Superintendent Johnson made constant decisions. He determined prior to making any decision whether the situation itself was simple, complicated, complex, or chaotic and deliberately tailored his actions accordingly. Complicated situations are predictable and repeatable, working with the “known unknowns” as Superintendent Johnson called them. There are few right answers because policies and demands continuously change. School districts tend to be managed, but Superintendent Johnson made every effort to maximize the efforts and quality of the people in the learning organization. Superintendent Johnson attempted to understand

how his school district functioned in the present, steering it in the right direction without controlling the organization (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Superintendent Johnson realized from the start of his appointment that participation was needed at every level of the organization to allow for a free-flowing exchange of ideas while building social capital through dialogic input and growth. He quickly asked his executive staff to plan community meetings and gain input on the restructuring of schools and the need for a bond election to improve existing facility structures. He simplified the complexity by seeing through the chaos, managing the interdependency, and understanding choice while developing the collective imagination to develop solutions for evolving challenges (see Gharajedaghi, 2011; Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Creative leadership emerged from the interactions between Superintendent Johnson and all members of the learning organization as they moved toward innovative and improved practices collectively. New forms of inquiry emerged through collaboration as members of the orchestra were invited to enter into the reality to collaborate, exploring possibilities and practices and evaluating them against other alternatives (Hawkins & James, 2018). Superintendent Johnson demonstrated creativity as he modeled different options in addressing situations and informing school district employees of any updates. For example, he destabilized conventional practices so employees would consider alternatives. He created a dialogue across the organization where he did not offer authoritative solutions but strove for a culture of interdependence. As he addressed members of his executive staff, he shared how as an organization, efforts had been made for teachers to use their creative freedom to develop digital lessons on the



recently purchased teacher laptops: “We empowered the teachers, yet they chose to power off” (Field notes, June 4, 2018).

Creative leadership within complexity theory “encourages diversity, creativity, and paradox, expecting disagreement as a necessary element in innovation” (Ng, 2015, p. 6) with the network of teams working to find the best-fit solutions. Complexity theory in the school setting allows for understanding and addressing the demands of the changing school system (Ng, 2015). Throughout this study, Superintendent Johnson was on a quest to facilitate productive change and encouraged the use of data dashboards to fill voids where the district lacked information. The various options presented gave autonomy to the staff to select what was best for their setting. He could determine where gaps existed and could formulate solutions to address them (see Runco, 2014; Torrance, 1966). Like an orchestral conductor listens for mistakes, Superintendent Johnson listened and found an approach to capture a feeling or need to define and solve the problem using his intuitiveness and insight. He quickly reframed and restructured situations on a daily basis to make sense of the meaning (see Runco, 2014), usually reframing issues in the context of something larger and connected to equity. He encouraged new patterns in discussions for new ideas in generating new effective developments to solve problems. Implementing new ideas and promoting them within the school community demonstrates one form of the everyday practical activity of creativity within creative leadership (Paul & Sorin-George, 2015).

### **Reflections as a Leader of Connoisseurs**

In choosing to investigate creative leadership through a novice lens, I attempted to provide a description and insight using connoisseurship in relation to a school district

superintendent. English and Ehrich (2016) asserted that leadership connoisseurship is a human activity worth investigating. I used my subjectivity as a district-level leader to make meaning of the observations and artifacts throughout the length of this study. Following the typology of connoisseurs (English & Ehrich, 2016), I deemed myself as a leader of connoisseurs as I have developed an awareness toward those who occupy leadership positions and I am reflective of my own practice and can assess my performance and limitations. My role entails making decisions and interacting with multiple stakeholders within the learning organization and representing the superintendent when necessary. Through my experience, I have made decisions regarding personnel matters, budget, and curriculum, as well as implemented systems to support the social and emotional well-being of teachers and students. I observed how quickly Superintendent Johnson could make decisions without hesitation, citing his experience in various capacities that helped him frame his processes and ideas. He had an innate ability for thinking of ideas, calling upon his key members to facilitate and implement them on a larger scale. The innovation came through the actions of his staff as they carried out the development of the concepts.

**Interlude.** Superintendent Johnson stated:

I come up with ideas by reading and by dreaming of what could be. I think that my ideas are formed by just opening my mind to the literature that is out there in the world. I love to see what other organizations are trying. Some ideas are generated from my experiences and some ideas just pop into my head. I have great people who can make those visions become a reality. I am always thinking

from the perspective of what can we do to get better for our students. (Field notes, July 16, 2018)

### **Creative Leadership and Sustainability**

Throughout this study, I discovered that Superintendent Johnson faced multiple responsibilities that encompassed not only student achievement but also societal and institutional issues. He encountered challenges that influenced the governance and management of the school district as he attempted to balance between the political and educational arenas that encompassed organizational, economic, personnel, and student-related challenges. The many responsibilities and decisions a school district superintendent faces make the position challenging and difficult as the leader works through the increased expectations from governmental entities, the school board, and the community (Kamrath, 2015).

The role of the school district superintendent has become more complex and demanding as expectations for the position have evolved (Björk et al., 2014). As Superintendent Johnson worked to transform, restructure, and redefine schools, he also worked with an organization resistant to change while maintaining stability (see Kamrath, 2015). During his second year as superintendent, he challenged the school principals to reinvent their school classroom designs. Only the staff and school administration from one campus accepted his challenge. In June of 2018, the campus principal, teacher leaders, and district personnel came together to discuss and reflect upon the current school model. They questioned whether the school transformation and redesign was intended to appease the adults or was in the best interest of the students. Inspired by the voices of the children and their families, the leaders overwhelmingly agreed that change

was needed (Observation, June 20, 2018). Together, the internal and external communities began iterating and implementing student-choice based projects. The project design would give students opportunities to research and create projects and products to demonstrate their learning. Teachers who were accustomed to the usual approaches of education expressed their discontent throughout the process.

Superintendent Johnson listened to their concerns and did not force them to make any decisions, but informed them this was a new approach and design that served the needs of the community. He knew that changing the structures within the system would not change the people. Complexity theory within creative leadership relates to “doing with” rather than “doing to” (A. W. Davidson, Ray, & Turkel, 2011, p. 207). Superintendent Johnson listened, communicated, and problem-solved with the community so they could establish an approach that would satisfy the members of this particular campus organization.

Superintendent Johnson’s intent was to develop a climate so the people in the organization could develop and foster relationships to create new systems and structures. When asked about the teachers’ willingness to accept his initiatives and whether the initiatives were sustainable or simply processes adhered to, he stated:

I create systems that will continue with or without me. The fact is I shock the system, and it unsettles people at first. When they see the outcomes, the effect on students and families, then they begin to change their beliefs. Their beliefs and understanding will then take over and guide the organization. Not me. (Field notes, July 11, 2018)

Sustainability of initiatives and practices can withstand situational change when members of the learning organization remain engaged in innovative conversations with a willful change of behavior (Newman-Storen, 2014). Superintendent Johnson made it possible to implement sustainable change because of his working knowledge in all areas of the school district in the instructional, human capital, business, and public relations departments. He displayed his competence in these areas throughout this study, particularly during school board meetings where he addressed the budget deficit, answered questions regarding a previous bond election and bond project, and continued to maintain his position as the main instructional leader providing feedback to principals regarding student learning. His skills helped him guide the organization and present a case for change through consistency with his decisions and his attention to details for solving high-stakes challenging issues in the moment (Grivas & Puccio, 2011; Sternberg et al., 2004).

### **Creative Leadership Versus Transformational Leadership**

I was asked multiple times by colleagues during this study how creative leadership differed from transformational leadership. I realized one leadership style may limit the full potential of the leader, placing him or her at risk of stagnation and being unadaptable to the changing organizational environment. In transformational leadership, the leader focuses on relationships and networking, no longer working as a planner or productivity manager (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Studies have shown theories of transformational leadership, when combined with management, improve knowledge acquisition, foster positive work cultures, and have a more positive impact on employee satisfaction, retention, organizational success, and innovative practices (Gowen,

Henagan, & McFadden, 2009; Weberg, 2017). According to these studies, the main point of transformational leadership is to motivate staff to look past personal gain and more toward team endeavors (Leonard, 2018). One argument under transformational leadership pertains to the organizational vision reflecting the beliefs of the leader and restricting input from other members of the organization (Yousaf, 2017). The organization begins to reject any innovations for fear of misrepresentation of the transformational leader's vision (Yousaf, 2017). In transformational leadership, the leader is conceptualized as an individual and the organizational culture is ignored, leading to narrow conclusions as to why or how organizational change occurred (Lord, 2008). Transformational leaders look at situations in a global manner, potentially overlooking key components. Though a popular leadership style, transformational leadership may be good for one specific item but could be detrimental to the organization as it may not result in the desired change to transform the system (Leonard, 2018). Transformational leadership has helped to define organizational leadership, yet a gap exists between the relationship of the individual stakeholders and the emergent leader relying on conventional practices to inspire change (Schein, 2004). Transformational leadership provides a leadership construct that emphasizes leadership as a dynamic relationship within the organizational culture and between self and the followers. Transformational leaders empower their followers to become adaptable, yet the assumption within this theory is that the followers do not initiate or lead change themselves.

As a leader of connoisseurs, I conclude that transformational leadership relies on the individual leader to do the transformation within the organization. The philosophy of

creative leadership embraces change and the importance of collective behavior in increasing levels of complexity. Creative leadership calls for collaboration and empowerment of the contributors to transform the organization. Superintendent Johnson's creative leadership provided a new approach for working through ambiguity while balancing the demands of the changing educational landscape. He was open to multiple perspectives to develop a broader understanding of the situation. He collected information, reflected on the experience, and observed new ideas as they developed. Superintendent Johnson then orchestrated the influences and any new ideas that developed and shaped them into a new reality for the organization. The superintendent orchestrated creativity by affording opportunities for the people in the organization to develop and frame the ideas into a reality (see Reckhenrich & Furu, 2015). He reframed old paradigms to unlock ideas for innovation. Using the school redesign example, Superintendent Johnson gave campus leaders full autonomy to develop a multi-age design program. The leadership team surveyed students and allowed them to choose their own topics to study within a teacher-developed framework. This multi-age learning project was a schoolwide endeavor. The stage for bigger, broader change was set, not by the superintendent but by members of the learning community. Superintendent Johnson assisted in the design and development of ideas, concepts, and solutions as the evolving project began to transpire (see Reckhenrich & Furu, 2015).

## **Coda**

Eisner (1991) asserted that educational criticism was appropriate for a critical investigation to contribute to the improvement of educational practice. During my study, I imagined that I could show how a superintendent exemplified creative leadership using

complexity theory while making a connection to an orchestra conductor. I chose this path because of my experience as a music educator for 22 years and my current position as a deputy superintendent. I believe I risked much in trying to connect the two with the potential of not showing anything significant or worth contributing to the research of creative leadership and complexity theory. Through this process, I wanted to provide insight into whether a school district superintendent and an orchestral conductor share similarities and work with organizations and stakeholders, but what I found was how Superintendent Johnson loved his work, his people, and the community. I contemplated whether creative leadership was reflective of multiple leadership theories even though I tried to challenge why it was not transformational leadership.

**Actor and interactions.** I referenced the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, as well as the review of literature, during this study. One of the emerging themes that surfaced showed Superintendent Johnson as a leader who shared his vulnerability, but I felt it necessary to determine whether he exhibited any creative qualities. In one transcript he stated, “I don’t know if I am creative when making decisions or when interacting with stakeholders. I think of what the other person must be thinking, or I think of the audience members . . . what they are thinking, and I make a connection” (Field notes, June 28, 2018). The key word in this transcript was audience, a term used in Glăveanu’s (2014) Five As model framework. The framework shows the interdependency of each part working together and not in isolation. Glăveanu asserted that creativity should be viewed within the context of culture and redefined. The framework outlines creativity regarding actors, actions, artifacts, audiences, and affordances.



Superintendent Johnson created systems and established a case for change with all actors (i.e., students, parents, teachers, and the internal and external community). The exchanges he shared with the audience members encouraged collective values and collective imagination, giving meaning to the members' ideas, actions, interactions, and relationships to assist in guiding change efforts. Each creation developed in the school district, whether a school redesign, a change in the school schedule, new program offerings, salary schedules, or hiring processes, became artifacts that were part of the school community. The artifacts did not necessarily constitute something material but represented the different beliefs and values in the socio-cultural traditions from the organization. The artifacts became symbols of the actions, the “developing process” (Dewey, 1934, p. 116) taken by the actors and contributions of the audience.

Superintendent Johnson allowed for the affordances, the objects and processes, within the school district to evolve as needed to reshape the organization. The Five As framework (Glăveanu, 2014) places creative leadership within a construct where the creative leader can employ multiple perspectives and abilities to build innovation and ideate solutions during complex and challenging situations. Superintendent Johnson pushed through uncertainty, showing creativity (see Amabile & Khaire, 2008) in his decision-making, knowing that adjustments were necessary. He guided the organization based on the values of the community while still holding high expectations and allowing the people to lead or make changes. He pushed those within the organization to let go of old habits and develop new possibilities. In this respect, Superintendent Johnson showed that change was the key factor and necessary for creativity.

**Creative change leader.** As my analysis of the artifacts and observations showed, change was the leading factor in Superintendent Johnson's school district. According to Puccio et al. (2011), leadership is the catalyst for change. A creative change leader is an individual who has internalized creativity and creative principles; the essence of leadership though is defined by the behaviors and attitudes toward pursuing and facilitating ideas that will have a profound influence on the organization (Puccio et al., 2011). The creative change leader deals with the same complexities and remains adaptable, flexible, tolerant of ambiguity, and open to new ideas and solutions (Puccio et al., 2011). The implication is not that conventional top-down leadership approaches lack creativity or relevance. Instead, leadership requires more complex and adaptive methods for thinking and acting differently to address complex problems. The concept of creativity and the connection to leadership stems from the notion of acting and thinking differently. For creative change initiatives to sustain and remain part of the organizational system, they require innovation, adaptation, and collaboration (Newman-Storen, 2014). When change is implemented, the interactions among the members during the process lead to change where innovation becomes the adaptation to change.

Superintendent Johnson also exhibited qualities of a creative change leader. He demonstrated his creative process with new approaches and concepts to transform the existing practices in the school district. He encouraged collaboration with all internal and external community members to define problem areas and identify gaps; making commitments to ensure that concepts would become a reality for the members of the school district.

Superintendent Johnson acted as the primary catalyst for change. He exposed the organization to new ideas and new methods of acquiring information and gave pushback, but allowed the dissonance to resonate. He would cite what other districts throughout the country were implementing: “Why is this school district using digital portfolios? The district is no different than our district. I want you to look at it. Go visit them and come back on how best we can utilize the portfolios” (Field notes, June 25, 2018). His team sat quietly. Eventually, the district and campus leaders determined how best to implement the strategies for their schools as the superintendent watched them “growing and learning from the experiences and action” (Field notes, June 25, 2018). Superintendent Johnson was self-aware and knew that he needed to get members of the school district to adapt and innovate quickly. He exclaimed:

If we do not change fast enough and we do not develop our schools and programs to meet the needs and interests of all of our students, they will leave. Our families have options, and they will not keep their children here. (Field notes, August 1, 2018)

Superintendent Johnson embraced innovation and took a proactive approach, sometimes demanding action from his leadership team, to ensure innovation and new practices remained a priority. He challenged the norms of the education system by pushing others to develop something new, and in doing so he challenged the current way of doing, of educating, to improve the system.

### **Orchestra Conductor and the School District Superintendent**

The conductor of an orchestra is considered a leader who uses his or her baton to convey when and how the sound starts and stops. Conducting involves core components

that are also essential in leadership: vision, self-awareness, communication, and visibility (Nierenberg, 2009). The conductor strategically uses key musical components (e.g., rhythm, style, interpretation, etc.) to achieve goals, produce a refined musical product, and develop a shared musical vision. The composer notates his or her musical thought in the score, which establishes the musical foundation and the boundaries the ensemble must adhere to as a guide for the performance (Barbieri, 2009). The conductor then must balance the interchange between the collective orchestra and the individual instrumentalists to give way to one cohesive sound (Barbieri, 2009). Like a conductor, Superintendent Johnson upheld the school district's core beliefs, working toward goals to improve teaching and learning using data, policies, and community feedback to establish a shared unified vision similar to a conductor relying on the musical directions provided in the musical score (Barbieri, 2009).

The conductor prepares for rehearsals knowing that trial and error and experimentation during the practice will lead to an overall flawless performance. The great conductors plan for every rehearsal as if it were the actual performance. The excitement of the concert experience begins when the conductor takes the podium, makes a quick gesture, and the music begins. As one of the most noted conductors, Benjamin Zander (2009) made reference to the fact that the conductor of an orchestra does not make a sound during a performance. Instead, the conductor is dependent on the ability to guide the musicians and relinquish control to them to produce the music. He closed by stating that the great conductors do not demonstrate their own musical skill via an instrument or through their conducting performance. Rather, a conductor's character is

based on his or her ability to produce an environment in which the artistry of others may emerge, and the quality of that performance may be experienced (Zander, 2009).

Superintendent Johnson shared this same passion and prepared for every meeting as if it was a performance, knowing the drivers of policy changes and the implications. A quick gesture from the superintendent initiated the organization to respond. A conductor believes in his or her musicians just as Superintendent Johnson believed the people in the school district were committed to the students, families, and systemic changes. His passion was infectious and seeped through the organization as he explained his purpose. Superintendent Johnson had a vision, a strategy, and a purpose as he guided the school district; without his “moral virtues,” as he referred to them, he would be leading an ensemble simply making noise.

**Self-awareness.** Conductors are self-aware of their every action, knowing that the slightest hesitation may give an unintended cue for a musician to perform at the most inopportune moment (Zander, 2009). Superintendent Johnson was aware of his gestures and actions and the impact he had on the organization and community. Every decision he made had meaning and purpose not only for himself, but for others. He was never careless with his public demeanor, accepting criticism yet always remaining gracious and cordial. A great conductor leads the musicians, aware that some possess musical skills that surpass the conductor’s abilities, making the musicians experts on their instruments (Ladkin & Bathurst, 2012). Superintendent Johnson strived to make members of the learning organization experts in their specific area, such as instruction, business, administration, human resources, or community engagement. He intentionally looked for

the qualities his employees could enhance and build upon. He often said to an individual, “You’re the expert. I trust you” (Field notes, August 13, 2018).

**Visibility.** A conductor is always visible at center stage on the podium (Nierenberg, 2009). Superintendent Johnson was also visible and at the forefront, whether at a school board meeting or in the community attending athletic events, performances, or in classrooms. People knew what position he held in the school district. He was active on social media showing his whereabouts and activities and advocating for education and school improvement. Though both the school district superintendent and conductor lead organizations, both leaders also share the spotlight, acknowledging the performers. Superintendent Johnson never made it about him, he said:

It’s about the people, the students, and their families. It’s about the teachers who work tirelessly in the classrooms. It’s about our custodians who keep our campuses clean and maintained. It’s about our food service department that feeds our students. (Field notes, August 14, 2018)

Superintendent Johnson believed every success could be credited to the people around him.

**Communication.** To deliver an exceptional musical performance, the conductor knows what he or she wants to hear from each instrument section. The conductor may use words to communicate this, but the real test in communicating the vision is seen through nonverbal conducting. The conductor communicates vision and musical goals through gestures, facial expressions, posture, and breathing (Barbieri, 2009). Conductors know the importance of verbal and nonverbal communication. They articulate every beat with the motion of their baton. Superintendent Johnson clearly communicated the core

beliefs of the school district organization and the rationale for every decision made. He stressed the need for communication as essential for trust and transparency. As a conductor uses his or her symphonic skills to guide musicians in performing their best, Superintendent Johnson communicated to create the conditions in which his people felt significant, valued, and accepted for their contributions.

**The school district ecology.** Music-making begins before any sounds are produced or any actions are taken by the musicians. Similarly, leadership begins prior to any implementation or change processes take effect (Nierenberg, 2009). The orchestral conductor analogy blends the social constructionism lens into this research by inferencing that leading an orchestra, and a school district, is socially constructed through relational activities such as making music and developing instructional programs (Hosking & Bouwen, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The letting go of authority so members of the organization may influence others toward a collective vision is just as crucial to the creation of leadership (Ladkin & Bathurst, 2012). Leadership then is an interactive process.

The illustration in Figure 2 provides an overall concept of the ecological framework and its relation to creative leadership and complexity. In an ecosystem, every organism depends on the microorganisms within the structure (Transmundi & Steffensen, 2016). The same holds true within the modified ecology of schooling (Eisner, 1991; Uhrmacher & Matthews, 2005; Uhrmacher et al., 2017). The modified ecology is an autopoietic whole living within a sociotechnical environment. The different perspectives from the areas of instructional support, structural, administration, and community are taken into account for decision-making and leading. The interactions within and between

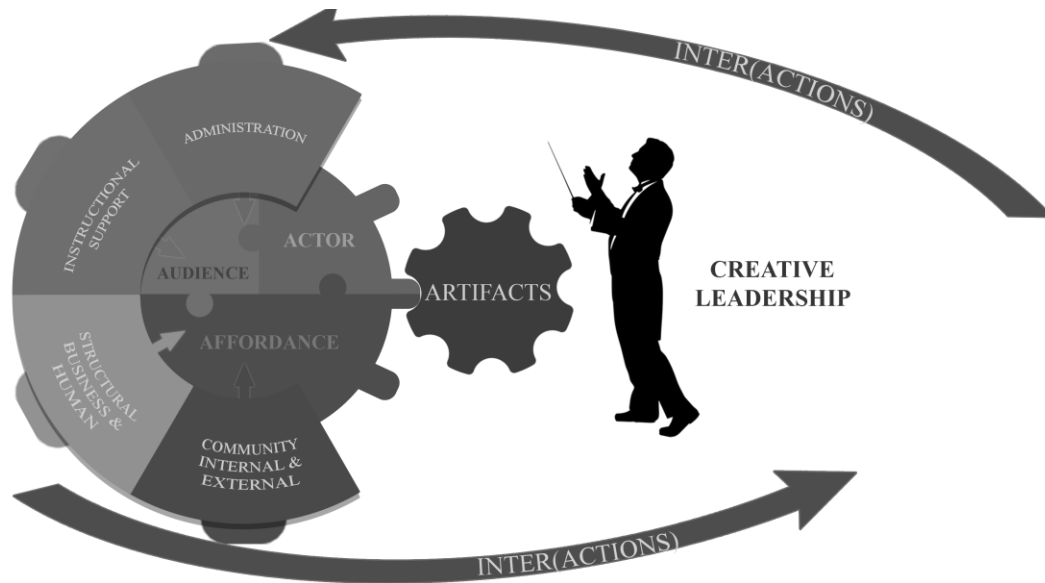
these systems reinforce the identity of the school district. The relationships and the interactions between the superintendent and the learning organization influence how the school system will evolve and change.

Superintendent Johnson, as the main actor, interacted throughout the ecosystem as he tried to develop a complex adaptive school system that would be resilient and sustainable through times of change and complexity.

Superintendent Johnson determined which information was relevant and the possibilities for members of the organization. The possibilities developed into processes, or affordances, that placed the leader within the surrounding environment of the organization. The affordances become apparent to the leader as he or she is engaged in the setting and in determining how to navigate the circumstances effectively (Glăveanu, 2012; Transmundi & Steffensen, 2016). “The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides, or furnishes, either for good or ill” (Gibson, 1979, p. 127). The affordances need the abilities of the leader and the features that comprise the environment to process the goals and the actions of the members in the organization (Glăveanu, 2012). Superintendent Johnson, as the main actor in a human-organism environment system, viewed the audience as a structure comprising multiple actors. The actions of the actors (participants) continually influenced the dynamics of the actions and interactions between the people. All aspects of the school ecology are part of the whole environment engaging in a willful action to greet, smile, or converse with one another, becoming the affordances for each other’s behaviors (Linnell, 2015; Transmundi & Steffensen, 2016). Superintendent Johnson’s understanding of how the school district functioned and interacted heightened the probability for creativity to manifest when



working through the complexity of systems as networks teaming with human potential and diversity. In this study, the superintendent orchestrated the change process through the growing complexities that transpired from the socio-political influences that affected the educational institution in the areas of instructional support, school structures, administration, and the school community.



*Figure 2.* Researcher's depiction of the creative leadership ecology. Adapted from Glăveanu (2014) and Uhrmacher and Matthews (2005).

## **Finale**

Today's school district leaders face complex challenges during heightened times of high-stakes testing and school district performance. School district leaders may navigate these challenges using creative leadership and complexity theory to deal with the unpredictability of the school system. Creative leadership requires a shift in thinking and leading away from long-established hierarchical practices. Instead, a holistic approach to leading becomes necessary, understanding that all elements of every idea, individual, and interaction are interconnected and necessary for sustainable change within the organization. The creative leader in the role of a school district superintendent strives

to develop the capacity to acquire a discerning eye to deal with the ambiguity and uncertainty to work through complex situations. New and adaptive practices of leadership, possibly multidimensional styles, may be required to help individuals grow, understand, and become creative when working in education. Creative leadership is seen as an approach to problem-solving and developing creative solutions in an era that is rapidly changing (Petrie, 2014).

Through this study, I am implying that creative leadership is a social interaction that is displayed daily through the interactions and decisions of the school district superintendent. Research supports that when leading individuals or teams, leaders become directive, telling their followers what to do, or integrative, soliciting and incorporating the input of others (Abecassis-Moedas & Gilson, 2017). However, there is limited research on what drives creative leadership or what it looks like in the context of school leadership. A gap exists regarding the actual challenges that influence the daily operations of the superintendent. It was my intent to show how my position as a deputy superintendent in the school district could provide insight to such challenges. More research is also needed on a superintendent's creative problem-solving efforts in daily decision-making and the influence on knowledge structures in real-world scenarios. Future research considerations may also include studying creative change leadership within the constructs of other leadership theories and fields.

I end this study with some consternation as to whether creative leadership is an acceptable approach for leading school districts. Superintendent Johnson expressed his satisfaction in reading the earlier drafts of the dissertation and said, "We need to always strive to make a difference. Change the practice and do what is best for students" (Field

notes, October 31, 2018). I believed him. Creative leadership may be a conglomeration of various leadership skills where leadership serves as the link between creativity and sustainability. In my opinion, Superintendent Johnson responded to the internal and external forces with such intentionality that his creativity was displayed as he articulated his decisions and ideas, and then relied on his ensemble to execute the tasks. He shifted away from a top-down leadership structure, understanding the importance and role of every member. He fostered organizational trust from within the district so individuals had the freedom to make decisions, problem-solved through collaboration and deliberation, and created new ways of thinking, acting, and interacting. He always remained the superintendent, guiding his orchestra through the motions and giving creative autonomy. At the end, he made the final call if necessary but never got in the way of the instructional, structural, administration, and community components of the school district ecology.

**Critic's notes.** As the conductor and the musicians take their final bow, I leave the performance wondering about my own leadership practice and my ability to conduct a future symphony. Would I lead like Superintendent Johnson? Most likely not. Superintendent Johnson had the unique ability to create an unsettling environment that would generate an urgency to develop solutions. He was like a lingering dissonant chord with acoustic frequencies that interfere with one another, creating a nervous tension. He had the same effect through his constant probing and questioning, sometimes disrupting one's pattern of thinking. Unlike a dissonant chord that eventually resolves in a passage, Superintendent Johnson could upset someone with disruptive truth creating resolution and realignment to the core values in time. Because of his willingness to challenge

people to be uncomfortable and through his actions, the superintendent could establish the need for change within the organization, yet he did not consider himself creative or a creative leader:

I believe that I am not limited by boundaries and that allows me to come up with some creative ideas but I do not feel like I am creative or a creative leader. I think I'm an individual who believes in the why not. (Interview, June 28, 2018)

He was also political and could anticipate the behaviors of specific actors in any political situation. A quality I do not yet possess as a leader.

I believe my leadership capacity places me in between that of a creative leader and a creative change leader. As a former conductor, I could place myself in the center of the instrumental ensemble, giving myself the space to hear the music from various directions. I then would make my way to the front of the group and ask for recommendations on how to address the musicality from the performer's perspective, as illustrated in Figure 3. I believe I lead as if I were conducting musicians. The creative leader oversees and establishes the vision for the organization, whereas the creative change leader can act as the visionary but also ideate and act upon the ideas, facilitating the change for innovation to occur in the school district. Creative leadership has its related idiosyncrasies, complexity, and vulnerability, yet all remain inseparable as I develop as an emerging leader.



*Figure 3. Researcher's reflection of self.*

As a leader of connoisseurs, I reflect on my own practice in the school district and the decisions I have made. I have a global perspective on how the school district functions and the interactions of the individuals and the groups within the learning organization. I create urgency to work collectively toward bettering the school system for all while trying to inspire those around me to be bold with the newness of change. As both a creative leader and a creative change leader, I am adaptable and understand that creativity is the process for change and innovation is the successful adaptation of the change. My skill set allows me to create and implement the necessary changes. My relational approach in collaborating and communicating with the learning community allows me to prepare for the complexities of the future.

## **APPENDIX SECTION**

### **APPENDIX A**

#### **Recruitment E-mail Message**

To: [Superintendent Johnson]

From: [Monica Ruiz-Mills]

Subject: Research Participation Invitation: Conducting the Symphony: How a School District Superintendent Uses Complexity Theory for Creative Leadership

Dear Superintendent Johnson,

This email message is an approved request for participation in research that has been approved or declared exempt by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**PURPOSE:** You are invited to participate in a research study intended to explore and make meaning of the actions and decision-making processes of public-school district superintendents in their adaptation to changes and accommodations to various cultural contexts, ideas, and perspectives. The information gathered will be used to describe if creative leadership, within the framework of complexity theory, enhances operational effectiveness. You are being asked to participate because you currently hold the position of School District Superintendent with a minimum of two years superintendent experience and two years of service in your current school district.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate, a maximum of four interviews, lasting approximately 30-60 minutes, will take place during the 2018 summer and fall semesters, at a convenient location of your choosing. During the data-gathering phase, the researcher will observe you for approximately 150 hours, focusing on your interactions within the school system structure. Follow-up interviews will include clarification and additional probing of questions that arise as a result of the observations. You will not have to do anything differently before or on the day of data gathering interviews or observations.

You will be asked to answer questions related to your beliefs, actions, and reflections regarding creativity and leadership as a school district superintendent. All answers will be audio recorded, and only the researcher will have access to these recordings. Your name will not be used in written transcripts or in the final publication. You will have the opportunity to read the transcripts prior to publication, in order to ensure the researcher accurately captured your responses. All physical data will be kept in a locked area for three years. Electronic data will be saved to a password-protected computer while research is ongoing, then moved to a USB and kept with the physical data in a locked area for three years.

#### **BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES**

There will be limited direct benefit to you from participating in this study. You may benefit from reflecting on your beliefs and practices. However, the information that you provide will assist in providing potentially valuable insight in developing the conceptual link between the school organization and the superintendent as a creative leader in sustaining school improvement efforts to enhance professional learning practices.

#### **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private and confidential. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team, the funding agency, and the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

#### **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

You will receive no compensation for participating in this study.

#### **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to participate in this study. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw from it at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

To participate in this research or ask questions about this research please contact me, Monica Ruiz-Mills, at [mmr136@txstate.edu.]

This project [IRB# 2018655] was approved by the Texas State IRB on [5-29-2018]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert (512-245-8351, dgobert@txstate.edu) or to IRB Regulatory Manager, Monica Gonzales (512-245-2334, meg201@txstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Monica Ruiz-Mills  
Ph.D Student  
Texas State University

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Original Interview Protocol**

*The purpose of this study is to explore and make meaning of the actions and decision-making processes of public-school district superintendents in their adaptation to changes and accommodations to various cultural contexts, ideas, and perspectives. The information gathered will be used to describe if creative leadership, within the framework of complexity theory, enhances operational effectiveness. You are being asked to participate because you currently hold the position of School District Superintendent with a minimum of two years superintendent experience and two years of service in your current school district. To assist in my research observations, please think about the following questions and answer to what is true to your beliefs.*

#### **Creative context**

1. What does creativity mean to you?
2. Do you feel you are a creative individual? Please provide an example(s).
3. As a leader, do you find yourself creative when making decisions or interacting with stakeholders? Please provide an example(s).

#### **Idea generation**

4. Discuss what you consider a significant innovation or innovations you have implemented as Superintendent.
5. How do you generate your ideas?
6. What type of input do you receive from your learning organization and from the community regarding your innovative ideas/programs?

#### **Perspective**

7. Why education?
8. Why a Superintendent?
9. What was the context of the district when you first arrived?
10. How do you know you're impacting the organization?
11. Discuss the structures within the organization.
12. Let's talk about the school community – the internal and external community – how has that evolved?
13. Finally, what does the future look like for the district?



## APPENDIX C

### District Core Beliefs



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