

A Story to Move Forward: A History of Past, Present, and Future Ways of Responding to Education

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Abstract

The healthy functioning of a school system depends upon many factors. The internal micro factors require a leader to take into account the heart and human conditions that coexist within the lived environment. The external macro factors are the events that occur in unexpected ways. When these internal micro factors are not functioning well, and a macro external event occurs unexpectedly, the system can struggle. While leaders may equip themselves with dynamic leadership skills to assist in navigating through the uncharted macro events, there is no disputing the fact that the pandemic of COVID-19 caught all leaders off guard. Many leaders just wanted to get through it. Many yearned to get their organizations back to normal. This qualitative case study examined the leadership's responses from Ulster BOCES (Board of Cooperative Education), during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Ulster BOCES-Educator Edge leadership attended to the hearts and minds of staff in human ways throughout each stage of the pandemic. This qualitative case study used the adaptive resilient frameworks from (Heifetz, 1994; Scharmer, 2009; Schein & Schein, 2017) as an inquiry into three research questions: 1) What kind of environment nurtures human development and promotes learning? 2) How did leaders attend to the human elements in virtual and hybrid spaces? and, 3) How did inclusive contexts highlight the need for varied approaches to nurturing and developing learning for both the leader and the learner?

Keywords: *dynamic leadership, mission driven, adaptive leadership, Ulster BOCES-educator edge, COVID-19 pandemic, moral compass*

Introduction

Human beings are the heartbeat and rhythm of any organization. In organizations of schools, it is humans who interpret, choose and contextualize the meaning behind words, which then become the norms of their culture. Dynamic leaders understand these complexities and recognize the work that is needed, is work of the heart. They are cognizant that what they put out in words to a body of actors—made up of humans whose perceptions and experiences—can either shape the healthy functioning of an organization or dissolve its entire empire.

Starting in March 2020, all leaders were tested, and the long-term outcomes of how they addressed the COVID-19 crisis are still yet to be seen. Regardless of how steeped a leader had invested their teams in preparation for change, in March of 2020, every leader was caught off

guard. When COVID-19 hit, all systems stood still in disbelief. Despite many years of preparedness for emergency lockdowns, lock ins, and even a *Guideline for Developing High Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (2013), published by the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, not one plan of action addressed *what to do* when faced with a national health crisis that basically shut every school district and other organizations down.

From the perspective of schools, some dynamic and noble system leaders have demonstrated practices of courage and vulnerability. With these traits, leaders are better equipped to “recognize the sometimes fuzzy distinction between policy and practice” (Rallis et al., 2008, p. 7) and to illuminate strong practices of implementation that can lead to creating good policy. Whether decision-making is intentionally conducted or leaders follow personal or professional codes of ethics, educational leadership is a craft to be woven into the fabric of the organization of all schools (Rallis et al., 2008). A specific and related topic for organizations of schools, is how educational leaders make decisions whether they encompass areas such as inclusion, justice, professionalism, democracy, and social justice, ethical policies and practices with plans to be implemented and embedded into the culture of a school organization (Rallis et al., 2008).

According to Rallis et al. (2008), leaders who lead with thoughtful reflection, who recognize the choice of their words and how their effect upon others needs to be inclusive of everything they do before they take action, are leaders who can be considered as dynamic. Leading from a framework of dynamic leadership, is all done within the context of the culture they exist in, and, thus, the impact of influence in return. The biography of their organization depends on this leadership, and those within the culture who learn how to pivot when needed, or make sense of things that might be unclear to an outsider, are what can help a culture thrive or just survive. The implementation practices of *how* leaders govern can impact whether they enact effective policies, changes, and procedures, or create roadblocks that can lead to a path of ethical and moral dilemmas. Though every school is required by law to adapt a code of ethics, these codes can easily be interpreted to mean many different things. Under the Code of Ethics Law, “all school boards are required to adopt a code of ethics for the guidance of its officers and employees that sets forth the standards of conduct reasonably expected of them” (School Law, 2020, p. 125). The words, reasonably expected, are just words and like many laws, are open to interpretations, which is precisely why school leadership requires a myriad of knowledge regarding policies, practices, and procedures, and a strong moral compass. Absent this, “Without any guidelines of procedures to follow, moral reasoning about policy formation, implementation, and evaluation can be convoluted and frustrating” (Rallis et al., p. 13).

Ethical leadership requires the use of reflective practices to support policies aligned with justice and a deeper understanding of the needs of all (Rallis et al., 2008). This reflective lens is what Rallis et al. (2008) claimed “helps school leaders sort out what they want to do (or must do by directive or law) and *how* they are going to do it” (p. 4). Ethical leadership includes the practices of considering and including cultural proficiencies and socially just and equitable norms for all. During times of crisis, ethical leadership can create the space to move forward and learn new ways of being.

Unfolding the Story

Schein and Schein (2017) espoused, “Culture as a set of assumptions defines for us what to pay attention to, what things mean, how to react emotionally to what’s going on, and what actions to take in various kinds of situations” (p. 22). Humans belong to various cultures, genders, and backgrounds, and they are the heart of any organization. An organization's culture can be examined from different frameworks to help unravel the complexity of how culture responds during times of crisis. Using this lens, I examined the contextual factors that influenced how leaders of the organization of Ulster Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES)/ Educator Edge faced the crisis of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic.

As a response to pandemic interruptions, all systems of education around the world needed to shift their ways of knowing and doing. This study examined the traits that support a system to be able to both survive and thrive during times of crisis. During these uncommon times, there is a calling to find a better way to compete and collaborate so that we, as a society, can build more equitable learning organizations. This paper focuses specifically on how mission-driven leadership practices can support leaders now and in the future to examine inclusive practices that arose from this crisis. The intention of highlighting these equitable practices is to point to a path of inclusivity for students who have been marginalized, whether through outdated policies, outdated mission statements, or outdated expectations of achievement. Based on the research, this paper suggests frameworks for designing policies and creating structures to nurture the hearts, minds, and interests of those leaders who want to do a more in-depth study on the lessons learned from living through the challenges presented during COVID-19. More specifically, this paper explores what was learned within a BOCES organization that highlights the leadership practices which helped strive to attain more equitable outcomes. Recommendations include ways that system leaders can take courageous steps to forward-face the (leader)ship and all those aboard toward a shared, forward direction.

Review of Literature

Research on how leaders have changed their practices during the crisis of COVID-19 is still being studied; several studies have examined the traits focused on in this current study (Anderson, 2020; Carpenter & Poerschke, 2020; Viner et al., 2020). From a crisis management perspective and school organizations, there are several studies that have examined the issues of crisis, and are mainly focused on the crisis that has been ongoing. For example, when faced with emergencies, school systems have varying levels of preparedness, depending upon the crisis. Over the years, school systems have had to plan and prepare communities for crisis events, create policies and procedures for things such as fire drills, lock-downs, lock-outs, floods, active shooters, hurricanes and health policies related to influenza and the like (Urick et al., 2021). The type of leadership needed during COVID-19 presented school organizations with a profound and different set of skills than those needed to address more familiar emergencies.

The preparedness for school leaders to be better equipped to handle crises within their organizations has been studied over time from an emergency preparedness lens (Urick et al., 2021). Models have been rolled out in school organizations, yet several scholars believe the problem of a lack of preparedness can be eliminated if training takes place throughout the entire school year (Urick et al., 2021). Some authors have posited that providing students with a voice early in the

planning could help those who currently are in those lived experiences better perceive the needs of the modern world (Day et al., 2020).

This type of training might address the social-emotional components that crisis planning does not take into account in the process of planning (Day et al., 2020). Studies on crisis leadership and self-care examine levels of burnout and examine reasons why leaders might leave the field of educational leadership (Carpenter & Poerschke, 2020; Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Wang et al., 2018). Though the field of nursing and social work have developed important bodies of research and evidence that support the importance of self-care, in education, it has only been since the pandemic that schools have begun to give rise to this work.

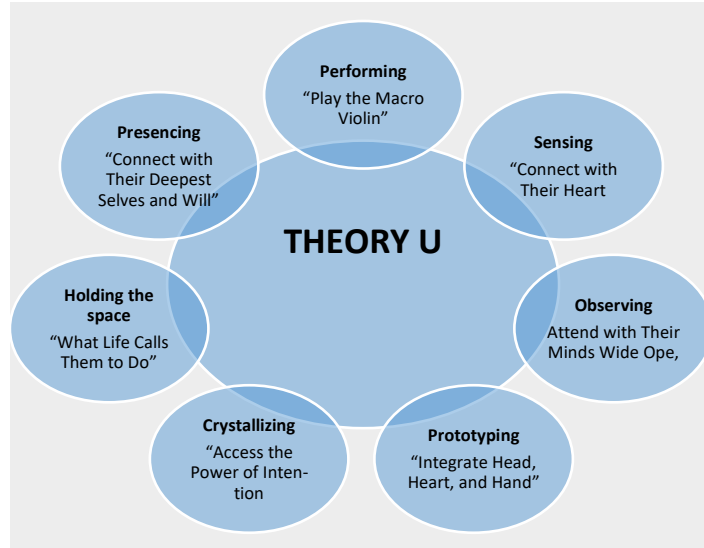
Theoretical Framework

I used the scholars Schein and Schein (2017), Scharmer (2009/2016, 2018), Heifetz (1994), and Heifetz et al. (2009) as the theoretical frames for this case study. I crafted interview questions to help inform data collection and hand coded responses to examine themes (Appendix A)

In defining organizational culture, Schein and Schein (2017) presented three levels of cultural analysis that examine and apply to “an individual, a micro system, a subculture, an organization, or a macro-culture” (p. 29). These three levels of culture are depicted in a model, organized into a framework that includes “artifacts; espoused beliefs and values; and basic underlying assumptions” (Schein & Schein, 2017, p. 18). Within this framework, complex organizations such as school systems can be viewed in terms of the explicit and implicit artifacts, beliefs and or values, and underlying assumptions that exist in the system, whether on a micro, macro, individual, or organizational level. From the perspective of examining the impact of leadership and culture, Scharmer (2009/2016) posited that people have been living during an era where conflicts and destruction have coexisted. Though it may be widely accepted that leadership in schools can directly impact a system, it is during times of crisis when it is most critical to examine the *how and what* leaders do to shift past ways of outdated institutionalized practices and past ways of thinking.

Research from Scharmer’s (2009/2016) leadership framework guides this paper and helps to examine how leaders can shift school environments to support the varied learning needs within a complex school system. Scharmer’s theoretical framework and practice include using a practice called presencing, defined as his theory U (see Figure 1). According to Scharmer, presencing is a process used in which leaders connect with their deepest selves and will. This theory provides leaders with a framework to break past patterns of practices that are unproductive. There are seven essential qualities of leadership that are identified by Scharmer (2009/2016) that can assist a leader to connect with their deepest selves. Scharmer’s seven qualities are outlined in Figure 1 (next page).

Figure 1: Scharmer's Seven Qualities



Note. A leader can use these qualities when moving through crisis situations. Diagram above was taken from the key concepts from *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges: The social theory presencing* (Scharmer, 2009, Berrett-Koehler Publishers).

I sought to understand and connect the theoretical framework Schein and Schein (2017) and their work on *Organizational Culture and Leadership* to examine the presence of leadership during times of crisis. Schein and Schein provide a rationale for why the shifted conversations were needed, especially during this crisis. They propose that the tangible and visible parts of culture, the organizational DNA, and the embedded and deep unconscious areas lie beneath these tangible layers of culture. The theoretical work of Scharmer (2009/2016) and *Theory U; Leading from the Future as It Emerges* are referred to in this study. Scharmer's (2016) research outlined the shifts in organizations using frameworks that offer a new way of seeing, doing, learning and doing as compared to what is already known. These ways of knowing are referred to when extrapolating comparisons of how the organization of Ulster BOCES/Educator Edge, where I hold an administrative position, navigated through this crisis, leading the way for an emerging future. Through a series of interviews and review of artifacts, I present an array of practices, creating options for other educational leaders to support the needs of staff and students who have been marginalized by an outdated system.

The framework by Heifetz (1994; Heifetz et al., 2009) was also used to examine the decision-making practices of the leadership of BOCES and explore how they operationalized moving their system forward during this time of crisis. Adaptive leadership theory emerged from over 30 years of research by Heifetz and Linsky through their research at Harvard University (Heifetz et al., 2009). In 1994, in *Leadership without Easy Answers*, Heifetz presented a theoretical framework based on what is defined as adaptive behaviors. This framework was developed and evolved around "two distinctions: between technical and adaptive problems and between leadership and authority" (Heifetz, 1994, p. 20). His work defined leadership as being best observed through the lens of a leader's undertakings rather than through their traits or skills. Heifetz (1994; Heifetz et al., 2009) asserted that leaders who apply an adaptive leadership theory could move beyond a simple way to address challenges, motivate, mobilize, and focus on different ways to solve them.

Additionally, they practice anticipating what challenges might come up and begin identifying the various root causes (Heifetz et al., 2009. Heifetz's (1994) metaphor of a leader knowing when to be on the dance floor and when to step up on the balcony applies to the skills needed in the COVID-19 crisis.

Methodology

This qualitative case study featured informational interviews gathered from administrators at the organization of Ulster BOCES (n.d.). A case study allowed for opportunities to explore “a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case)...over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information...and reports a case description and case themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). A qualitative data analysis approach was used to describe the commonalities and differences in viewpoints among interviewees and various scholars on the challenges of leadership in the face of crisis and the significance of the effect of leadership on educational systems. Qualitative analysis allowed for searching data to identify thematic descriptions and overviews (Creswell, 2013). Data collected for this study were contextualized and fractured to allow for an overall understanding and making certain conclusions. An inductive approach allowed me to emphasize a theory critical for better understanding of school organizations. The case of Ulster BOCES was selected due to access to the administrators and their innovative practices during COVID-19.

Data Collection

Ulster BOCES was used in this case study, specifically examining the degree to which four members of the Ulster BOCES leadership team (a) the district superintendent, the chief executive officer responsible for all aspects of the programs sponsored by Ulster BOCES; (b) the deputy superintendent; (c) the director of learning and design for innovative teaching and learning student based programs, and (d) the director of learning and design for the career pathways programs, engaged in behaviors and took actions to support a culture of social-emotional safety for all throughout the interruption of COVID-19.

This paper examines how one organization, BOCES, rose to meet the community's needs during the COVID-19 global pandemic. In their planning for supporting public school supports and services, all BOCES throughout New York State required a response reflective of the many communities within each county they support. Ulster BOCES is located in the rural area of Ulster County, New York. It supports services to eight component public school districts in Ulster County. BOCES is a public organization and was first created in 1948 by the New York State Legislature. The purpose of a BOCES is for the provision of shared educational services and programs to the different school districts within the BOCES region (Jones, 2013). As of current, there are 38 BOCES that exist that incorporate all, except nine schools within the 721 identified public school districts in New York state. The process of forming a BOCES service is created when at least two or more school districts have similar needs and can be met through a shared program (Jones, 2013).

Through the support of a BOCES, school districts are able to save money through pooling resources and sharing costs to provide a wide array of services. These shared services are economical for districts to be able to provide services, programs, and supports that might not be affordable to provide. It is less costly and more efficient for BOCES to operate a central service rather than

to open separate programs for each school district (Jones, 2013). Each year, all local Boards of Education review the needs of their district and make decisions about purchasing BOCES services. The State of New York gives financial incentives for a district to participate in a shared service and offers state aid to school districts for the BOCES service they received. The application of a shared service helps the school districts to be able to meet the many unprecedented challenges. The Instructional Services Programs of Ulster BOCES supports the eight school districts in Ulster County in professional learning that keeps districts current in their practices, and to keep up with NYSED changing mandates.

The mission statement for Ulster BOCES (n.d.) states:

At Ulster BOCES, our mission is to provide high-quality shared educational, administrative, and technical services that enable component school districts to develop the capacity of their students and adults to achieve higher standards of performance. With an emphasis on economic efficiencies, Ulster BOCES is committed to offering educational programs that prepare all students for employment and/or postsecondary education. (p. 3)

When this paper was written, I was employed by Ulster BOCES as an administrator in the Instructional Services division of Ulster BOCES. The administrators interviewed at Ulster BOCES were not direct supervisors of this author, and the author's supervisor was not interviewed. This was purposeful in ensuring relationships and biases were minimized as much as possible.

During the first year of the COVID-19 global pandemic, when many schools were busy trying to figure out how to contact trace, providing safety through use of masks, installing clear barriers for desks, providing supplies of disinfectant and hand sanitizers, and ensuring transportation was available, Ulster BOCES leadership did all that *and* engaged in innovative practices that prioritized the emotional health of staff. These innovative practices were determined to be priority needs by leadership from both their student-based programs, which support the education of around 230 students in the Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning; 1008 students in the Career and Technical Education programs; 91 students placed in the Hudson Valley Pathways Academy, a program that offers college credit in addition to working toward a high school diploma; and 32 students in the Alternative Pathways Phoenix Academy and the leadership through the division of Instructional Services, which provides the programming and professional learning supports for all 8 districts in Ulster County. These priority areas came from the leadership's understanding that students and families of the community of learners attending the student-based programs were faced with a crisis like never before, and it was critical that staff and teachers servicing those communities be considered a high priority.

The focus on wellness for staff and teachers offered opportunities for online Zoom meetings to discuss other priority needs. This included the offering of wellness programs for staff, and attention given to weekly memos from the superintendent who kept everyone up to date on the current conditions of the pandemic, as well as reminders that self-care was a priority. In addition to the weekly offering of online meetings for wellness check-ins, staff were encouraged to plan to prepare wellness offerings for the eight districts in the county. As a result, several districts used the professional learning offerings during their superintendents' full-day conferences and courses were offered around learning for staff that helped build skills needed during this time. For example, there were wellness topics for staff and their students, mindfulness classes, classes on how to use

Zoom in a way that would bring empathy and engagement to families and students, and a focus on the needs of the current time. This shift came out of the crisis.

In the past, operations of school systems tended to perpetuate past ways of thinking and being. However, during this pandemic crisis, there was an opportunity to rise to the present and use the circumstances to help build thinking minds. Those systems that were focused on trying to “get back to normal” were ones that truly struggled and were caught in a lack of mobility. I am of the belief that if school systems really want to move their performance levels, they must operate to include the present times. During this time of COVID-19, to think that schools could operate as they have been, was to operate as if one was on a sinking ship and the captain was trying to use the navigation system they had been using all along to help it to stop sinking. During this time, the opportunity for a leader to use their mind to not engage in past ways of knowing and thinking required a different state of mind. For example, the deputy superintendent reminded everyone that their schedules needed to allow time to pause for their students, *as well as themselves*. Staff would often hear the deputy superintendent posit, “Our calendars are a statement of our values, and if we are not planning to include valuing the social emotional well-being of our students and ourselves, then it is less likely to happen.” The value statement of time as a priority for self-care was most critical during this time. With leaders of school systems not being prepared to lead the way during the pandemic, it is no wonder why the cogs on the school systems were stuck with trying to get back to normal. This paper proposes that these adaptive, resilient frameworks (Heifetz, 1994; Scharmer, 2009; Schein & Schein, 2017) have been at the heart of their leadership. Using these conceptual frameworks, I investigated the following three questions of inquiry:

1. What kind of environment nurtures human development and promotes learning (negotiation of meaning, co-construction of knowledge and new ways of being)?
2. How is this created in virtual and hybrid spaces?
3. How do diverse inclusive contexts invite (or even necessitate) a variety of approaches to nurturing and developing learning for both the leader and learner?

Gaps in Learning and Knowing or Gaps in Responding?

Political divisions surfaced regarding *how* this pandemic should have been handled; the *why* school district leaders needed to address the systemic issues became even more critical because systems needed to move forward. In particular, school organizations became a target, a place for opening up an awareness of the deeper inequities. It became a domino effect from the heart of a school system, not fully functioning, that elicited many examples and other forms of crises across communities. Families were not prepared to juggle managing work while also needing to educate their children. In addition, not only were the inequities felt within the walls of each school, as a community, it clearly became an issue when access to technology was limited due to low socioeconomic conditions. The barriers of language and lack of education became an ever larger challenge when parents were faced with having to become partners of delivery in their child's education. For example, teachers were faced with teaching from a small square screen that gave them a glimpse into the lives of students. For the first time, teachers really started to see and hear how students from poverty live outside the four walls of school.

It is through this lens that the leadership at Ulster BOCES modeled the ability to work through some ground-level challenges faced by school organizations. Heifetz (1994) contends that by recognizing the different times of discord or chaos, communities tend to place the expectation

on the leadership (authority) to give them answers, decisions, and courage, and to create a map of the future. It is expected that leaders would be someone who knows where the community should be going and is someone that assists in making difficult problems simple. However, instead of looking for this kind of leader/savior, Heifetz (1994) suggested the real work of leaders is in challenging every single member within a group to face complex problems, problems that have no solutions that are not simple problems and require that each member learn to engage in new ways in sharing in the leadership practices. These complex sets of problems, problems faced through the COVID-19 pandemic, problems with no easy answers, are the kind of problems and challenges that K-12 leaders have been facing. Heifetz and Linsky (2004) asserted, "In this complex environment, it is more important than ever that educators at all levels exercise adaptive leadership" (p. 37). The leadership at Ulster BOCES purposefully created opportunities for staff and teachers to share their thoughts, questions and concerns during the COVID-19 crisis so that there was a two-way dialogue to problem solving. The superintendent would voice in meetings, "If anyone has a great idea, I am always interested in hearing about it, please share. My door is always open or you can message me anytime" (Personal communication, December 14, 2021). It was evident in these meetings that the leadership acknowledged that this time required all hands on deck and that the leaders did not hold all of the answers to fix it.

This pandemic halt not only culminated in remote learning and lockdowns, but it also forced leaders to take stock in exploring their lens of delivery. Ulster BOCES took the lead in recognizing that although it was still important to provide explicit instruction, skills, and knowledge, the priority for strengthening the focus on relationships and community needed to be the strong foundational practice that was prioritized by all.

Through the leadership team of Ulster BOCES, decisions were quickly made to adapt education to the technological shifts needed for both staff and students. This rapid swift change was made possible through clear communication and direction from leadership. These are examples where the leadership was able to use what Heifetz (1994) defined as solving technical problems. These are problems that have some known solutions and can be easily operationalized by all. However, it took adaptive skills to be able to think beyond the known solutions. Building upon the charge of Ulster BOCES's (n.d.) mission statement, the superintendent kept the community informed on a consistent timeline about the needs across the state that he gathered by attending ongoing meetings, and from his research which involved communications with his colleagues who are other thought leaders throughout the state. All pertinent details were readily shared with staff through ongoing email communications.

The leadership team was committed to supporting robust solutions using technology so that remote and hybrid learning opportunities were made readily available and the student-based programs were able to make radical education changes. Infrastructures were increased by leadership through licensing of updated technology systems for all classrooms within the Ulster BOCES student-based programs, allowing more fluidity of using Zoom for hybrid learning and instruction. The use of new tools provided the technology that included crystal clear enlarged view of the classrooms, dynamic audio ranges, and a camera that moved around the room to pick the continual fluidity of the classroom. Through the technology tools, families and students were provided with access to instruction as it was occurring, whether students were at their desks, or standing or moving around the room and not facing the camera. The technology used systems with which teachers had familiarity and they did not have to be concerned with learning new operating systems. This also provided provision of equity and access to education for those who could not physically return to the classroom when there were high infection rates. One example in the Ulster BOCES Career

and Technical programs was how technology provided instruction for what had previously required hands-on learning. Through the use of GoPro cameras, students were able to gain access to looking under cars during automotive labs and demonstrate cosmetology skills, and even the skills needed in culinary classes could be highlighted with technology. This approach provided not only access to instruction but equitable access to those who were unable to physically attend shop classes or labs. As posited by the superintendent, “We've been of the belief that teaching and learning should be the drivers of how technology is leveraged, not the other way round.” He further clarified and stated, “This technology...through the Zoom application made that possible” (Personal communication, December 13, 2021).

Even prior to the pandemic, Ulster BOCES had been a leader in technology solutions throughout the county, supporting innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Over the years, through its Instructional Services and Model Schools departments, Ulster BOCES has provided its county-wide public school districts opportunities for teachers, students, and administrators to be leaders in the field of education through the wide array of professional learning programs. As the Ulster BOCES deputy superintendent stated during the interview, “What supported our success was several key pieces. First, we used a crisis management perspective, having a single point of communication. The narrative was consistent, elevating having a single access point” (Personal communication, December 13, 2021). When asked the questions if there was a point throughout the year, or not, when leaders began to notice opportunities for new ways of thinking about education or was there a push to go back to the way things have always been, the superintendent responded:

In late April 2020, we began to think about planning for the 2020–2021 school year. We believed that we would continue to be remote or hybrid and as such we needed to refine our practices to take the best from lessons that we learned from the March 2020–June 2020 period to apply those lessons to a newer paradigm for that school year (2020–2021). We anticipated that there would always be a push back to return to the pre pandemic delivery systems. The pre-pandemic status quo. We sought, at least in our own programs, to refine our practices so that the issues, that the programmatic shortfalls, that were present before March 16, 2020, were addressed. Unfortunately, as a service agency, we could not influence many (or any) of our school districts to engage in a reimagining exercise. In short, we engaged in a reimagining exercise to create a better system and future, but we were alone in that endeavor and as such, and as a service agency, we were forced to succumb to the pressures of the status quo. (Personal communication, December 13, 2021)

As a BOCES agency, however, there were many opportunities to build the capacity to showcase possibilities during this time of crisis. When asked how instruction had shifted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the response from the deputy superintendent was:

I believe that teachers are continuing to use some of the techniques and strategies that worked so well for them during the past 20 months. I also believe that teachers are paying more attention to engagement and the emotional and psychological well-being of their students. In that way, instruction has shifted (Personal communication, December 13, 2021).

In regard to supporting technology, the deputy superintendent made a point to say:

Building capacity using technology platforms was not negotiable...We needed the best technology we could use, we needed the best air purifiers and the focus on education was not going to be about pedagogy. It has to be about emotional safety and leveraging the trust that was already built within the programs. (Personal communication, December 14, 2021)

The deputy superintendent further elaborated this and shared that when he was asked by staff, “How are we going to deliver instruction,” he answered them with the response and question in return, “How are we going to build our school and what do we want it to be?” (Personal communication, December 13, 2021).

Responding Versus Reacting

When a crisis occurs, it can either divert the conditions of what has been considered the normalcy, upending practices and ways of doing business, or it can paralyze the organization (Scharmer, 2018; Schein & Schein, 2017). With the latter, discourse for growth becomes frozen, and those in leadership become fixated by such crises only to perpetuate a reoccurring mindset, “We need to find a way to get back to normal.” Such leaders assume their mission is to solve the issue at hand for those who have become attached to the system and the way it has been. All around, people and systems have been trying to get back to normal. It is almost as if they are determined not to learn from the crisis or develop anything new or creative from the experience. This concept of “getting back to normal” is a common response from organizations that depend on operationalized procedures and policies to function. However, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the landscape of design thinking for many leaders in educational organizations, because suddenly, the concept of normal was lifted from the core ways of knowing and being. This crisis halted the status quo and remotely shifted the dialogue about education as a whole. This shift was brought on not only by the pandemic alone, but through the timing of a culture that was facing the strain of an over 400-year inequality race-based epidemic that polarized and shifted narratives in both organizational leadership, education, and government.

As exhausted teachers and leaders were faced with a need to continually pivot all aspects of education, the competitive battlefield of our school organizations faced increased pressures to meet performance demands from states and federal government, and it quickly became clear “doing business as usual to find a way back to normal” was no longer an option. That being said, the conversations among organizations of schools developed differently within each community, county, and state. The dialogue between most school leaders vacillated between trying to figure out what the best options for education during a pandemic should be, while also attending to the wellbeing and mental health of students and staff. With the structures of school organizations being fluid and more vulnerable during times of uncertainty, strong leadership was being called for to help communities cope and adapt to challenges of changing circumstances being faced by all.

Moving Beyond Crisis Thinking

The work being done at Ulster BOCES currently, and after these past years of pandemic and current COVID-19 variations, has been laying the groundwork for post pandemic recovery and rejuvenation of the life of education. As the deputy superintendent shared often with staff, “We are the ones who have to be the innovators, to be able to lay the foundation for moving forward out of this crisis” (Team meeting, January 20, 2022). The relationship of building social,

emotional, and culturally responsive practices has been expedited from the crisis of this pandemic. This is the type of thinking that digs deeper into my questions about exploring how environments can nurture human development and promote learning (negotiation of meaning, co-construction of knowledge, and new ways of being). When a superintendent explicitly defines the expectations for innovative ways of addressing a crisis, staff feel empowered to think outside of the box.

The deputy superintendent expressed that over the past few years, teachers were able to get a good glimpse into the lives of families through Zoom. Once we started to return back to classrooms this school year, the instructional pieces started to become more of a discussion; however, it became more complicated with the continual new strains of the COVID-19 virus, and the challenges around having to have more conversations about testing.

These were challenges not with academic testing, as found in past decades, but with COVID-19 variant testing and how to keep schools safe. The infrastructure piece became even more of a critical conversation. Throughout, Ulster BOCES leaders and staff were engaged in conversations that involved innovative thinking and began shifting the dialogue from crisis thinking to planning a future. An example of this was shared when this researcher asked the administration about the lessons learned. Some responses included,

The conversation about lessons learned and delivery of instruction (whether via Zoom, hybrid, or face to face—really “mask to mask”) included innovative thinking about how to leverage time. For example, leaders at Ulster BOCES started to look at how they might take one day of the week and make it an asynchronous day, where students would be provided ongoing lessons via technology, while teachers are provided time to think, plan and take action for the things they have little time for when they are teaching a full day. Colleges are able to do this! Why can’t we?

Additionally, it was stated,

The need to practice the intentional shift out of crisis management...the acknowledgement that we are just starting to see things, and to be honest that we don’t know it all. We need to continue observing and make honest assessments along the way. The expectations should not be to get it right, but to have leadership that is action centered. (Personal communication, December 13, 2021)

With leadership like this and communication ongoing, Ulster BOCES’ teachers and staff within all areas of the agency were able to focus more on building and maintaining relationships with each other, families, and the community at large. Often during the large Zoom meetings with the entire agency, staff, and administration, community-building activities took precedence over other agenda items. This priority for building community is something which both directors of the student-based programs spoke about during interviews. They discussed how the time allotted during this time of the pandemic was spent providing staff with:

Equity and a systemic approach to learning. Whether the issues at hand were related to special education, students in the Career and Technical programs, or students placed in advanced opportunities for higher ed learning, the approach taken at Ulster BOCES is to

ensure that everyone was...taking care of themselves and each other, heart to heart, face to face, mask to mask or on-line. (Personal communication, December 14, 2021)

Additionally, these leaders expressed, “It requires a strong leader who is able to recognize that mental health is a priority need during times of crisis” and to recognize what is meant by the metaphor, “we are leaning over the edge now” (Personal communication, December 13, 2021).

There is significant attention being placed on technology and wellness at Ulster BOCES. In the department of Instructional Services (IS), many of the professional learning webinars being offered to schools, shifted from a focus of standards work, to wellness, project-based learning and cycles of inquiry. As a team, the IS department recognized the need to begin to triage and support teachers, staff, and leaders throughout the county through compiled webinars of professional learning that offered solutions to healing, rather than fueling stress. In addition, the staff of specialists within Instructional Services implemented a practice of Wellness Friday mornings that provided a live, 10-minute Zoom webinar for guided breathing and meditation. The link to this training was shared throughout the BOCES agency, as well as to other leaders throughout the county.

From the perspective of shifting the narrative around building programs, Ulster BOCES invested time in training staff in the work of design thinking, through trainings offered from Stanford University. Bernstein and Linsky (2016) described how the use of design thinking supports leaders to be “better able to understand the people they are serving. They develop the courage to fail and make mistakes...and...design their way out of many (if not all) problems” (p. 6). These authors also propose that people who work with a design mind, “they become more optimistic, more collaborative, and more willing to take risks” (Bernstein & Linksy, 2016, p. 6). At Ulster BOCES, the shift from expecting staff to focus on instruction instead of wellbeing originated from the work of design thinking. The leadership was committed to meeting with staff to “build engagement by first building student relationships and creating a sense of purpose with them” (Personal communication, December 13, 2021).

This shift in the prior mentioned practices speaks directly to the levels of culture about which Schein and Schein (2017) wrote in defining a leader’s response to a crisis. These authors elaborated by further stating, “Crises that arise around the major external survival issues are the most potent in revealing the deep assumptions of the leaders” (Schein & Schein, 2017, p. 190). Scharmer (2016) also pointed to the challenges that crisis brings and postulates, “The crisis of our time isn’t a crisis of a single leader, organization, country or conflict” (p. 1). Scharmer (2016) further defines that crisis can be seen from the lens of “three major divides: The ecological divide...the social divide...and the spiritual divide” (p. 2). These divides are barriers between the disconnections of ourselves and nature, ourselves and others, and the divide between ourselves and self (Scharmer, 2018). The ecological divide within the first divide is related to what is known today as global warming. Scharmer (2018) described this crisis collectively and stated that, as a whole, humans create “outcomes that nobody wants” (p. 3). The second divide, the social structures, are formulated from varying structures. Though in the past, these may have had meaning to the times, these divisions and disparities are the parts of crisis that can strain schools and organizations who are unprepared to address a global pandemic, such as with COVID-19. The result of loss in structures and cultures as has been known, and can lead, “to eruptions of violence, hate, terrorism, and civil war” (Scharmer, 2018, p. 3). Given the nature of this COVID-19 crisis and the many factors surrounding it, this theory expanded upon further by Scharmer (2018), leaves wide margins for those organizations still trying to operate and maintain their past ways of being.

Schein (1984) emphasized these divides in relation to the three layers for depth of culture. Emphasized in his theory is the importance for deepening understanding around the many layers within a culture. Each level ranges in the way tangible outcomes are manifested within an organization, which include the artifacts that can be seen, heard, felt, and embedded deeply within the assumptions of a culture. On a surface level, these are the superficial artifacts such as architecture, technology, employee's stories, office layout, public documents, and materials (Schein, 1984). Though pieces of culture can be easily found, they are not as easy to interpret. Schein (1984) defines culture as the *what* and *how* of the organization; however, it does not get at understanding of the *why* of the organization. Schein described that to better understand the *why* of an organization requires digging into what he defined as the second layer, which involves the values. At Ulster BOCES, it was clear from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic that what was valued were relationships.

I had given thought about illuminating the importance of these values through the process of interviewing key stakeholders within an organization. However, these create the challenge of receiving answers that only speak to the espoused values, the areas in which the organization asserts as its reasons of behaviors, but in reality, the lived environment is very different. The experiences of working through this crisis at the Ulster BOCES organization was one which the lived experiences matched the espoused values. As an employee of the organization, I can attest to these lived experiences. The value of leadership that prioritized these values in every department was critical to how the organization was able to move forward during this pandemic crisis. Schein (1984) claims the importance of interpreting and understanding what the underlying assumptions might be within an organization are important to developing meaning within the culture. According to Schein (1984), it gets at the level of the third layer that lives in the unconscious of the group members; however, when analyzed, it helps to better determine how the members of a group might actually be perceiving, feeling, or thinking about a situation (Schein, 1984). These basic assumptions connect to the learned responses to how problems and crises are solved. The learned behaviors stemming from a value ultimately become transformed into underlying assumptions and beliefs about how problems should be solved (Schein, 1984). From the lens of shifting the narrative for how this BOCES addressed this pandemic, it was clear from the start there was a commitment from leadership to move beyond the past and push toward taking care of the soul of the staff and the community as a whole.

Administrators did not always see a clear path even though the COVID-19 pandemic yielded the need to take pause and reflect upon current practices, policies, procedures, and ways of being. In an interview, one administrator expressed the need for a clear path out of crisis thinking and when asked what might be done differently, they responded, "What would you do differently, looking back now that a year has passed?" the administrator responded, "I think it would be learning how to listen to myself differently and realizing how much I have to learn...and making sure that people are in the right seats." It was often communicated, even before the pandemic, that the work of this BOCES was to be a spotlight and beacon of light for demonstrating innovative practices that would assist school districts in moving beyond their traditional four walls. Reflecting upon all of this, I am reminded of the research from Laloux's (2014) work on transformation and their research on shifting the work toward living organizations. In *Reinventing Organizations*, Laloux (2014) referred to a people-centric process, streamlining the structures while helping to facilitate self-management and the active involvement of all involved. This way of thinking allows for an end product, according to Laloux's framework, to be able to work toward a more soulful,

productive, and purposeful way of living. The provision of these practices aligns with the mission statement of Ulster BOCES. As expressed clearly by deputy superintendent,

It is our goal to maximize student potential. We need to make sure that we get them out working and the way to do that is to give them work that they feel is meaningful to serve the widest communities possible. (Personal communication, February 13, 2022)

Results and Recommendations for Future Research

This research allows for further examination of the existing trends of leadership in schools during a time of crisis. It is possible to hope and postulate that, given the uncertainty of the topic, the methods of preparedness will continue to shift over time. However, it is through this deep study into understanding the actions of leaders during a crisis that school organizations can be better prepared for the future. It would behoove educational organizations to examine these types of soulful practices that can help shift schools to a new stage of consciousness. Though there is no “right way” to survive a crisis, there comes a time where a leader’s vision must center on thriving instead of surviving. If the goal is only survival, the conditions for leading an organization forward over time become stifled and limited. As an administrator and employee of the Ulster BOCES organization, I can attest to the importance of a thriving mindset versus just trying to survive whole. I continually pose the question: How can leaders make sure there are opportunities to thrive, survive, and revive their communities of learners?

Leaders must create the conditions and learning opportunities for all students, from preschool to high school. Currently, the Ulster BOCES leadership team offers services to connect with thought leaders around the world. The superintendent and deputy superintendent launched an innovative professional learning website, *Educator Edge*. It is the hope that through this work and the work of Instructional Services, whose mission is to support our county schools, school systems will grow exponentially. The mission and north star of Ulster BOCES is to create opportunities for learning that addresses equitable outcomes for groups with the greatest needs. The vision for moving forward must come from a reflective space that includes principles suggested from theoretical frameworks referenced in this paper (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009; Scharmer, 2009/2016, 2018; Schein, 1984; Schein & Schein, 2017).

The crisis of the COVID pandemic opened a gap where leaders are being called to examine their own practices, and learn new ways to help strengthen our communities’ moral compass. This is an invitation to deconstruct and reimagine education in a way that can exist among the diverse and divisive world in which we live. To reimagine education is a way forward, moving past crises, to evolve toward a kinder caring system that will expand learning for everyone. “The journey from being driven by past patterns and exterior forces...towards a place that allows us to shape the future from within ... we call the journey of leadership” (Scharmer, p. 355).

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