Establishing Connectivity and Trust in High Schools During COVID-19

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Abstract

Although meta-leadership was originally a framework used to examine healthcare leadership in crisis, it is also a valuable framework for educational leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused school leaders to endure a crucible of fire in every area, such as balancing children's safety with losses to education quality. The action plans of educators are frequently in flux as the pandemic evolves and unfolds. The continuation of this crisis has led to uncertainty, and at times, chaos.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how meta-leadership, with emphasis on connectivity, has been applied by educational leadership in American high schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. 2020 virtual commencement and graduation speeches of school leaders posted on YouTube were used as qualitative evidence to determine the presence and influence of meta-leadership in education. A qualitative case study approach was used to identify common themes of connectivity by school leaders in the San Jose, California, area. Study conclusions suggest a link between trust and connectivity; however, further research is recommended to examine the linkages between meta-leadership, trust, and connectivity within schools.

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, meta-leadership and its tenets have become more visible than ever before. Because of the pandemic, both positive and negative leadership traits in many sectors have surfaced. One industry that has been significantly affected by the current crisis is the education sector, K-12 schools. Administrators and educators alike were forced to adjust their plans, sometimes multiple times, to stay aligned with health and safety mandates. All the while, students' educational opportunities at the campuses were at stake.

Some questions currently being discussed in the arena of education and meta leadership are: how do educators keep children safe without compromising the quality of their education are topics of discussion among educators and parents alike? How does educational leadership interact with students, parents, and teachers before the crisis, and what is its effect on the current crisis environment? For example, does the application of meta-leadership in crisis allow a new level of trust and connectivity to emerge? Or is trust and connectivity more dependent on long-term leadership practices that were present before the crisis? Study conclusions showed connectivity and trust in educational leadership; however, leadership must create the proper conditions for both to successfully grow prior to a crisis. Recommendations for practitioners include school leaders promoting open communication and trust by adopting different practices based on the people they are leading. Recommendations for future research includes potential comparisons at all schools in the same socio-economic bracket to examine levels of trust and connectivity.

Meta-Leadership Framework

Meta-leadership is a framework developed by the faculty at the School of Public Health at Harvard University. The purpose of the framework is to equip leaders to direct and steer others during crises and emergencies (Marcus et al., 2015). Its core tenets are connectivity, leading down, leading up, leading across, and leading beyond. Meta-leadership is not a novel theory of leadership; instead, it is a framework that draws from and synthesizes established best practices from the existing canon of leadership. This framework's intended vision is to assist leaders, regardless of industry, helping them navigate incredibly complex situations during uncertain times (Marcus et al., 2015). Through this holistic lens, meta-leaders can galvanize connectivity by intentionally linking and leveraging the efforts between a wide range of stakeholders to achieve singularity in purpose and action (Marcus et al., 2020). Meta-leadership informs a

leader's effectiveness through three, distinct dimensions: the person, the situation, and connectivity.

Person

First and foremost, a leader is a human being. To lead others, a leader must possess a certain degree of self-awareness and emotional intelligence (Harms & Creed, 2010). Researchers have stated that "employee perceptions of supervisor effectiveness are strongly related to the EI of the supervisor" (Kerr et al., 2005, p. 275). The fields of psychometric analyses and neuroscience have contributed mostly to identifying the personal traits and tendencies possessed by successful leaders that are appreciated by followers. Followers look for authentic leaders who can resonate with them personally, especially during a time of crisis. During high-stress situations, developing and establishing trust is the critical component in connecting multiple stakeholder groups (Marcus et al., 2015). It is imperative that meta-leaders create, manage, and maintain trust through their personal interactions; otherwise, organizational cohesion will collapse (Kolditz, 2007). Self-awareness is a crucial leadership element for leading through fast-changing, emotionally charged situations. The human brain is wired to respond to a stressful stimulus by retreating, freezing, or fighting (Donahue, 2020). The Meta-leader must be self-aware while experiencing stressful situations to consciously move from the "Emotional Basement" and regulate their brain to make rational decisions through complex thinking (Marcus et al., 2015). The "emotional basement" is the part of the brain, the amygdala, that is involved with emotion, and it is the brain's trigger for responding to threats (Goleman, n.d.). Possessing the ability to lead followers out of the emotional basement and elevate the team's consciousness requires self-awareness, mental stamina, and a substantial degree of discipline (Marcus et al., 2015).

Situation

The second dimension of meta-leadership is identifying and addressing the context surrounding a time of change and crisis. The meta-leader must be capable in this dimension to identify and distinguish between the perceived and actual reality of the situation. Addressing and bridging the reality gap is essential to developing any response plan (Tyler, 2013). This is both an incredibly complex and challenging task, particularly so when working with multiple groups of stakeholders. The leader may or may not directly lead in addition to time constraints requiring near-immediate action (Marcus et al., 2015). During ever-evolving times of crisis, change, and challenge, leadership aims to arrive at the closest picture of objective reality and accurately convey it to all those concerned (Marcus et al., 2015). For example, for the personal dimension, this may be as simple as adjusting the tone of one's voice (Jong, 2020). For the situation dimension, research has shown that the manner in which followers perceive those in leadership is connected to more positive outcomes in crisis situations (Sakran et al., 2012).

Connectivity

Connectivity is the third and most dynamic dimension of meta-leadership. Without connectivity, trust can never be achieved to accomplish a common goal of strategically responding to a crisis (Tschannen-Moran, Gareis & Zepeda, 2018). This domain incorporates organizational leadership management, followership, influence beyond authority/power dynamics, inter-and intra-organizational relations, game theory, network theory, boundary-spanning, and systems theory (Marcus et al., 2015). Meta-leaders treat the organization and outside entities as an ecosystem to identify previously unconnected links that allow for agility and adaptability while leading through adversity (Marcus et al., 2011).

Connectivity consists of four facets of leadership: leading down, leading up, leading across, and leading beyond (Marcus et al., 2015). Meta-leaders must forge strategic connections to align

stakeholders, both inside and out of the organization (Marcus et al., 2011). It is only by navigating multiple environments and constraints that overarching objectives can be achieved (Marcus et al., 2015). This can be viewed as a social influence process that renders emergent coordination and change (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Table 1: The Four Facets of Connectivity outlines each direction of connectivity, established leadership related to each facet, and how meta-leaders apply them.

When examining the four facets of connectivity, trust plays a crucial role in understanding the effectiveness of meta-leadership. Connectivity relies on building with followers and outside stakeholders through authority and influence. A meta-leader can lead down and across using their assigned leadership position within the organization (Northouse, 2019). There is a need for emergent, relational-based leadership to develop influence, particularly when leading without authority. Furthermore, having open communication and a unifying vision are keys to building trust when leading up and leading beyond (Kotter, 2012). According to Harris & Jones (2020), during times of crisis, such as a pandemic, "a high degree of trust will be needed, as the collective glue, to ensure that issues are addressed collectively as they arise."

Table 1
The Four Facets of Connectivity in Meta-Leadership

Facet	Theory/Theories	Application in School Leadership
Leading Down	Authentic Leadership (George, 2004), Transformational Leadership (Burns, 1978)	● "Leader of Leaders"(Northhouse, 2019) ● Emphasis on trust and communication with followers ● Serves by example to inspire beyond/below their direct domain of influence.
Leading Up	Emergent Leadership	● Informs and influences their

	(Northouse, 2019), Influence, Bottom-Up Approach	superior(s) ● Creates "vertical connectivity" within the organization (Marcus et al., 2015). ● Uses emotional intelligence to build a strong interpersonal relationship with their superior(s)
Leading Across	Shared Leadership 8-Step Process for Leading Change (Kotter, 2010)	● Instructs, influences, and engages with multiple departments to create links. ● Knows when to keep departments siloed and when to link them for synergistic results. ● Identifies commonalities of stakeholder groups to leverage capacity.
Leading Beyond	Relational Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006)	● Lack of assigned power/authority ● Integrates objectives, aligns motivations for cooperation and identifies risks and rewards. (Marcus et al., 2015).

Meta leadership in education

Because meta-leadership was initially intended to address crisis management in the healthcare sector, its application to the field of education is relatively recent. In the last ten years, research and application of the meta-leadership framework has made some noteworthy assertions regarding followers' responses to leadership in crisis. Academic leaders have a crucial role in leading their institutions through crises and emergencies (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). From a practitioners' view, the groundwork should already be laid out by campus leaders well in advance of any unforeseen event by establishing a culture that builds trust, communication, collaboration, and shared leadership (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). According to Fernandez & Shaw (2020), this proactive approach allows a school a greater capacity to handle times of crisis. The environment created by leadership is a predictor of if a school is ready when disaster strikes. Hasel (2013) concurs by stating that best practices indicate leaders should prepare an

environment with support mechanisms and responses during times of stability to ensure success during periods of unpredicted instability. However, additional research is needed to explore the mediating roles between leaders and followers during both turbulent and stable situations (Hasel, 2013). Other literature confirms that trust is a crucial factor in the relationship of school leaders and stakeholders before, during, and after a crisis.

Trust

Typically, in the period of time immediately after a tragedy hits, trust perceptions by parents and teachers under school leaders reach an all-time low--due primarily to a lack of honesty, benevolence, and openness by leadership (Sutherland 2017). This issue would be likened to connectivity between leaders and followers compounded with an uncertain situation under the meta-leadership frame. According to Tschannen-Moran, Gareis & Zepeda (2018), "…successful schools have higher degrees of trust among its members" and "…the ability…to trust…creates the context for positive growth and change and for effective judgments and decisions." (p.92). School leaders should set a tone that positively influences how teachers respond to one another, students, and the entire community (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). If a tone of trustworthiness in interpersonal staff relationships is vital when circumstances are "normal," then its importance is as critical, if not more so, during times of crisis. The literature supports the leading down facet of connectivity within meta-leadership. Leaders should continuously serve by example to inspire trust beyond their direct domain of influence.

From a system-wide and organizational standpoint, trust grows and builds between individuals with subsequent and consistent interactions. Daly (2009) states that building trust is both an interactive and reciprocal process created through smaller, frequent interactions by individuals but ultimately affects the institution at every level. This sense of collective trust is a product of

social relations provided by regular opportunities to continuously gain rapport in every direction

(Daly, 2009). Thus, there is no time for an initial establishment of trust in times of crisis within

that environment of uncertainty. Trustworthiness is an element of character. Trust, as a character

attribute, must have already been validated before the onset of the crisis. This speaks to the first

domain of meta-leadership: the person. Schoenberg (2005) states that "crisis management is a

test of the quality and character of leadership as much as it is a test of skill."

Leadership style within the framework of meta-leadership

Leadership style within the framework of meta-leadership is another consideration. Meta-

leadership builds upon authentic, transformational, and relational leadership style, with little

credence given to more authority-driven leadership styles such as transactional leadership (see

Burns, 1978). This may be mainly in part to meta-leaders using their authority to influence trust

and communication instead of a carrot-and-stick approach. The literature alludes to the effect of

transactional leadership in underperforming schools. According to Smith & Bell:

In areas of high social and economic deprivation which are often typified by under-performing
schools, external pressures on heads and schools can lead heads to adopt transactional leadership
which is far less likely to produce much-needed school improvement than is transformational
leadership (2011).

The literature confirms both a lack of trust in leadership due to the absence of connectivity and

transformational leadership effectiveness in this scenario.

It is also worth noting that emotional intelligence and people skills are a vital component of

meta-leadership. Harms & Creed (2010) suggest that emotional intelligence influences the

actions of a leader. The emotional intelligence elements of empathy, self-confidence, and self-

awareness serve as the foundation of transformational leadership (Harms & Creed, 2010). Self-

awareness and understanding how one's brain is functioning during a crisis situation are essential

skills for meta-leaders. The key is that when faced with a stressful situation, the leader must

escape the emotional basement while leading those out as well so that collaborative problem-solving and higher-level thinking can take place. Emotional intelligence is exemplified by showing empathy and communicating throughout a high-stakes situation.

The literature asserts that two essential steps for leaders responding to a crisis are showing concern and communicating (Smith & Riley, 2012). Open and genuine demonstrations of concern for others' welfare can cement powerful bonds between management and employees and go a long way towards resolving a crisis (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Leadership in times of crisis must not be the responsibility of one individual at the top. Harris (2020) alludes to the importance of collaboration and distributing leadership and notes that school leaders need to "filter out the noise" in times of crisis, be collaborative, and "focus on distributive leadership practices" to ensure that work is done. During times of challenge, leaders must embed and sustain a collaborative culture that involves creating connected networks among people (Harris, 2020). This further cements meta-leadership's emphasis on connectivity and leading both vertically and horizontally. It is also necessary to draw attention to the ability of a leader to model a specific emotional response that serves to best guide the group forward during times of crisis. (Humphrey, 2002, p. 498). According to Humphrey (2002), leaders help unify a group and increase its collective morale "by creating shared emotional experiences" (p. 498). Thus, how a leader acts, connects, and appears to those who follow, is important.

Context

At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to develop, with vaccinations currently available to all citizens. The researchers sought to observe meta-leadership at five high schools during a mandated stay-at-home order in May and June of 2020 in San Jose, California, a diverse metro area within the region known as Silicon Valley. In this case study, the five schools

examined are from various regions within the city. Three are private institutions and two are public schools.

The schools studied are a heterogeneous group, with demographics for each school displaying diversity in ethnicity, net income, standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college acceptances. Despite the schools being unique from one another, they all share the common meta-leadership dimension of the situation. All schools experienced stay-at-home orders from the state and local authorities and a shift from physical to virtual learning. Each had to adhere and comply with continuously changing legal and health regulations at government agencies' direction. All schools and their stakeholders experienced many changes and challenges due to the crisis caused by COVID-19. The conclusion to the 2019-2020 school year, for all these institutions, was a virtual graduation for the class of 2020 that was made available online.

Methodology

The research methodology embraced a qualitative stance. By adopting a social constructivist worldview, the researchers seek an understanding of the world in which they work and live (Creswell & Cresswell, 2018). Having experienced the COVID-19 era, the researchers seek to make sense of school leadership during a time of crisis. The methods of this study rely on textual analysis and interpretation from graduation speeches and crisis response plans.

Target Population

The target population for the study was high schools throughout San Jose, California, who posted an online graduation ceremony for the graduating class of 2020 and posted their COVID-19 crisis response plans to their website. To ensure a broad population representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds, private, public, and secular schools were selected for the study. The

schools' varied in their location, which included the more affluent to middle-class suburbs in West San Jose, to the more economically-challenged area of East San Jose. The main criteria for the schools in the study were:

1.   The school must be a private or public high school located in San Jose, California.

2.   The school must have a 2020 graduation commencement speech available for viewing online.

3.   The school must have a crisis response plan available for viewing online.

Data Collection

Data was taken from the schools' crisis response plans and their high school graduation speeches, which were openly available online. The graduation speeches were publicly available and found on the YouTube and Vimeo platforms. The researchers transcribed the graduation speeches, which were generally between 5 to 10 minutes in length, and delivered by the school leaders. Next, the crisis response plans were downloaded from each school's website to use as a secondary source of data and information.

Data Analysis

The researchers used the software *HyperResearch* to code the data within the transcripts. The speeches were then coded using the four facets of connectivity, the situation, and the person as themes with unique codes rendered under each theme. The codes and themes are based on the meta-leadership work of Marcus (2015) and his colleagues. A total of six themes and twenty codes comprises the master codebook (Figure 1). Using the software, each speech was coded and verified by the researchers to ensure consistency, validity, and internal reliability. The researchers then analyzed the results of each speech and compared all speeches to find additional

commonalities. This was achieved through frequency reports, advanced filters, word counters, and other data tools used for analysis.

Figure 1

Codebook and Sample Transcript
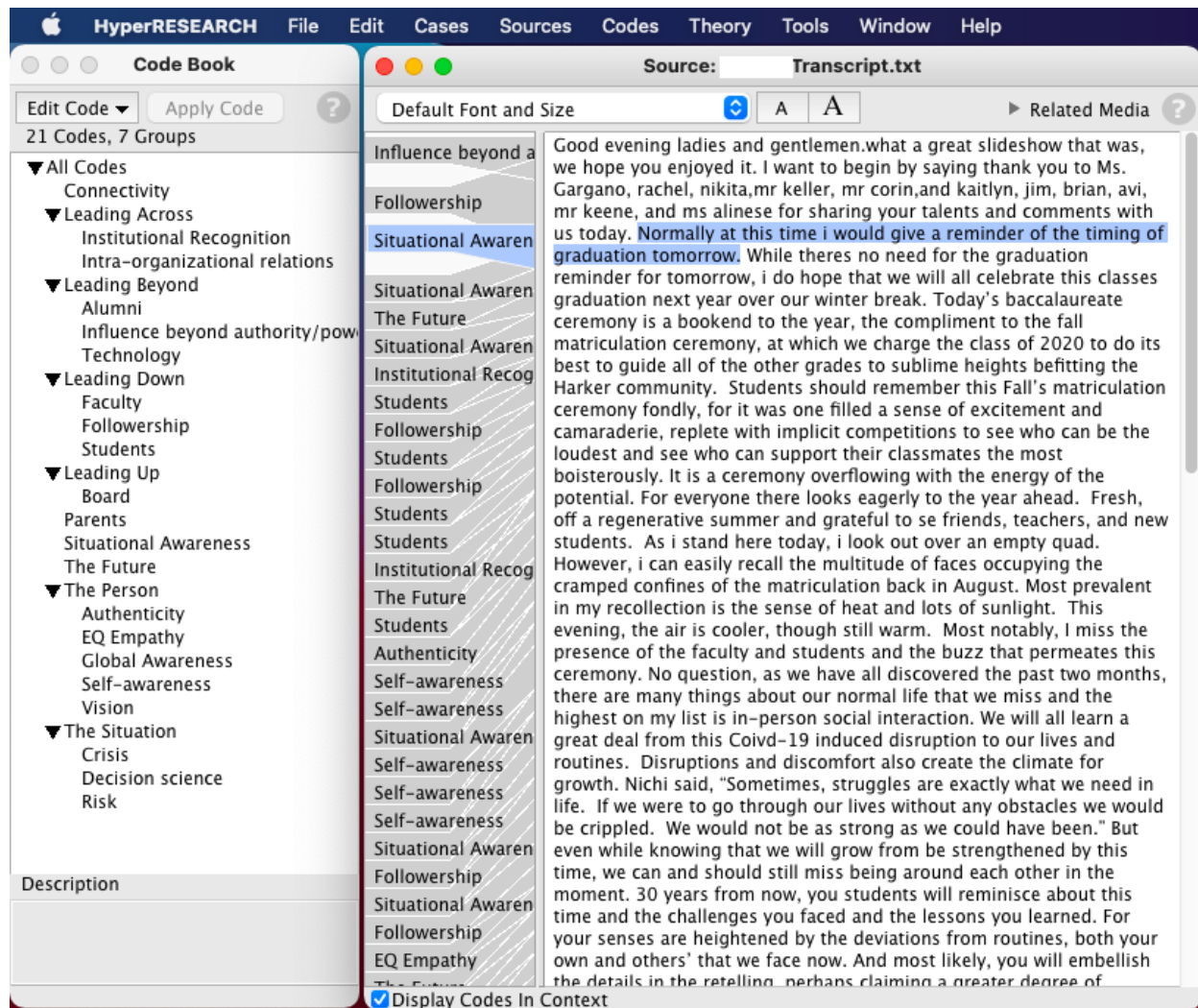
Results

The results of our study show that the meta-leadership framework can be useful to describe the connectivity and trust of educational leaders in the K-12 sector. Specific words that stood out in the coding process embodied the meta-leadership framework in education. Both the word and

code "students" was the most prevalent among the artifacts, being coded a total of 113 times, and appearing 93 times in text. This code is related to the leading down sub theme of connectivity.

The theme of connectivity was the most heavily coded element across all speeches and transcripts, more than doubling the total of the other two themes of the person and the situation. Connectivity accounted for 58.4% of codes, followed by 23.5% of codes for the Person, and 18.1% of codes relating to Situation. All four facets of connectivity emerged, however, leading beyond and leading across were scant in comparison to leading up and leading down. Within the theme of connectivity, leading down was most prevalent with 317 instances of coding, while the situation and the person was coded 37 and 105, respectively. This data suggests that the school leaders spent the majority of their speeches attempting to build trust with their audience through connectivity.

An additional element of the Person, which accounted for 8.7% of all codes is empathy via emotional intelligence. As mentioned in the review of the literature, leaders build trust by connecting on an emotional level and showing that they care. Thus, the code of EQ empathy also lends support to the possible link between connectivity and trust.

Figure 2   **Figure 3**

Code Frequency Report   *Word Count from Artifacts*

Discussion

At the beginning of the process, the researchers aimed to code the three dimensions of meta-leadership: person, situation, and connectivity. However, it was clear from the onset of the research that the situation of COVID-19 was a shared experience, and it would be difficult to identify and evaluate leaders as people without an interview. Simultaneously, the literature process guided the inquiry towards the element of trust within the dimension of connectivity. Thus, it was determined to focus on the four facets of connectivity while analyzing the data, in the hopes of seeing trust emerge as a singular component.

It is clear after completing the coding process that educators are, indeed, meta-leaders and connect across all four facets with their stakeholder groups, with emphasis placed on more hierarchical stakeholders. The single most important stakeholder group in education is students. This is indicated by leading down the largest number of codes. As expected, leaders attempted to make connections with students more than any other group by a significant margin.

Leaders also attempted to make connections to other stakeholder groups such as parents, teachers, and alumni in their speeches and response plans; however, their primary focus was on students. By making mentions of internal and external stakeholders, this is an attempt by leaders to establish trust in their educational community. Hughes & Kwok (2007) state that parental participation in a child's education, whether at home or at school, leads to higher student achievement levels, increased motivation to achieve. They further posit that students whose parents have warm, mutual, respectful relationships with teachers are better adjusted socially, behaviorally, and emotionally (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). According to Gordon & Louis (2009), there has been a shift in recognizing families and community members as direct clients of the schools' services (p.4). Gordon & Louis (2009) continue by stating, "that the value of creating participatory structures in schools lies in its potential for increasing parent and community members' sense of engagement in children's education" (p. 4). Considering the leader/parent or leader community relationship is another contributing element to connectivity and trust for school leaders. This is a key takeaway and of particular interest during the current pandemic; especially considering the manner in which educators and parents connect and engage when students are not onsite in classrooms. However, further research is needed to substantiate a link between the four facets of connectivity and how leaders establish trust with various stakeholders before, during, and after a crisis or emergency.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Future recommendations for practitioners are to ensure that different leadership practices are employed with those within their sphere of influence. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution. For example, open forum meetings with staff might increase trust and connectivity; however, that same approach may not work for interactions with parents. Parents may respond more favorably

to authentic partnerships with leadership; and daily interactions between students and leadership may prove more beneficial to increasing connectivity and trust. Additionally, school leadership should explore boundary spanning with outside agencies and public services.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is needed to compare trust and connectivity in both public and private schools in greater detail. More research examining schools in the same socioeconomic bracket to understand levels of trust and connectivity–all things being equal–is also warranted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, meta-leadership in education reveals the emergence of connectivity and trust, but only occurs if the educational leadership creates an environment for both to flourish prior to any crisis. The researchers' analyses showed that school leaders embody the characteristics of meta-leaders by being empathetic, situationally aware, and by establishing connection with others in four distinct directions. While the results of the research point towards a link of trust and connectivity, opportunity certainly exists for further investigations of meta-leadership, trust, and connectivity within schools. Research into the area of trust and connectivity will only become more important going forward, particularly due to the increase in remote learning and virtual interactions between educators, parents, students, and school administration as a result of the pandemic.

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