Navigating Turbulent Waters: Leading One Manitoba School in a Time of Crisis

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed the practice of school leadership, requiring greater flexibility, creativity, and innovation. Guided by institutional theory, this paper suggests that leadership adaptations are influenced by environmental pressures such as coercive (e.g., from governmental or regulatory agencies), mimetic (e.g., attempts to emulate best practices from other schools), and normative pressures (e.g., professional standards endorsed by professional societies or unions). By using a qualitative co-constructed autoethnographic approach (See Kempster & Iszatt-White, 2012), the paper presents the Covid-19 timeline in Manitoba, identifying stakeholders and associated environmental pressures. It also features the personal leadership adaptations experienced by a school principal (Susan). The findings suggest that coercive pressures are mostly associated with creativity and inventive leadership practices. Mimetic pressures may lead to copying behaviours, and normative pressures are associated with enhanced foundational knowledges, all depending on contextual factors. The findings also highlight the significant emotional and physical toll the pandemic has taken on school principals.

Keywords: leadership adaptations, environmental pressures, COVID-19, Manitoba public schools

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed the practice of school leadership (Harris, 2020; Jarvis & Mishra, 2020; Pollock, 2020). In crisis, leadership competencies arise that are fundamentally different from those required under normal circumstances. Decisions directly affecting the health and well-being of a whole school community need to be made quickly and under pressure, requiring decisiveness, flexibility, and innovation (Netolicky, 2020; Van Wart, 2005). School leaders are expected to use unconventional approaches to solve problems emerging from unfamiliar circumstances (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020). Uncertainty and unpredictability are doubled by various environmental pressures that differ depending on local contexts (Burch et al., 2020; Pollock, 2020). These differences may involve conflicting or absent government responses, changing staffing situations, and varying degrees of vulnerability emerging from inadequate infrastructure and socio-economic differences among student groups (Harris & Jones, 2020; Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Virella, 2020). The sensitivity and unfamiliarity encountered in crisis test leaders' knowledge, skills, and overall leadership capacity.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there seems to be a general assumption that school leaders naturally possess expertise and control over situations that can be characterized as ambiguous, complex, and constantly evolving (Harwati, 2013; Netolicky, 2020). However, recent literature on crisis leadership has pointed to the following problems: 1) a lack of preparedness among school administrators (Jarvis & Mishra, 2020; Thornton, 2021; Tourish, 2020); 2) a dearth of empirical knowledge on how to lead in a time of pandemic (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2020; Harris, 2020; Smith & Riley, 2012); and 3) a need for different theorizations, as mainstream leadership theories are not applicable in situations of radical uncertainty (Tourish, 2020). There are a few emerging insights that provide a starting point for examining school leadership practices in a global pandemic. For example, Netolicky (2020) observed an increase in leaders' individual decision-making autonomy to make deliberate choices and take innovative

risks for their schools. Harris and Jones (2020) and Pollock (2020) suggested the importance of context in pandemic leadership responses. Leaders benefit from establishing and sustaining a collaborative organizational culture through networking practices (Azorin, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Kidson et al., 2020). Hemmer and Elliff (2020) described how new skillsets such as effective communication, creativity to work around inadequate infrastructure, building new networks of collaboration, and enhancing advocacy skills can emerge from navigating crisis. While crisis may bring instability and change, it may also allow for quick, professional growth. However, these anecdotal findings suggest that there is a pressing need to empirically examine local leadership practices during a global pandemic. Examining environmental uncertainties during a pandemic can help us understand how rapid leadership adaptations may contribute to the success of organizational survival and adaptations when time is of the utmost importance. Furthermore, there is a dire need to better understand the array of contextual factors that may impact the nature of changes in leadership in times of crisis.

Beginning of March 2020, Manitoba public schools closed their doors and turned to remote learning in an effort to contain the spread of the virus. As COVID-19 continued to ebb and flow, Manitoba public schools adhered to colour-coded restrictions based on the level of risk assessed by the Manitoba Public Health (Government of Manitoba, 2020a). Since then, with the shifts in response levels, public health policies and divisional directives have frequently changed, resulting in a vast number of uncertainties and constant reorganization of school activities. This situation has been complicated by the fact that there have been limited directions given by the provincial government, whose jurisdictional responsibility is to regulate activities in the K–12 sector. This absence of leadership has left educational administrators across the province relying upon their best guesses in contemplating what steps to take. Depending on the local contexts vis-à-vis infection rates, the pressures on leadership have been different, but there has been a universal expectation that school principals should adapt quickly in order to offer uninterrupted, quality education.

In this paper, we examine the relationship between the context-specific environmental pressures and leadership adaptations through the experiences of a school leader in a Manitoba public school. By adopting a co-constructive autoethnographic research design, the lived experience of one school principal (the author of the paper Susan) has been situated and weaved within the literature and theory around leading schools in crisis by the university researcher (the author of the paper (Merli). The research questions that guide this paper are: 1. *What key environmental pressures have triggered adaptations for school administrators in Manitoba?* 2. *How have these pressures impacted administrators' leadership practice?* The paper aims to contribute to more nuanced perspectives on pivotal leadership changes and to share potential insights into how context-specific leadership adaptations occur during times of extreme uncertainty and how these adaptations may be essential for determining the survival and success of school operations when leaders are faced with a crisis. We propose that the nature of adaptations is dependent on the type of pressure leaders face.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework draws from the tenets of crisis leadership literature and institutional theory. A school crisis is defined as a relatively unpredictable event that seriously disrupts the stability and welfare of a school community (Brock, 2002). The work of school administrators is characterized by complexity and pressures as they navigate financial, legal, curricular, and political challenges on a daily basis (Noppe et al., 2013). However, in crisis-related situations, there are additional factors at play – direct threat to the well-being of the school community, extreme unpredictability of events, high levels of emotions at play, and limited warning. There is an urgency to take immediate action and bring things back to normal. In these situations, leadership competencies emerge that feature different skillsets than in normal situations, requiring self-efficacy, decisiveness, creativity, and flexibility (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Moilanen, 2015; Van Wart, 2005). Most of the crisis leadership literature has looked at leadership adaptations in relation to the lifecycle of a crisis in a linear progression, assuming predictability of events (see Coombs, 2014; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009). Scholars have tended to list stages, steps, or phases of a crisis and to analyze organizational responses. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that health-related crises may unfold in a highly irregular manner, wherein different waves of the pandemic have prompted a variety of government restrictions, a return to new lockdowns, and stricter constraints. Evidence from

previous studies has demonstrated that effectiveness in managing organizations is closely related to external environmental factors (Burch et al., 2020; Miller, 2018; Pollock, 2020; Smith & Riley, 2012). This applies to school contexts, as responses to a pandemic are interconnected with government policies and health regulations across the country, as well as navigating financial constraints and parents' reactions – which are all external factors. As such, there is a need to move away from the phase-focused crisis leadership approaches and look for theoretical lenses that help to unpack the external factors in more detail.

Institutional theory is helpful here as it focuses on the impact of environmental pressures without assuming a linear progression of events. Institutional theory argues that organizations under strong pressures are pushed to adopt the norms, values, and ideologies of their external stakeholders in order to survive, thereby yielding to the expectations of key stakeholders and legitimizing their own formal structure (Ashworth et al., 2005; Caravella, 2011; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Institutional theory suggests that organizations, including schools, are influenced by three main forces resulting from external pressures - coercive pressures (e.g., from governmental or regulatory agencies), mimetic pressures (e.g., attempts to emulate other organizations), and normative pressures (e.g., professional standards endorsed by professional communities or certification agencies) (Caravella, 2011; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It also suggests that pressures faced by organizations may lead to homogeneity, referred to as "institutional isomorphism," which would explain similarities in leadership practices across schools. While the education system has always operated under isomorphic pressures to maintain stability and legitimacy, the COVID-19 pandemic has overturned the way schools have traditionally functioned, bringing forward unique, contextually grounded responses.

Coercive isomorphism occurs as a result of both indirect and direct environmental pressures, including the reliance of an organization on other organizations (e.g., health and safety regulations), social and cultural expectations within the organization itself (e.g., internal behaviours such as persuasion), and governmental or regulatory agencies (Ashworth et al., 2005; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The role of coercive forces highlights the impact of political, rather than technical, influences on organizational change. These coercive pressures imposed by authorities force organizations to comply in order to ensure their sustainability. In Canadian school contexts, coercive pressures are associated with provincial government, which has constitutional jurisdiction over education. These pressures suggest a rapid pace for leadership adaptations within rigid boundaries. *Mimetic isomorphism* occurs when organizations, under ambiguous conditions, attempt to mimic or emulate other organizations' practices and structures (Ashworth et al., 2005). Despite a lack of empirical evidence of the performance outcomes of new processes or systems, organizations will continue to copy other organizations deemed to be being successful or legitimate, to avoid uncertainty (Burch et al., 2020). In school contexts, mimetic pressures are associated with learning from the best practices of other schools and the leadership adaptations of other school leaders. These pressures may suggest the incidental nature of adaptations. Finally, *normative isomorphism,* focuses on "professionalization as the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 152). Adhering to organizational norms that result from professional standards endorsed by professional communities, such as formal education and accredited certifications, legitimizes occupational independence and relevance (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In school contexts, these normative pressures may come from teachers' societies and teacher unions that determine the standards for a profession. Normative pressures motivate leaders to revisit the core values associated with being an educator and suggest adaptations driven by ideological beliefs.

While institutional isomorphism seeks to explain similarity, there is an agreement that organizational responses can lead to different outcomes. Oliver's (1991) seminal work added an important perspective to institutional theory. It showed the difference in organizational responses and drew attention to the significance of social and cultural aspects in organizational environments. Oliver suggested that, although environmental pressures may be similar and interact with each other, their precursors and outcomes tend to be distinct from one another depending on the context. In addition, there is a role for active agency and resistance in organization–environment relations. In this paper, we are aiming to trace the emergence of both a particular type of environmental pressure as well as the active agency of a school administrator in leading a school as a response to those pressures.

Methods

Methodologically, the paper uses a qualitative co-constructed autoethnographic approach (Boyle & Parry, 2007; Kempster & Iszatt-White, 2012; Kempster & Stewart, 2010) to document and examine the experiences of one school leader during a pandemic. Autoethnography refers to an approach that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experiences in order to understand and explain a cultural phenomenon (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2006). Scholars have pointed out that the intensely emotional and personal nature of autoethnography can impact the sensemaking of the reported events (Boyle & Parry, 2007). Furthermore, the dilemma of insider/outsider, whereby one person experiences difficulties due to their dual positioning in autoethnography, has been documented (Maydell, 2010). In co-constructed autoethnography, one researcher reflects on their personal experience, creating a narrative that is then interrogated and developed with the assistance of the other researcher(s) (Kempster & Iszatt-White, 2012; Kempster & Stewart, 2010). The role of the other researcher is to help support reflexive self-evaluation and facilitate the critical meaning-making process, relying on literature, theory, and experience. Co-constructed autoethnography uses back-and-forth movement between experiences and literature, examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of those experiences while negotiating the insider-outsider view. It is a dialogic approach that helps to illuminate experiences by probing with related theory in a deeper reflexive manner (Cunliffe, 2002). We met several times over the fall-winter of 2020/2021, where Susan shared her personal experiences from the field, expressing how her leadership practice had changed due to the pandemic. What started as a series of casual conversations developed later into a research paper. With specifying questions from Merli and linking Susan's experiences to theoretical literature around leadership adaptations, a story started to unfold. It became clear that school leaders were negotiating various environmental pressures that had an impact to their practice. Together forming a researcher-practitioner duo, we started to investigate these connections further, building on each other's' strengths and making an argument that is grounded in the theoretical literature and illustrated with personal experience.

Data for this autoethnographic study consisted of formal documents gathered by the researchers, self-observations, recollection of conversations with colleagues and parents, and revisiting notes made during the time period. The documents gathered consisted primarily of government communication shared with Manitoba school administrators between March 2020 – June 2021 and divisional pandemic planning publications during the three COVID-19 waves. Individual emotional responses to various environmental pressures were composed of as recollections from memory. The overarching lens for examining the data was a change in leadership practice resulting from environmental pressures. Leadership practice is examined in this paper through two fundamental dimensions: a) at the individual level, awareness of one's personal attributes, disposition, and resilience that help to manage stress in crisis situations; b) at the social level, one's awareness of the environment and people that enable one to develop collaborative relationships at work (Wang, 2021). This approach highlights the self and interpersonal leadership skills that are needed in order to deal with instructional, administrative, legal, managerial, and day-to-day educational and non-educational tasks in order to provide direction, implement plans, and motivate people in one's school (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Wang et al., 2021). The methods of analysis employed in this autoethnographic study combined two elements: introspection and cultural analysis. Introspection has been described in terms of zooming in on personal, embodied experiences (at the individual level), and cultural analysis has been described as zooming out on wider cultural concepts and frameworks (at the social level) (Hokkanen, 2017). As Hokkanen (2017) noted, introspection and cultural analysis are not single steps in a linear process of analysis but practices that are carried out iteratively. In this study, the field data from personal notes, policy documents, and divisional communication stored in folders were coded based on a deductive coding method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Burnard, 1991; Creswell, 1998). The structure of analysis was operationalized based on previously formed categories (three pressure types: coercive, mimetic, and normative). All data were initially coded in correspondence with these three categories, gradually adding sub-codes while more specific and nuanced data were added. In parallel, the cultural analysis was conducted by the focal researcher's continual assessment and reflection upon her different social identities and roles as a school leader. Initial interpretations of the data were shared with the other researcher, and together we clarified the progression of events and accompanying emotions and leadership changes. Several sessions of dialogical conversations took place between the

two researchers, in which discussion pointers and clarifying questions were used in order to recollect the trajectory of the events, specify details, and finalize the written narrative. Recollection of individual emotional reactions was part of the introspective analysis. Clarifying emotions took place via focused conversations between the two researchers with guiding questions helping to recollect the memories. These conversations were not transcribed, but rather detailed notes were made during the sessions to be able to incorporate this data into the narrative.

Co-constructed autoethnography was an appropriate method for analyzing leadership changes because, first, it focuses on highly personalized data, revealing rich information that a researcher is intimately familiar with. This approach enables the provision of first-hand insights into the phenomenon but also assesses it in a critical, theoretically grounded way. Second, this method brings forward school leaders' voices, inner conflicts, and struggles. As such, it helps to directly inform and educate the readership on the dynamics emerging from these experiences. Reading about lived experiences of a cultural or social phenomenon, readers can become aware of realities that have not been thought of before; they may start seeing similarities to or differences from their own lives. Experiences like this would be particularly important for other school leaders reading this paper. Third, co-constructed autoethnography is committed to clarifying theoretical understandings of a broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). Applying reflective introspection and cultural analysis as our methods for data analysis allowed us to examine subjective feelings that revealed important cultural assumptions and tacit understandings of leadership adaptations while interpreting those practices in the context of social settings – schools.

Findings

The Context of Manitoba and One Public School in Winnipeg

In 2019/2020, there were 37 school districts/divisions[1] in Manitoba, governed by school boards (Government of Manitoba, 2020b). There was a total of 186,372 students enrolled in 690 public schools (Government of Manitoba, 2020c). The smallest Manitoba school division serves a few hundred students, while the largest serves over 30,000. According to Wallin and Newton (2014), about 43% of children in Manitoba attend rural, remote, and/or northern public schools. Manitoba has the largest percentage of Indigenous peoples across the Canadian provinces (Statistics Canada, 2016). Indigenous children and youth comprise an important portion of the population in schools, with significant disparities in high school graduation rates between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers (see Bartlett & Freeze, 2019). School boards play a central role in policy development and implementation, a role which was exercised consistently during the pandemic.

The findings suggest a variety of adaptations driven by context-specific environmental pressures in leadership practice. The number of COVID-19 cases in the province has triggered diverse pressures initiated by the various stakeholders, including the provincial government and public health officials but also school divisions, divisional administration, teacher unions, parents, and community members (see Table 1). The following sections examine the lived experiences of one school principal (a graduate student and a co-author of this paper, Susan) in her efforts to effectively support staff, students, and families, while also dealing with the inherent dilemmas and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic spanning from March 2020 to June 2021.

Susan, who has 13 years of experience as a teacher and six years of experience as an administrator in a Manitoba public school system, reflects the following: In my capacity as a principal of a Winnipeg inner-city elementary school with approximately 250 ethnically diverse students living in high poverty areas, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of changing public health directives in the province on teaching and learning. I have also experienced how the physical and emotional safety and well-being of the school community have been affected, which has influenced educational priorities. In some cases, families decided to relocate to safer areas, removing their children from school altogether. COVID-19 disrupted the school nutrition programming that many vulnerable students relied upon, such as breakfast and morning snacks, which in turn put a greater strain on home food security. Additionally, parents/guardians scrambled to find appropriate childcare as many continued to work in essential services. Overall, there was an increased feeling of anxiety and stress as families and teachers dealt with the chal-

[1] In Manitoba, the geographical areas are mostly referred to as *school divisions*, which have the same meaning as *districts*.

lenges presented by the pandemic. As the administrator of a school, it became my role and responsibility to manage the directives from public health and the school division, while also supporting the school community with their mental well-being.

Table 1

General COVID-19 Timeline in Manitoba: Identifying Stakeholders and Associated Environmental Pressures Experienced by One School Principal

Date	Environmental Pressures		
	Coercive	**Mimetic**	**Normative**
March–May 2020: Province suspends schools indefinitely			
March – May 2020	• Remote learning (government, Public Health) • Physical distancing (government, Public Health) • Daily work summaries required (divisional admin)	• Distribution of technology devices (divisional admin) • Sharing of resources, co-creating and delivering printed packages (teachers) • Additional support services, e.g., food hampers, school visits (school admin)	• Professional development (PD) training on the use of online platforms (teaching staff, school admin) • Privacy concerns (teacher unions) • Virtual PLCs in grade groups (teaching staff, school admin)
June 2020: Province of Manitoba reopens schools partially			
June 2020	• Limited student access to schools for 1:1 learning & assessments (divisional policy) • Physical distancing, non-medical masks required (Public Health)	• Defining phased reopening (divisional admin) • Grade 6 graduation held outdoors (divisional admin)	• Report card writing sessions, recovery learning plans (teaching staff, school admin)
August 2020: Province of Manitoba operating at level Yellow (caution)			
August – October 2020	• Masks mandatory (government, Public Health, Divisions) • Cohorts of students (divisional admin) • Staggered entry/ exit plans (school admin) • Hand hygiene (school admin) • Increased cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces and common areas (divisional admin)	• School reopening plans (school admin) • School screening processes (school admin) • Flexible recess (school admin) • Establish two-way communication with the school community (school admin)	• 3 PD days prior to reopening of school – focus on COVID protocols, blended in-class and remote learning plans, mental health and well-being strategies (divisional/ school admin) • Webinar on virtual learning platforms (divisional admin) • Compliance with collective agreements for teachers (unions)

November 2, 2020–March 2021: Winnipeg Metro Region in Manitoba operating at level Red (critical) October 26, 2020: Schools move to Orange (restricted)			
November – December 2020	• Physical distancing of 2 metres (divisional admin) • In-class learning continues (divisional admin)	• Moving extra classroom furniture into storage pods, re-purposing common areas into classrooms (school admin) • Reassignment of staff (school admin)	• PD sessions on school mentorship (divisional admin) • Code Red synchronous teaching and learning prep (divisional admin)
January – April 2020: Schools operate in Orange			
January – April 2021	• Two-week remote learning period for grades 7–12 (mandatory) and K–6 (optional) for the first two weeks of January (government) • Schools were directed to continue to offer remote learning until the end of the year (government) • Contact tracing at the school level (Public Health)	• School-wide scheduling of synchronous and asynchronous learning times (school admin)	• Continuation of in-school /divisional PDs/ trainings and e-learning (divisional admin)
May 2021: Winnipeg Metro Region moves into full remote learning as part of critical level Red			
May - June 2021	• Critical Service Workers' children can participate in temporary remote learning at school (divisional admin) • Play structures closed with the exception of daytime use by Critical Service Worker's children (divisional admin)	• School-wide scheduling of synchronous and asynchronous learning times (school admin) • Distribution of divisional tech devices (divisional admin) • Modified Grade 6 graduation (school admin)	• Graduate work finding academic sources that would help with adaptations

Coercive Pressures and Leadership

Direct and substantial pressure from the provincial government required school administration to abide by the strict public health rules in order to contain the pandemic. For example, the government stated that "school divisions and schools will follow provincial public health measures, along with learning and school day structure guidance to ensure student achievement" (Government of Manitoba, 2020d, p. 9). As a result of this statement, I was required to enforce a multitude of preventative measures, from maintaining physical distancing through means such as seating configurations in classrooms and managing

the flow of people in common areas, to the monitoring of mask-wearing by both staff and students. The high pressure and sense of urgency to implement these regulations quickly altered stress levels for many school principals. In my capacity as an educational leader, I experienced extreme levels of occupational stress as I endured additional workload and responsibilities. For example, if adherence to two metres of physical distancing to the greatest extent possible was not feasible, the provincial government's directive was to create classroom cohorts as a means of keeping students separated from one another. The goal was to avoid the possibility of cross-contamination in the event of contagion. In my case, this required creativity to reconfigure all classrooms to ensure appropriate distancing. Classrooms with the largest number of pupils were moved into the library and one-half of the gym, while other classrooms with lower numbers remained where they were. As a leader, I had to fulfill the tasks of an interior designer, crafting classroom plans with appropriate room measurements in order to meet social distancing guidelines. Further, I had to work collaboratively with teachers and parents to explain why certain changes were mandatory. The requirement to make such quick adaptations to extraordinary demands without any expertise was overwhelming and left me with mixed feelings that I was doing my best while simultaneously anticipating that the decisions I made might need to be reassessed and revised as new directives and issues arose. By keeping an open mindset and being receptive to differing opinions, new opportunities, and better ways to problem solve difficult and unforeseen circumstances have bolstered my confidence to effectively lead a school within the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

In the fall of 2020, as COVID-19 cases continued to rise in the province, the provincial government raised the alert level to code orange. That meant going back to stricter restrictions for schools. Under a tight timeline, I had the responsibility of restructuring classrooms and repurposing staff for a second time. This time I was feeling more confident in making successive and rapid decisions. Single classrooms were split into two physical spaces and placed under the shared supervision of a classroom teacher, an itinerant teacher (e.g., Art, Music), or an educational assistant. However, these logistical changes created a ripple effect that necessitated smaller, yet critical alterations. For example, all excess furniture, other than student desks or tables, needed to be removed and housed in a rented storage pod to make room for the two metres of physical distancing. Once again, I took on the unfamiliar task of coordinating the relocation of school furniture and working with the division on necessary documentation. These activities were accompanied by keeping up with continuous communication – both with teachers and with families. Information had to be shared in a timely manner with teachers, so that they had the appropriate amount of preparation time required by the collective agreement that guides a unionized working environment. Establishing a variety of information channels to update the school community became a key activity. I was regularly involved in the tasks of a communication manager by sending letters home, updating the school website, making daily phone calls, and coordinating home visits to drop off home learning packages and/or devices, school supplies, and food hampers. Addressing the many challenges left me feeling emotionally exhausted and interfered with my work-life balance. Other divisional level restrictions, such as the closing down of playgrounds due to being high-touch surfaces that could potentially carry the COVID-19 virus, impacted the school community on a larger scale. In one incident, I had to ask a community member to remove their child from playing on the play structure as per the directive of the Public Health and my school division. This message was not received well, and I was placed in a position where I was the target of the hostility, aggression, and anger that people were feeling due to these new restrictions. What lifted my spirits, however, was the incredible collaboration of the school team that offset some of the workloads and provided different problem-solving solutions such as adding more signage to visible areas around the schoolyard, and distributing messages in the school newsletter and school website.

In addition to the physical distancing, the provincial government mandated that "students in Grades 4 and up, teachers, staff, and visitors are required to wear masks when physical distancing of 2 metres is not possible" (Government of Manitoba, 2020d, p. 17). This practice was extended to the 2021–2022 school year and is now inclusive of all staff and students ages five and up (Government of Manitoba, 2021). The consistent policing of staff and students to wear their masks appropriately has involved a considerable amount of time and effort. It was important to be empathetic to the differing opinions among teachers and parents/caregivers about the effectiveness and/or the disadvantages of mask-wearing. As a school principal, I have had to be steadfast in delivering an unchanging message – we must uphold all

provincial regulations in order to keep one another safe. This is a careful balance, as I have had to navigate continuous conversations with persons who identify as being for or against wearing a mask while referring back to the government regulations and divisional policies. As a result, my legal literacy skills have been enhanced as I had to be knowledgeable about the constantly changing regulations, figuring out areas where I could be creative in implementing those policies.

Added pressures emerged from the socio-economic context of the school. There was an immediate need to find ways in which students and their families with limited financial resources could be best supported in this switch to remote learning. I prioritized ways to reduce barriers, such as food insecurity issues, which were exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. This included writing grants, seeking private donations, and partnering with food rescue charities. It was essential to support students with the technological equipment (e.g., iPads, computers) required for online learning. These decisions were done in collaboration with other school administrators working in similar situations but also with support from the divisional administration, in order to maintain the learning capacity for all students.

Mimetic Pressures and Leadership

Mimetic pressures came from the environmental uncertainty when we were in the position of actively looking for best practices from other schools or divisions. The response to COVID-19 represents an example of an enormous shift in the importance of peer reliance, as we, the administrators, looked to each other for next steps. The requirement to move to remote learning caused schools to engage in different variations of online learning practice. The concerns of adhering to privacy requirements in regards to sensitive data was at the top of my list of considerations. Collating a variety of sources, which sometimes were contradictory and confusing, necessitated reaching out to colleagues for clarification or making decisions based on instinct, as there was often minimal time for consultation. While this left me in a state of discomfort, I was aware of the importance of disseminating and distributing timely and key information to the school community for reassurance and safety purposes. Clear communication became an integral component of my daily leadership practices and monopolized a great deal of my time and attention as we adjusted to the many changes.

In my situation, during the first phase of remote learning, I reached out to colleagues to determine the 'best,' user-friendly conferencing platform that would also provide optimal student data privacy. My decision to use Microsoft Teams was purely based on the persuasive recommendations of a fellow administrator. There were no other initial directives, guidance, or background knowledge provided to school leaders. Shortly after the decision was made, I was informed by my school division of the two online platform options that we would be utilizing. I was grateful for the direction and opportunity to learn alongside staff as we became more competent in virtual teaching and learning. It has been a new skill set that I obtained as a result. Changing entire modes of communication and instruction required me to be understanding and compassionate toward teachers who were stressed, anxious, and perhaps even frightened of moving beyond their well-established teaching methods. This is where I had to practice counseling skills to boost teacher confidence in their new pedagogical approaches as we progressed together, learning from our mistakes and celebrating our successes. Pivoting between the demands of staff and differentiating support, at times, felt endless and frequently kept me from wrapping up the workday at a reasonable time, leading to mental fatigue and physical exhaustion. Although I am confident in my professional capabilities and ability to be resilient during difficult times, the compounded and complex challenges manifested into intensified levels of stress I had never experienced before. At the same time, there was also the opportunity for growth as I incorporated a new toolbox of online tools (e.g., SeeSaw, Google Classroom, Google Meet) that can provide "intellectual stimulation, idealized influence and inspiration" to foster a community of learners (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020, p. 39). Supporting the continuation of teaching and learning during the pandemic has required me to meet a hierarchy of needs, and it is through this process that I have learned to be intuitive and flexible in addressing the many challenges and concerns of the school community.

In times of crisis, it is essential that all stakeholders feel that there is an effective plan in place that will safely guide the school community through unchartered territory. In response to physical distancing restrictions, I implemented a flexible recess format, which honours teaching and learning time, yet provides opportunities for teachers to 'read their students' and take them outside for recess breaks when they see fit. Flexible recess has included dividing the playground into zones and teachers signing up on

a daily basis using an online tool. This decision to utilize a flexible recess format was a result of seeking advice from a personal network of administrators within my own division and from administrators outside of the division whom I met during my graduate studies. All shared varying ways they avoided crossing classroom cohorts during outdoor breaks. The flexible recess has been an example of success, as it provided additional opportunities for teachers to foster relationships with their students outside of the classroom, and there was a drastic reduction in recess conflicts.

One of the biggest struggles of teaching during the pandemic is the wearing of face masks, which muffle one's voice and hide facial expressions. To circumvent these issues, I purchased face masks with transparent windows so that students had a clear view of teachers' mouths to allow for better communication. When schools were directed to use medical masks, we were no longer to use this style of mask, and instead, I purchased portable voice amplifiers for every teacher. When I shared my idea with fellow administrators and explained how it helped teachers from losing their voices and improved their volume and clarity in the classroom, which in turn had a big impact on student learning, many of my colleagues followed suit. This is an example of reverse mimicking in which my creative ideas were shared and implemented by other administrators.

Normative Pressures and Leadership

The shift to remote learning due to a combination of school closures, partial reopening, and online options for students under quarantine created a sense of unrest, as not all teachers were equally equipped to deliver programming virtually. Teacher knowledge and experience in delivering online lessons were extremely varied, and it became apparent that differentiated support was necessary. As a graduate student, I was actively looking for academic resources that could help guide my leadership practice, building this new knowledge into my course papers. For example, I relied on Yukl and Mahsud's (2010) work in which they stated, "Success in adapting to external changes usually requires collective learning and collaboration by many members of the organization, and leaders can encourage and facilitate these processes" (p. 86). Within my school, in order to assist teachers in the continuation of teaching and learning through online platforms, professional development to all staff members was provided through two avenues: locally and divisionally. Teacher capacity was built by utilizing teacher leaders to share their knowledge and expertise about online learning platforms through 'lunch & learns' and one-on-one support. I designated a team of teachers to provide real-time technology and remote learning assistance and re-worked teachers' timetables for grade-related group collaboration. In addition to delegating teacher-led roles and actions, my school also partnered with the division to receive additional formal training support on inquiry-based projects through remote learning. Through this process, teachers began to upgrade their skillsets, adapting to new teaching norms. Teachers were appreciative of the support provided, as it was evident that relying solely on traditional ways of teaching was no longer a viable option. Although there were certainly times of frustration as new skills were being acquired, teachers were very supportive of one another in their learning as they reflected upon and discussed situational issues and applauded accomplishments. A strong sense of collective teacher efficacy in instructional practices has developed during the pandemic, and I have witnessed increased collegiality and positive relationships as a result. To show my personal support of and empathy with this journey of new learning, I came up with the idea to create a "shout-out" bulletin board, where all staff could complement one another on their teaching and learning journeys. The high level of participation represented one way we came together as a community, acknowledging our efforts both individually and together. In order to remain resilient amid the pandemic, the strengthened connections between the administrators and staff have provided the necessary emotional support in ensuring leaders' well-being.

Taking on new initiatives under environmental uncertainty requires educational leaders to continuously assess the situation and make necessary adaptations. As noted, my graduate work provided an important normative pressure to update my theoretical understanding of leadership. I was inspired by Bagwell's (2020, p. 32) work, wherein he noted, "By mobilizing individuals to collectively tackle challenges, school leaders have an opportunity to shift and alter existing practices and mindsets." Oftentimes I have carried that knowledge forward by honestly sharing with staff that things are going to get messy, and we will just try our best, learn together from our mistakes, and continue to move forward. By recognizing our vulnerabilities and learning on one another, we have grown stronger together as we seize these

opportunities for professional growth that will transcend beyond the COVID-19 crisis.

Discussion – Adapting Leadership Practice

The purpose of the paper was to answer two key questions. First, *what key environmental pressures have triggered changes in leadership practice for school administrators* in Manitoba in times of crisis. It was evident that all three categories of environmental pressures suggested by the institutional theory– coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures – had an impact on leadership adaptations. Coercive pressures coming through public health regulations had to be followed, but the implementation was left in the hands of school leaders, allowing for some flexibility. While decisions had to be made fast, there was creativity and innovation involved when designing, for example, classroom plans, relocating furniture, and establishing new communication channels. The findings also demonstrate that coercive pressures have led to a more nuanced understanding and implementation of various regulations and policies (government policies, divisional guidelines, and collective agreements by the unions) among school administrators but also stronger communication mechanisms among divisional administrators, teachers, and parents. As a result, crisis planning activities have now become a new norm in Manitoba public schools.

In this study, mimetic pressures were associated with learning best practices from others, aimed at securing organizational survival and success in times of extreme uncertainty. The extent of mimetic behaviours also depended on contextual factors – how much formal guidance and direction was provided from a division or government; was there financial, human, or training-related support available; had the school principal developed a network of trusted colleagues for gaining best practices. In this case, there was a good mixture of divisional support as well as informal support through a network of colleagues. Phased reopening practices are a specific example of mimetic activities where learning from other schools and divisions occurred. The sharing of resources and co-creating and delivering printed learning packages became a daily practice among administrators and teaching staff. Mimetic pressures may have resulted in copying behaviours but those also led to collective shared wisdom of professional networking, which contributed to a shared understanding of best leadership practices during unpredictable times. This points to a need to further establish formal channels of connection to support collaboration between school administrators at local and national levels.

Normative pressures emerged from the lack of initial pedagogical support available during the switch to remote learning. Teaching is a profession with direct responsibility to one's students, requiring ongoing efforts to improve one's professional practice. This requires leaders to create a healthy school climate that nurtures collective teacher efficacy through opportunities for collaborative practice. This study showed that inconsistencies in teachers' willingness towards and confidence in online learning were experienced in a variety of ways by school principals – some teachers required individual support but had a motivation to learn, while sometimes others expressed ignorance or resistance. Responses to normative pressures resulted in organizing a series of professional development days, teacher training programs, and workshops that would help secure teacher confidence. Looking for new ways to provide support indicates the need to find guidance from academic resources that would provide theoretical or empirical insights into navigating times of crisis. Additionally, ongoing professional development that improves instructional approaches, especially in the area of technological innovations, is an area that needs stronger training support.

Our second research question aimed at examining *how these pressures impacted administrators' leadership practice*. Overall, our findings suggest that it is more appropriate to talk about leadership adaptations, whereby some tasks were added, and others expanded, rather than sweeping shifts in leadership. Many of the leadership skills and approaches in this study were something already present in leadership behaviours before. However, times of crisis might have amplified and created stronger awareness of practices at both individual and social levels. First and foremost, individual leadership adaptations included enhanced creativity in securing optimal learning environments (e.g., phased recesses, relocation of classrooms by using non-traditional spaces, phased return to in-person teaching), and resourcefulness in finding methods that would not contradict government health regulations, yet would address the individual needs of every learner, (e.g., utilizing student desk shields to maintain guiding reading groups). Individual adaptations also included enhanced awareness of one's resilience, flexibility, and gradually growing confidence when leading in times of crisis. In terms of enhanced skillsets, emotional intelligence was a skillset that required expansion during the COVID-19 pandemic. School principals

being empathetic to the perspectives and feelings of staff became essential to maintaining a positive organizational climate during times of crisis. Leaders need to become more mindful of the uniqueness of each staff member, and of their knowledge, skills, experience, and comfort level to meet their varying personal and professional needs. Furthermore, principals' legal literacy skills increased. Leaders have learned to use their best professional judgement, improvising and making necessary adjustments when navigating a myriad of government and divisional regulations in order to support teachers and students.

Second, leadership adaptations involving the social aspect of community building included intensified collaboration and networking with teachers and other colleagues. Fluency in communication skills has become of utmost importance in order to stay connected with teachers, parents, and students during the pandemic. There has been a demand to utilize a wider range of communication modes (emails, newsletters, phone calls, and virtual meetings) as well as to increase the frequency in communication due to rapidly changing public health orders and divisional directives. Leadership adaptations documented in this study also included increased attention to teacher-enabling behaviours, focusing on providing collegial support and guidance to instructors who may have felt insecure in this new online teaching reality but also in their personal health situations with increasing COVID-19 cases. Building teacher capacity requires educational leaders to be responsive to the needs of staff by fostering a growth mindset while providing individual and collective support. By intentionally building positive relationships, the collective sense of trust can be significantly strengthened.

Conclusion

The key conclusion we draw from this study is that the type of environmental pressures leaders experience may lead to specific leadership adaptations. Coercive pressures are mostly associated with creativity and original, inventive leadership practices. While government regulations require alignment, contextual specificities force school leaders to invent new ways in which these regulations can be best implemented in their specific school contexts. Mimetic pressures may lead to copying behaviours as a result of peer pressure tied to limited regulatory support but also to new learning oppertunities from others. Such leadership adaptations are dependent on trust and friendships and are less focused on contextual circumstances. Normative pressures are associated with enhanced foundational knowledge. Revisiting professional norms and relying on theoretical literature is another form of leadership adaptation. Contextual factors may have a specific role in leadership adaptations where certain initiatives may work better than others. Clearly, such general categorization has its limitations, as pressure types may occur simultaneously or overlap, influencing leadership behaviours in unique ways. There is a need for further research to clarify these particular nuances.

As has become apparent, coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures resulting from COVID-19 have had direct implications on the work of school leaders. While school administrators have tried to be creative and suggest innovative ways to keep their school communities safe, these shifts have taken a significant emotional and physical toll on them. It is easy to over-glorify the creativity aspect in the work of a school leader – creating a narrative around perseverance and grit during COVID-19, emphasizing how leadership has spearheaded new initiatives and made school communities stronger. While this may be true, the reality is that the workload of school administrators has significantly been altered and increased with added tasks that educational experts are not necessarily prepared for but are required to enact and reinforce. Leading during a crisis has placed extraordinary demands on school administrators and requires a flexible and adaptive mindset to catalyze positive change. There is a feeling of entering year two of the COVID-19 pandemic with exhaustion, while trying to persevere in the hopes of returning to some form of stability in the future.

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