Developing teacher leadership during unprecedented times of change

by

Tamra Lynn Mitchell

B.A., Wichita State University, 1989
M.S., Emporia State University, 2009

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2021

Abstract

The 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic created a crisis that tested teacher leaders, building leaders, and school culture in ways that will take years to analyze. In this qualitative focus group study, teachers working in Kansas throughout the pandemic shared their perspectives on leadership development. The teachers reported taking on roles and responsibilities beyond what they could have imagined, affecting their professional relationships with students, families, colleagues, and the greater community. Teachers said they enjoyed successes and learned painful lessons from their failures. When discussing changes in their leadership, they reported growth in their skills and confidence regarding communication, collaboration, and social–emotional development. When discussing the role of their principals, most described principals who generally supported students and teachers. However, many had difficulty explaining how their principals intentionally contributed to their leadership growth during this time. Those who could add to this topic said that shared leadership, relational trust, and intentional opportunities to practice leadership skills with support, coaching, and feedback were needed to help them feel successful.

The development of teacher leadership in Kansas during unprecedented times of change

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Debbie K. Mercer

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Acknowledgments

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In addition, I would also like to thank my colleagues, Jay Scott, Dr. Mischel Miller, and Sarah Perryman, for being my thought partners at crucial times throughout this research. Their feedback and insight were instrumental in developing and organizing focus group questions that created an engaging environment for participants.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Shawn Mitchell, and my sons, Evan and Spencer Mitchell, who acted as my sounding board and provided stimulating discussions and sometimes much-needed distractions from this research.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the participants—the teachers in Kansas redesign schools who gave their precious personal time on warm evenings in the spring of 2021 to reflect, laugh, cry and share via another virtual meeting.

Thank you for trusting me with your stories. Every single one of you is my hero!

Chapter 1 - Overview of the Study

Background of the Problem

"I would never want to be a leader! I do not want to be the boss. I want to work with children." I collected this direct quote from a conversation I had with a teacher in a Kansas redesign school. This teacher led their school redesign team and school leadership team. She worked as an instructional coach, was respected by her teacher peers, and served as the go-to person for her principal. I found this comment astounding because this teacher exemplified servant leadership (Sipe & Frick, 2015) in all she did, both in and out of the school building. This disconnect regarding the meaning of leadership had been on my mind for over 3 years because I had experienced the same disconnect throughout my career. As a previous early childhood and elementary educator and the current elementary redesign specialist for the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE), I had believed leading children in a classroom did not qualify me to lead adults.

Nevertheless, I learned that leadership is less about a position or job description and more about personal integrity and influence (Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; O'Malley & Cebula, 2015). This notion of leadership as a verb instead of a noun inspired me to coach teachers to build their leadership capacity. It also made me curious to know how teachers grew their leadership capacity through the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic. I am passionate about helping teachers realize their own leadership capacities by engaging in the Kansans Can School Redesign Project—hereafter called Kansas Redesign or the Redesign—and I wanted to hear teachers talk about their leadership growth as they reflected with colleagues in small focus group discussions. I believed that teachers might not even realize they had grown, and they may not recognize that growth as exercising leadership, but it is growth nonetheless. If anything can be redeemed from

this terrible time in education history, perhaps it involves teacher leadership. Before exploring this topic, it is essential to understand the educational context in Kansas and teacher leaders' efforts to move Kansas through this challenging time.

Kansas Sets Out to Lead the World

In the spring of 2015, KSDE Commissioner of Education, Dr. Randy Watson, and KSDE Deputy Commissioner of Learning Services, Dr. Brad Neuenswander, hosted a community conversation tour entitled, “Kansas Children, Kansas’ Future” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2018). These conversations occurred in focus groups with participants from every local community sector, including parents, students, business and community leaders, educators, and state legislators (Neuenswander, 2018). These focus groups took place in 20 locations and included approximately 1,700 attendees divided into 287 groups. Facilitators asked each focus group to provide feedback on the same three questions.

1. What are the skills, attributes, and abilities of the successful 24-year-old Kansan?
2. What is K–12 education’s role in developing the successful high school graduate, and how would we measure success?
3. What is higher education's role in developing the successful Kansan, and how would we measure success? (Neuenswander, 2018).

The data Neuenswander and Watson collected informed the Kansas State Board of Education (KSBE) as it developed a vision for Kansas education. That vision was: “Kansas leads the world in the success of each student” (KSDE, 2018). The KSBE described that success as going beyond academic achievement:

> A successful Kansas high school graduate has the academic preparation, cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability skills and civic engagement to be successful

in postsecondary education, in the attainment of an industry-recognized certification or the workforce, without the need for remediation. (KSDE, 2018)

A deeper dive into the qualitative data showed that Kansans wanted:

- every child ready for kindergarten upon entry at age 5,
- more choice for students in their learning activities,
- a focus on technical and employability skills to accompany social–emotional learning, and
- long-term projects as a part of daily learning (Watson, 2015, 2016).

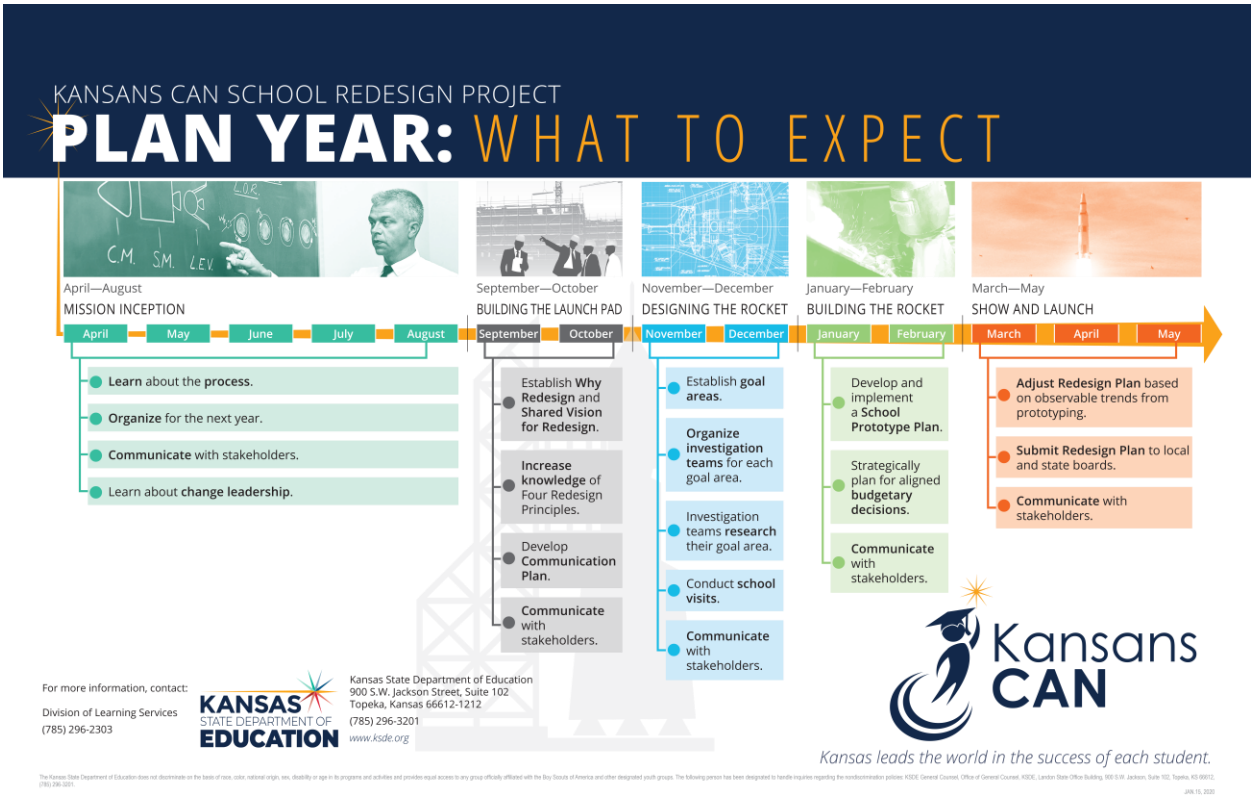
This vision served as the foundation for the Kansas Redesign. In July of 2017, seven Kansas school districts were selected to be the first Kansas Redesign cohort. The KSBE aimed to redesign pre-K through Grade 12 education for all 286 school districts in Kansas by the year 2026. Since July of 2017, in addition to the Mercury school cohort, other cohorts named Gemini I, Gemini II, Apollo, Apollo II, Apollo II, and Apollo III have undergone redesign. At the time of this writing, approximately 193 schools in 71 districts were a part of the Kansans Redesign Project (KSDE, 2021).

After 3 years of Kansas Redesign, redesign schools were on track with the implementation of their redesign plans. KSDE built the Kansas Redesign methodology on the core belief that teachers, who work most closely with students, should lead school improvement efforts . Through Kansas Redesign training, school redesign teams, comprised of administrators and teacher leaders, earned how to organize, implement, and exemplify this core belief while practicing shared leadership and decision-making and building or strengthening a positive learning culture. When a principal shares leadership responsibilities and a school intentionally builds and sustains a positive learning culture, teacher leadership grows, teachers' voices are

heard, best practices are implemented, and positive student outcomes result (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Fullan, 2002; Kools et al., 2020). The Redesign project timeline was organized into a tight and precise planning year where school redesign teams learn and practice design thinking articulated in McChesney et al. (2012) in *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* as a collaborative school improvement process (Beckman & Barry, 2007; Koh et al., 2015; Liang et al., 2020). Kansas' network of education service centers partnered with KSDE to host and facilitate Redesign trainings in regional locations. Figure 1.1 illustrates the project timeline for the Redesign plan year.

Figure 1.1.

Kansans Can School Redesign Project Timeline (KSDE, 2021).



COVID-19 Changes the World

In March of 2020, under Governor Laura Kelly's orders, Kansas became the first state to close school buildings because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Strauss, 2020). Teachers in Kansas

and across the nation faced unprecedented challenges as they flipped instruction and social–emotional support for students to a remote or virtual model with only 1 or 2 weeks to adapt (Bonella et al., 2020). This challenge was unlike anything educators of this generation had faced. With no manual or existing protocol to follow, every plan to remotely educate students had to be created from scratch and executed in record time (Heifetz, 2020). Flipping instruction under normal circumstances represents a tremendous and time-consuming shift. In addition to this immediate overhaul of instructional practices, educators, families, and students experienced uncertainty, fear, job loss, the real possibility of illness, or even death (Mitchell & Herrera, 2020).

Nevertheless, some schools persevered and connected daily with every student to continue instruction (*Navigating Change Survey—Summary of Open-Ended Questions*, 2020). It was unclear why some schools could adapt, and others seemed paralyzed by indecision and uncertainty. Similar questions surround how some staff pulled together and others splintered and isolated. Perhaps some schools had an existing culture characterized by shared leadership and a focus on learning with a principal who, even during the crisis, empowered teachers to grow teacher leadership in ways that had never been needed before. This triad of teacher leadership growth, principal support and leadership, and positive learning culture align with the conditions that Kansas Redesign sought to instill and grow in schools. The pandemic provided an unparalleled test of this methodology.

Kansas has a history of intentionally developing strong teacher leaders. The Kansas Teacher of the Year (TOY) Program recognizes and utilizes representatives of excellent teaching in elementary and secondary classrooms across the state. Organizers designed the award to build and utilize a network of exemplary teachers who lead school improvement, student performance,

and the teaching profession. Teachers nominated for this prestigious award become active members of the Kansas Exemplary Educators Network. They may be called upon to advocate for students, work with state policymakers and community leaders to shape policy and public opinion, or serve as an advisor to state committees and conferences. This program was initiated in 1992. With nearly 30 years of history, the cadre of current and former Kansas TOY Program candidates spans every region of the state (KSDE, 2019a). During the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic, these teacher leaders were called upon to do the unimaginable—write guidance to help their colleagues navigate the closing of school buildings while maintaining relationships with students and families and switching to remote instruction at Grades pre-K–12. They wrote, edited, and published this guidance in under 1 week.

The Continuous Learning Taskforce

The month of March 2020 resembled none other. At a time when schools should have been gearing down for spring break, a worldwide pandemic brewed. In an interview with KSDE Deputy Commissioner Brad Neuenswander, I learned more about how decisions were made and how the continuous learning task force came to be (personal communication, December 30, 2020). The timeline was as follows:

- Monday, March 9, 2020. The KSDE leadership team contemplated what the pandemic could mean for schools.
- Wednesday, March 11, 2020. Kansas University, Kansas State University, Pittsburg State University, and other Kansas Regent schools announced massive delays and at least a 2-week extension of spring break in light of the possible spread of COVID-19 from students returning from travels.

- Thursday, March 12, 2020. In an unprecedented move, the Kansas State Capital Building closed to the public to curtail the spread of COVID-19, even though the legislature was in session. Deputy Commissioner Neuenswander, Deputy Commissioner Dennis, and Commissioner Watson begin serious talks about the possibility of extended K–12 school breaks due to COVID-19.
- Friday, March 13, 2020. KSDE executive leadership began talks with Governor Kelly's office regarding a large-scale closure plan.
- Saturday, March 14, 2020. KSDE executive leadership decided to create guidance, giving the governor's office time to make a large-scale plan. Watson called an emergency meeting via Zoom with all superintendents and highly encouraged them to either extend spring break by 1 week or start spring break early. Districts were asked to postpone school to slow the spread of COVID-19 until the governor provided more direction.
- Sunday, March 15, 2020. Neuenswander and Watson planned to convene a group of Kansas teachers to write guidance for continuous learning through what they believed would be a short-term—perhaps month-long—school building closure. Neuenswander and Watson chose Tabatha Rosproy, the 2020 Kansas TOY, who was soon announced as the national teacher of the year. Also selected were Cindy Couchman, then assistant superintendent for Unified School District (USD 313, Buhler, KS, and Diane Smokorowski, district technology coach for USD 385, Andover, KS. Both Couchman and Smokorowski had previously earned Kansas Teachers of the Year. Neuenswander and Watson emailed them on Sunday morning, and by noon, all three had agreed to lead the development of guidance for their

> Kansas colleagues. They received only broad instructions: find 20 to 25 colleagues and write guidance for how learning might continue if the current disruption extended for a few weeks. This guidance would need to be published and ready for distribution 72 hr later, on March 18, 2020. Notably, no one imagined in mid-March 2020 that this school disruption would extend for over 1 year. By 9:00 p.m. Sunday, these three teacher leaders had approximately 45 teacher colleagues ready and willing to volunteer their time and efforts. (B. Neuenswander, personal communication, December 30, 2020)

Between 9:00 p.m. on Sunday and midnight on Wednesday, 45 educators, led by three teacher leaders and supported by a state agency, worked 24 hours a day for 3 days and created the *Continuous Learning Guidance*. When Governor Kelly announced closing school buildings on Thursday, March 19, KSDE posted guidance for educators and stakeholders (KSDE, 2020). Many of these teachers came from Kansas Redesign schools, and the language and application of design thinking showed throughout the publication. Neuenswander commented, "I don't remember how many times I heard people saying, 'How might we?' They kept saying, 'Yeah, we've never done it before, but how might we?'" (personal communication, December 30, 2020). "How might we" comes from the language of design thinking (Hesbol, 2017; "How Might We?" n.d.).

The continuous learning task force made its primary goal to develop guidance for Kansas educators so they could immediately support learning throughout the spring of 2020. The team intentionally chose the term "continuous," for although the governor closed school buildings, efforts for teaching and learning would continue. The team also intentionally avoided using words such as "virtual learning" because they did not want to confuse this new type of remote

learning with full-day, computer-based learning. Rather, educational leaders challenged themselves to think beyond screen time to provide inclusive and equitable learning opportunities for all students (KSDE, 2020). Within the context of the Kansas Redesign vision and the continuous learning task force's empowerment and leadership, Kansas teachers set out to lead and learn through the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic.

Statement of the Problem

Kansas Redesign schools' conditions during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic required fundamental changes and adaptive challenges, which required the best creative thinking and innovation that Kansas teachers could offer. Under normal circumstances, school leaders must develop and maintain a positive learning culture, and principals must maintain that culture and take on coaching roles to develop leadership talent. Like three legs of a stool, school culture, teacher leadership, and principal leadership support student learning (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Kools et al., 2020; Peterson & Deal, 1998). At a time when so much of how the school day usually occurs underwent change, these three ingredients: teacher leadership, principal leadership, and school culture, became even more critical.

Change, whether personal or professional, individual or systemic, can be difficult and slow. Researchers in the fields of education, business, psychology, and sociology have all extensively explored the topic of change. Larry Cuban's theory on fundamental and incremental change, blended with Ronald Heifetz's work on adaptive challenges, provides one way to describe the conditions Kansas Redesign teachers experienced during the redesign process, and to a more considerable degree, while navigating the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic (Cuban, 2013; Heifetz, 2020). Fundamental changes are extreme because they completely upend an existing system and require leaders to start with a clean slate. Incremental changes may have the

same end result of complete system reform; however, the strategies involve more gradual steps, allowing individuals in those systems time to adjust and buy in (Cuban, 2013, 2016). Spring of 2020 left no time for incremental changes. Flipping instruction represented an abrupt fundamental change that challenged ideas about what public education should be. It is too soon to determine how far-reaching these fundamental changes or lessons learned will be.

Heifitz and Linsky described organizational changes as responses to adaptive or technical challenges (Garmeston & Wellman, 2013; Heifetz, 2020; Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Technical challenges have a clear solution. They follow an if-then formula that includes proven step-by-step instructions. Adaptive challenges, in contrast, require creativity and leadership because instructions do not exist. Adaptive challenges can be intensely personal because those involved must change their ideas and beliefs on the issue (Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Moeckel, 2020). Many school challenges combine both technical and adaptive challenges. An example from spring 2020 involves flipping elementary student instruction to remote learning. In this case, technical challenges included ensuring students and teachers had devices and Internet access; teachers, students, and families knew how to log on and use designated programs; and families knew when students should be online for synchronous instruction. However, these demanding challenges also had clear technical or logistical solutions.

In contrast, adaptive challenges involve changing individuals' views. Difficult questions arose about such topics as how to keep 8-year-olds engaged in a Zoom meeting, how much screen time should be considered too much in this context, how teachers could support students' social–emotional well-being in a remote learning environment, and what teachers should do if they suspected or witnessed child abuse during remote learning. Technical ways of addressing these problems could be devised, but the emotional aspects of these challenges were more

difficult to address. For example, a process for reporting child abuse existed, but those processes would not address the emotional aspect of making that report. In my role as elementary redesign specialist, I heard about these types of challenges from teachers I virtually coached during this time. School improvement researchers such as could not have fathomed these kinds of challenges when they published their works.

Teachers in Kansas Redesign schools have learned to address adaptive challenges that lead to fundamental changes using design thinking and *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* (Liang et al., 2020). Design thinking has long been used in business and industry, especially in innovative start-up companies (Plattner, 2010). The design stages of empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test mirror the plan, do, check, act steps of traditional school improvement. However, there are benefits to using design thinking as a school improvement framework. Design thinkers create the conditions where school values and visionary and transformational leaders' ideals can connect innovation with evidence that the implemented strategies produce the intended results (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018). Design thinking requires leaders to be sensitive to the local context and complexities of implementing interventions in real-life conditions. It involves autonomous teachers and teacher leaders acting as change agents to rapidly and creatively consider user feedback and make the necessary pivots to impact student learning (Mintrop, 2016; Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). The four disciplines of execution (4DX) are: focus on the wildly important goal, act on lead measures, keep a compelling scoreboard, and create a cadence of accountability. These disciplines add a layer of intentionality to design thinking. Combining design thinking and 4DX provides the structure for determining lead and lag measures and collecting data for the prototyping and testing phases of design thinking (Liang et al., 2020).

School leaders who use design thinking to approach adaptive challenges must create and sustain a collaborative and innovative learning culture whereby teachers exercise leadership, principals deliberately share leadership and decision-making, and relational trust provides the foundation for colleagues to speak their mind, stay focused on students, and challenge traditional ways of thinking (Canli & Demirtaş, 2018; Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018; Hanson et al., 2016; Redding & Corbett, 2018). Teacher leadership, effective principal leadership, and collaborative and innovative learning culture are inextricably intertwined. Teacher leadership needs a collaborative culture to grow (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Cansoy & Parlar, 2017). The transformational and learning-focused principal creates the conditions and models the characteristics that support the collaborative culture (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Fullan, 2002; Teasley, 2017).

As change agents, teachers must have autonomy and exercise leadership. Research has shown that when rapid innovation and improvement are required, such as during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic, more teachers must become change agents (Bakkenes et al., 2010; Fullan, 1993; Lukacs & Galluzzo, 2014; van der Heijden et al., 2018). Change agents embrace change, both in and out of the classroom; they also exercise agency and make intentional choices about their work (Fullan, 1993; Lukacs & Galluzzo, 2014; van der Heijden et al., 2018). This depth of professional growth takes time and is outlined in the National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) report as four stages that take teachers years to develop. However, during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic, Kansas teachers did not have the luxury of time. They led from their position, innovated in ways they never dreamed possible, and led themselves—testing all they knew about self-care and self-regulation as they worked to reach students and families.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the growth and development of teacher leaders in Kansas during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the unprecedented responsibilities of flipping to remote instruction in as little as 2 weeks and persevering through ever-changing conditions for over a year, teachers may have taken on leadership responsibilities they might not have considered volunteering for in normal circumstances. Information was gathered by conducting a qualitative focus group study with teachers from Kansas Redesign schools. This data was analyzed through the epistemology of constructionism, emphasizing symbolic interactionism.

Constructivists believe that individuals construct meaning as they engage with the world, which is a bedrock belief of educators (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998; Piaget, 1967; Wadsworth, 1984). The more people interact with each other and the situations they encounter in the world, the more their understanding grows and changes (Bryman, 2016). This study was an exploration of the participants' constructed meaning of teacher leadership at a particular point in time and under the specific set of circumstances resulting from the implementation of Kansas Redesign during an unprecedented pandemic and widespread school response. From a theoretical perspective, interpretivists focus on understanding a situation rather than on determining causal relationships. Interpretivist analysis involves no cause-and-effect relationships; instead, interpretivists believe learning derives from historically situated interpretations of social interactions (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivists integrate human interest in a qualitative study and respect that individuals may have some common interpretations of or reactions to events. An interpretive approach also provides flexibility for the researcher to appreciate individual differences (Crotty, 1998; Silverman, 1990). Symbolic interactionism is a type of interpretivism

through which a researcher can examine data to explain how people interact with symbols to create meanings that may change over time (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Mead, 1934). Symbolic interactionism also provides a framework for understanding how people see themselves and others and how they think others perceive them while creating a way to understand how participants interact with and construct meaning in their world (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998).

Researchers who conduct focus groups operate under the assumption that when people gather together, they interact and develop a synergy that leads to data that pushes beyond the participants' individual thoughts (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Kress & Shoffner, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997). For this qualitative focus group study, teachers from Kansas Redesign schools were invited to discuss their leadership roles and development and their principals' support throughout the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic. These focus group discussions took place virtually, using Zoom video conferencing technology. Conducting focus groups as a method of inquiry and research has grown popular and influential in contemporary qualitative research (Kress & Shoffner, 2007; Litosseliti, 2003; Richard et al., 2021). Marketers first developed focus group methods in 1988, but Krueger published the first practical guide for applying focus group research in the social sciences (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Krueger, 1998a). Focus groups involve small groups of participants selected to converse around a particular topic led by a moderator or facilitator (Litosseliti, 2003). Focus groups are ideal for qualitative research topics because, when structured appropriately, participants explore specific topics and personal views enhanced by social interaction (Lederman, 1990; Litosseliti, 2003; Morgan, 1997). Focus group discussions offer many benefits not available through individual interviews or observations. A group conversation may feel more natural than a one-on-one interview, and

participants will influence each other, which can encourage richer conversation and produce more in-depth data. Researchers can hear multiple viewpoints and attitudes (Morgan, 1997), enabling them to uncover attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about specific experiences (Lederman, 1990).

In this study, I held focus group discussions so that participants could speak with me (i.e., the facilitator) and each other about how they viewed leadership and professional growth and how their principals supported their leadership growth. Because individuals construct meaning as they learn and experience life, it was possible that the participants did not see themselves as leaders before the focus group discussions, but they may have recognized their growth as a result of the conversation (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998). I explored the participants' constructed meaning at a particular point in time and under particular circumstances, teacher leadership, during an unprecedented pandemic (Bryman, 2016; Heifetz, 2020). The individual realities constructed by the participants and the meanings they associated with these realities represented ongoing constructions between the participants' self and their society or culture (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). Inviting these teachers to speak about their leadership growth in focus groups showed that their understanding of leadership evolved as they worked during this historical time.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

- How did Kansas Redesign teachers demonstrate leadership during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do Kansas Redesign teachers describe the leadership growth they experienced during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?

- How do Kansas redesign teachers describe their principal's role in supporting teacher leadership growth during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?

Research has shown that focus groups function in the following stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Smith, 2005; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The focus group conversations for this study lasted for 2 hours, but I expected that at the beginning, members of the group would test each other and the facilitator to determine the conversation's boundaries. Norms needed to be established and explained. Participants needed to develop a rapport with each other and the facilitator to feel safe enough to provide the in-depth data sought. I informed the participants that no expectation existed for the group to reach a consensus and that all perspectives were valued. Skillful facilitation was needed to ensure quieter members had opportunities to share and talkative members did not monopolize the conversation. When the facilitator is also the researcher, best practices require the following safeguards:

- The facilitator/researcher should collaborate with other researchers or colleagues familiar with the topic to brainstorm questions customized for each of the forming, storming, norming, and performing stages (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). In December 2020, I met with three KSDE Redesign colleagues to brainstorm a list of potential focus group questions that aligned with the literature review and research questions. I organized these questions to enhance conversational flow and help participants move through the group stages.
- The facilitator/researcher should consider having an additional administrator or support person present during the focus group discussions to listen and support the researcher/facilitator. In December 2020, I asked a leadership training and coaching

expert to act as an additional administrator to help me facilitate the discussions and debrief with me after each session.

- Practice group facilitation by convening a group of critical friends to test-run the question route and discussion guide. I created this opportunity in February 2021 and solicited feedback regarding the quality and understandability of questions and the conversation flow.

I recorded all focus group discussions with Zoom video conferencing software, which created a text transcript of the discussions. These transcripts were checked and edited for accuracy and sent to participants for validation. The number and duration of the focus group interviews created approximately 200 pages of transcribed data that were then analyzed. I then followed up with two participants for individual interviews to clarify some of their points from the focus group interviews. I also audio and video recorded, transcribed, and analyzed those conversations. I transcribed all data manually using holistic coding and NVivo software for in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009).

Significance of the Study

Much has been researched and written on school leadership, teacher leadership, and school culture over the past 30 years (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Ash & Persall, 2000; Donohoo et al., 2018; Fullan, 2002; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Redding & Corbett, 2018). A wellspring of literature also existed on how business and educational organizations address challenges and embrace change. Researchers already understand that change is complex and often unsustainable. The 2020–2021 pandemic tested what is known on these topics in ways that will take years to analyze. Before the onset of the pandemic began, educators had already begun to learn the vocabulary of design thinking and the 4DXs through the implementation of the Kansas

Redesign. The earliest Redesign cohorts had not yet had implemented their redesign strategies for long enough to see results in state assessments that would have been conducted in spring 2020. This study did not address all that education professionals learned during the pandemic. Rather, it was focused on hearing teachers reflect on their professional growth in order to share the findings with the broader academic community.

All Kansas educators will benefit from this study's findings because each educator who reads this paper may reflect on and recognize their own leadership growth. Others interested in researching teacher leadership development will see the crucible that the pandemic provided, prompting individuals who did not previously view themselves as leaders to step into the role. The findings will also serve a broader research community by illuminating what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was limited by several uncontrollable factors. Participants volunteered during a stressful time, making participant drop-out a limitation. The participant sample was limited, with 30 teachers participating in the focus group discussions. The discussions generated rich qualitative data, but the selection did not represent all Kansas teachers in Kansas Redesign schools. Teachers responded to a series of questions within the focus groups, but the time was limited, and some people may have needed more time for deeper reflection to produce their best answers. One mitigating strategy involved allowing participants could contact me after the focus group discussion to request a one-on-one conversation. Two participants took this opportunity. Last, some participants may not have felt open to sharing in front of others, or they may have been intimidated by the process or the fact that I worked for the KSDE.

Generalizability represented an expected limitation because it is not a goal of qualitative research, nor is the goal to draw causal conclusions (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Peshkin, 1993; Saldana, 2009). Another limitation involved the need for me to consider my positionality and subjectivity, especially because I was also coded the data (Krueger, 1998a; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Saldana, 2009). Safeguards were planned to account for subjectivity or bias, but the study could not be entirely objective because that is not the goal of qualitative research.

Delimitations arose from the choices made in the research scope and design. The topics of teacher leadership, principal leadership, and school culture were too vast to explore in one focus group study; however, learning from a handful of Kansas Redesign teachers about how they navigated their leadership roles and growth during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic defined the scope of this study. Another delimitation involved participant volunteers who taught in a Kansas Redesign school during the time of the research. Teachers not teaching in Redesign schools and principals were excluded from the study. The research questions were straightforward, so any data provided that did not support the research questions were not considered for this study. Another delimitation involved the choice to host focus group interviews rather than use other methods of data collection, such as mass surveys or one-on-one interviews. This intentional choice reflected a desired to hear participants' personal stories. I also believed participants would share more in-depth information when speaking with and listening to peers.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions were used during this research.

- *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* represent a set of proven practices that have been researched, tested and refined through working with hundreds of thousands of leaders across seventeen different industries. (McChesney, 2020, p. 9).
- *21st-century skills,* also referred to as *soft skills* or *employability skills*, include grit, conscientiousness, work ethic, teamwork, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, and agreeableness (Schwartz, 2015; "What Are 21st Century Skills?" 2021).
- *Adaptive challenges* emerge when a change goes beyond personal preferences or routines and requires individuals to change their hearts and minds. Individuals may have to learn new ways of doing things and choose between what may appear to be contradictory values (Heifetz, 2020; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Persistent conflict also indicates that a challenge is adaptive.
- *Change agents* are individuals who do new things and try to spread innovative ideas and practices (Fullan, 1993; Lukacs & Galluzzo, 2014).
- *Collective efficacy* refers to the collective belief that teachers can make a positive difference that influences student outcomes (Donohoo et al., 2018).
- *College and career ready*, according to the KSBE, refers to a successful Kansas graduate who has the academic preparation, cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability skills, and civic engagement skills needed to succeed in postsecondary institutions or to move directly into the workforce without remediation (KSDE, 2018).
- *Design thinking* refers to "an iterative process in which we seek to understand the user, challenge assumptions, and redefine problems in an attempt to identify

alternative strategies and solutions that might not be instantly apparent with our initial level of understanding" (Friis Dam & Siang, 2020)

- *Focus groups* involve small groups of individuals selected to participate in a conversation around a particular topic and are led by a moderator or facilitator (Litosseliti, 2003).
- *Fundamental change* refers to organizational changes made to meet environmental demands for competition. Fundamental changes alter the very character of an organization (Walker et al., 2007).
- *Incremental change* refers to more minor, slower organizational changes that take place over time (Cuban, 2016).
- *Innovation in education* describes an environment where leaders encourage teachers to experiment and innovate their practice by engaging in inquiry (i.e., pose questions and gather and use evidence to decide how to change their practice). Teachers in this kind of environment remain open to thinking and doing things differently and openly discuss failures to learn from them (Kools et al., 2020).
- *Kansans Can School Redesign Project* is the process by which school systems and buildings transform education delivery around the following principles: student success skills, community partnerships, personalized learning, and real-world applications (KSDE, 2021).
- *Kansas State Board of Education* includes 10 elected board members who oversee K–12 education in Kansas. The KSBE website is http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=92.

- *Kansas State Department of Education* refers to the state educational agency that works on behalf of the KSBE to ensure federal and state compliance and advance and implement the goals of the KSBE. The KSDE website is http://www.ksde.org/Home.
- *Remote learning* refers to a form of education that districts across the state of Kansas utilized in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote learning did not merely involve a virtual curriculum and instruction. Remote learning was designed to approximate the student learning experience typically occurring during in-person classroom instruction.
- *School improvement* refers to a systemic way of planning school improvement and tracking it over time, using a school improvement plan (Hanover Research, 2014).
- *School improvement plan* is a written plan that organizes the school's changes to improve student achievement outcomes (Hanover Research, 2014).
- *Schools on improvement* refers to a designation determined by state education agencies in compliance with the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act. https://www.ksde.org/Agency/Division-of-Learning-Services/Special-Education-and-Title-Services/Title-Services
- *Shared leadership* refers to a leadership style that distributes leadership responsibilities within a team.
- *Teacher autonomy* is defined as "The professional independence of teachers in schools, especially the degree to which they can make decisions about what they teach to students and how they teach it" ("Teacher Autonomy," 2014).
- *Teacher leadership* is defined as "Teachers who are leaders lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher-learners and

influence others toward improved educational practice" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 5).

- *Technical challenge* refers to a challenge with a known solution that needs to be applied (Heifetz, 2020; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).
- *Transformational leadership* refers to a leadership style through which leaders prompt individuals and social systems to change. Ideally, transformational leaders create valuable and positive changes that influence a culture of learning (Balyer, 2012; Dumay & Galand, 2012).

  Virtual learning is learning that occurs through the use of computer software, the Internet, or both to deliver instruction to students. Virtual learning takes several forms, including computer-based, Internet-based, remote online teaching, blended learning, and facilitated virtual learning (Van Beek, 2011).

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Conditions

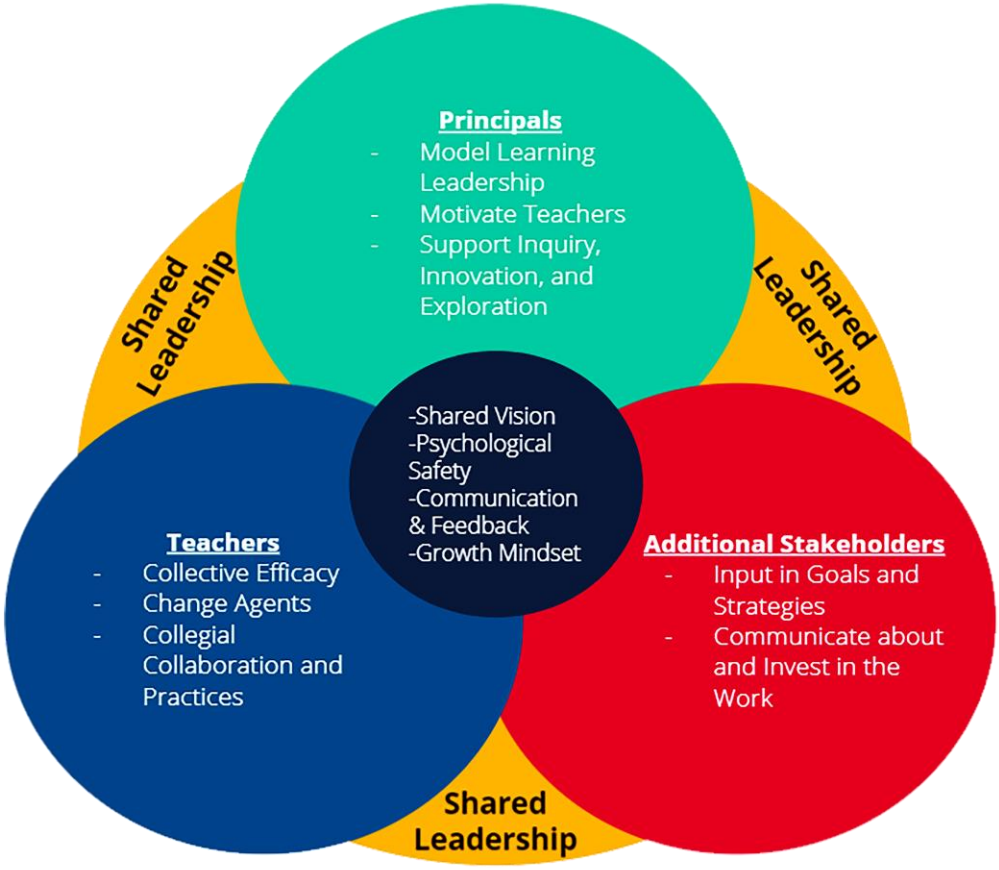
During the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic, fundamental and adaptive challenges permeated the conditions for Kansas Redesign schools, requiring the best innovation and leadership that Kansas teachers could offer. This literature review is organized around the theoretical framework defined by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) regarding the development of teacher leadership, in which the authors state that the principal's actions and the school's culture contribute to teachers' growth and development as leaders. This literature review also includes research on the aspects that contribute to successfully addressing adaptive challenges with innovation in K–12 schools. Larry Cuban's (2016) theory of fundamental change, blended with Ronald Heifetz's (2020) work on adaptive challenges, described the conditions that Kansas redesign teachers experienced through the Redesign process and, to a more considerable degree, while navigating the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic.

For schools to successfully prevail through such precarious times, they must have processes in place to implement innovative responses to adaptive challenges (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018). Redesign school leaders use the process of design thinking, fortified with the 4DXs, which provide structure to rapid response and innovative problem-solving (Liang et al., 2020). However, executing this depends on schools having established a collaborative and innovative learning culture where teacher leaders step out of their classroom roles to collaborate and act as change agents (Fullan, 1993; Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018; van der Heijden et al., 2018). Principals who exercise transformational learning leadership set the conditions for teacher leadership to develop and for the collaborative and innovative learning culture to grow, which increases teachers' collective efficacy (Balyer, 2012). Figure 2.1 illustrates how the roles of

teachers and principals impact the school's culture and ability to address adaptive challenges and fundamental change.

Figure 2.1.

Cultural Conditions for Kansas Redesign Schools (Mitchell et al., 2021)



When these constructs of a positive learning culture are in sync, over time, better long-term student outcomes result (e.g., postsecondary success, mental and physical health; Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Redding & Corbett, 2018; Teasley, 2017).

Principals, Culture, and Change Agents

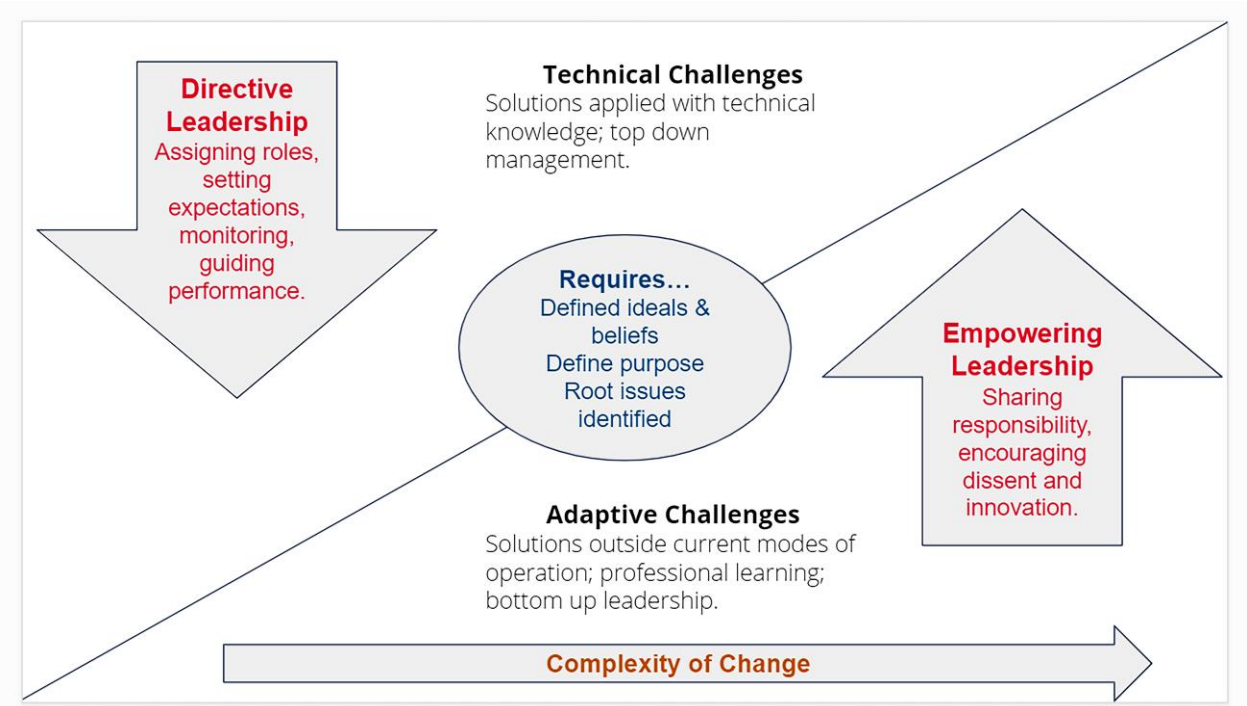
The Role of the Principal

Much has been written regarding the school principal's influential role. For this study, the focus was on the principal's role when leading through adaptive challenges, specifically related to creating and sustaining a collaborative and innovative learning culture. Kansas Redesign initiatives involved adaptive challenges; however, the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic created adaptive challenges never before experienced, and adaptive challenges require adaptive leadership (Ackerman et al., 2018; Garmeston & Wellman, 2013; Heifetz, 2020; Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; Linsky & Lawrence, 2011).

Adaptive leadership involves continuous learning, which necessitates an experimental and open learning mindset (Ackerman et al., 2018; Kools et al., 2020). That is not to say that principals must always share decision-making and never be direct. Figure 2.2 illustrates the balance principals need to navigate change. More technical aspects of a challenge can be resolved through directive leadership. There is a time to assign roles, set expectations, monitor progress, and guide performance. Directive leadership can be efficient and provide clarity that moves the work forward (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). However, the more adaptive challenges, where solutions fall outside the current modes of operation, the greater the need for empowering leadership, shared responsibility, and productive dissent. The fulcrum of this balance requires defined ideals and beliefs (i.e., a shared vision), defined purpose, and the identification of root issues (Goodwin et al., 2018).

Figure 2.2.

Technical Versus Adaptive Challenges (Goodwin et al., 2018)



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The principal's role that supports innovation is adaptive and transformational, with a dogged focus on students' learning (Ackerman et al., 2018; Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012). Transformational school leadership increases teachers' motivation and commitment to the school, influences school culture, and improves teacher efficacy (Dumay & Galand, 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2014). Leaders who utilize a more democratic leadership style create working cultures where teachers have better mental health and are more productive and enthusiastic about their jobs (Hoy et al., 2015). Transformational leaders willingly and purposely share leadership and decision-making within their buildings (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012; Schwartz, 2015). Shared responsibility is also essential, which requires principals to have the interpersonal skills to engage and mobilize teams of teachers in habits of prototyping or testing innovative strategies

and learning from and sharing rapid results with colleagues (Ackerman et al., 2018; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Linsky & Lawrence, 2011; Razzouk & Shute, 2012). Transformational leaders are

- knowledgeable,
- trusted and respectful of teachers,
- caring and safe,
- disciplined and decisive,
- focused on creating a family-like community school environment,
- positive,
- communicators of high expectations,
- aware of innovations,
- purposeful to speak the same language as the teachers, and
- excellent communicators (Ibrahim et al., 2014; Onorato, 2013; Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012).

Principals must be more than popular and friendly. A charismatic principal's positive intentions do not equate to transformational leadership that impacts student outcomes. Teachers can commit to a school but not to student learning unless the transformational leader intentionally builds a learning culture. School improvement challenges learning, not implementation (Forman et al., 2017). Principals have a unique role as they guide improvement efforts, which takes them away from traditional, managerial tasks to instead guide the culture toward learning while fostering psychological safety and relational trust (Forman et al., 2017; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). This focus on learning requires a commitment to the shared learning of all adults and students in the building. Principals must model learning and participate in professional learning with teachers (Forman et al., 2017; Kools et al., 2020). Collective learning

in teams, revisiting shared learning commitments, and participating in open, shared reflection on learning strengthens this learning culture and expands relational trust (Forman et al., 2017). Teacher leaders can impact school culture, but they cannot completely change the culture without a principal who welcomes and supports a collaborative and innovative learning culture (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012; Syamsudin, 2017).

Collaborative Learning Culture

The culture of the school matters because it creates the conditions for optimal learning. In their white paper, *Shifting School Culture to Spark Rapid Improvement*, Redding and Corbett (2018) defined school culture as "the underground stream of values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals, built up over time, that influence daily behavior and actions of everyone at the school and set the context for student learning" (Redding & Corbett, 2018, p. 1). Cansoy and Parlar (2017) differentiated between organizational culture and school culture by defining organizational culture as the fundamental values that create unity, shared understanding of how things are done, and integration of shared beliefs and values. In comparison, they defined school culture as the atmosphere that creates the feeling that all are part of the same team, working toward common objectives with agreement on curriculum and instructional elements. Because the human relationships within the school create and sustain the school culture, teacher leaders acting as change agents are essential components of school culture. The principal guides and influences school culture. These roles and relationships come together to nurture and sustain a collaborative learning culture that supports innovation. Kools et al. (2020) described schools with this type of culture as learning organizations

A look at dysfunctional organizations can help paint a picture of what school cultures should not be. Dysfunctional organizations are inefficient, ineffective, and result in low

performance and dissatisfied employees (Balthazard et al., 2006; Teasley, 2017). These organizations have low trust between colleagues, which creates resistance to collaboration. Lack of transparency in leadership in a school creates distrust and poor teacher, parent, and community relationships. Low academic expectations coupled with unorganized support for students produce dismal academic achievement, and punitive discipline practices lead to high negative student behaviors (Teasley, 2017). In addition, dissatisfied employees turnover more often, costing organizations money, time, and resources (Balthazard et al., 2006). When those dysfunctional organizations are schools, the dysfunction creates a principal turnover issue, lower teacher retention rates, lower student achievement gains, and a culture of failure (Béteille et al., 2012).

For decades, researchers have tried to decide upon the constructs that make up a high-quality learning organization. In schools with a positive learning culture, teachers report higher job satisfaction and a lower turnover rate (Lumby, 2012). Roles and communication in these organizations are clear and transparent (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Goodwin et al., 2018; Lumby, 2012), and they experience improved customer service and adaptability (Garmeston & Wellman, 2013; Lumby, 2012; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008). Kools et al. (2020) described the concept of school as a learning organization with eight dimensions: shared vision, continuous learning opportunities, team learning and collaboration, a culture of inquiry, innovation and exploration, systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge, and learning with and from an external environment. Other literature supported these dimensions.

Shared Vision

Leaders at learning organizations authentically seek and act upon stakeholder input. When school leaders solicit feedback from stakeholders, they must be transparent regarding what the feedback says and purposeful in communicating how feedback is being used to make changes. These actions break down barriers and build relational trust (Redding & Corbett, 2018). Feedback plays an integral part in developing a vision centered on student learning that is cocreated with external and internal partners. Members of the learning organization commit to shared values, moral purpose, and vision (Cross & Martinez, 2017; Goodwin et al., 2018; Kools et al., 2020). Successful and healthy schools have an organizational culture unified around fundamental values, how the school operates, and shared goals (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Forman et al., 2017). There must be harmony and peace among staff members in schools as they collaborate and work toward a shared vision (Bakkenes et al., 2010; Cansoy & Parlar, 2017).

Continuous Learning Opportunities

Learning organizations provide continuous learning opportunities focused on teaching, learning, and developing deep practice (Fullan, 2002; Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Kools et al., 2020; Rouleau, 2018; Teasley, 2017). Engaging students and their families in pursuing educational goals takes priority. Students and families set students' learning goals, and working toward these goals builds the students' intrinsic motivation for high-quality learning (Redding & Corbett, 2018). Teachers in these organizations commit to their professional development; seek out opportunities to learn; and practice, reflect, and collaborate to improve the teaching techniques that improve student outcomes (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Bakkenes et al., 2010; Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012; Steiner et al., 2017; van der Heijden et al., 2018). School leaders make team learning and collaboration high priorities by providing time in the

school schedule for them to occur and establishing protocols for teachers to peer coach and observe their colleagues (Donohoo et al., 2018; Rouleau, 2018; Teasley, 2017). These leaders also value learning together and building collective efficacy over learning in isolation (Kools et al., 2020). When a high degree of collective efficacy exists, teachers share a belief that they can positively influence outcomes for all students (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Donohoo et al., 2018; Hattie & Donoghue, 2016).

Culture of Inquiry, Innovation, and Exploration

Leaders in learning organizations cultivate a culture of inquiry, innovation, and exploration where teachers embrace collegiality, open dialogue, and honest reflection of their students' learning data in a purposely inclusive culture (Kools et al., 2020; Rouleau, 2018). There is a positive earnestness where teacher leaders convince colleagues to reject the status quo by inspiring and energizing them rather than creating anger or frustration (Ash & Persall, 2000; Kools et al., 2020; Pearce et al., 2003). This urgency around improving student learning increases the pace and rigor of strategy implementation (Redding & Corbett, 2018). The staff unites around issues in ways that prioritize diverse perspectives, model respect among all participants, and encourage and support systems that promote group interactions (Cashman et al., 2014). The staff approach challenges with a strengths-based, growth mindset that promotes professional learning, innovation, and action (Dweck, 2006; Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018; Goodwin et al., 2018; Hanson et al., 2016; Rouleau, 2018).

Systems for Exchanging Learning

Learning organization leaders have clear and organized methods for collecting and exchanging knowledge and learning. These structures include protocols for teachers to engage in regular dialogue and share knowledge among staff (Garmeston & Wellman, 2013; Kools et al.,

2020). Staff is adept at using data, research, and evidence from action research to improve their practice (Kools et al., 2020; Learning Point Associates, 2004; Redding & Corbett, 2018). Staff regularly reflect and evaluate whether their strategies have the intended impact on student learning (Beckman & Barry, 2007; Hesbol, 2017; McChesney et al., 2012).

Learning From External Sources

Learning organization leaders seek out opportunities to learn with and from the external environment. These leaders collaborate with social and health services within their community to respond to student needs and interact with higher education institutions to deepen staff and student learning. These leaders also look for opportunities to share their learning with educators outside of their system and participate in collaborative school-to-school networks. They may seek out learning from an outside expert. However, they aim to build local capacity, not become dependent on external consultants (Kools et al., 2020).

Teacher Leaders and Change Agents

Teacher Leaders

Teacher leadership has been defined and redefined over the past 20 years. In their book, *Awakening the Sleeping Giant: Helping Teachers Develop as Leaders*, Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) defined teacher leadership and wrote that the principal's actions and the school's culture contribute to the growth and development of teachers as leaders. Other researchers referenced this groundbreaking book multiple times in the articles covered for this literature review. Although some teachers may serve in formal teacher leadership roles, such as instructional coaches, department chairs, or teacher mentors, authentic teacher leadership occurs outside any official position or job description (Fullan, 1993; Gunter, 2006; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Taylor et al., 2011). Informal teacher leadership results more from influence and collective

efficacy than teacher leadership as a formal position (Angelle & Teague, 2014). In other words, a position's formality does not equate to influence (Fullan, 1993). The *Teacher Leader Model Standards*, created by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium in 2008, defined teacher leadership as "the process by which teachers . . . influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of the school community to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2008, p. 10). This definition, and the supporting document, appeared to stop the teachers' influence at the community level. The NNSTOY, however, built upon this work by including teacher leadership roles beyond the school or local community to influence the profession, educator effectiveness, and access to excellent teaching for all students at the state or national levels (Jacques et al., 2016). The NNSTOY definition of teacher leadership includes the following actions:

- foster collaborative culture to support colleagues' professional development,
- use research to improve professional practice,
- promote professional learning focused on continuous improvement,
- facilitate instructional improvements that lead to student learning,
- promote appropriate use of assessments and data to inform decisions,
- improve collaboration with families and community,
- shape educational policy, and
- advocate for students and the teaching profession (Jacques et al., 2016).

Teacher leaders serve not only as teaching and learning experts within their classrooms but among their peers. They are known to volunteer to lead and accept responsibility for tasks outside of their classrooms (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017). This individual behavior exists outside of

the organizational hierarchy and may not be recognized formally, such as with a title or additional pay (Angelle & Teague, 2014). Teachers who take on additional leadership roles help their colleagues feel supported and encouraged, share their expertise willingly and informally, and contribute to a culture that values collaboration (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Taylor et al., 2011; Thoonen et al., 2011).

Under normal circumstances, teacher leadership develops over time. As educators improve their teaching practices, their leadership skills develop (Jacques et al., 2016; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). The NNSTOY report supported this notion and outlined a methodology with a four-stage teacher leadership development continuum. In the preservice stage, teachers begin their careers and learn how to teach. In the novice stage, which lasts from 1–5 years, teachers gain skills and confidence in the profession. During the career stage, which typically begins after the sixth year, teachers have achieved a certain level of mastery in the profession but have not yet taken on significant leadership roles outside of their classroom. According to this document, the teacher leader stage begins after teachers become state teachers of the year or assume other state or national leadership responsibilities (Jacques et al., 2016). Teacher leadership roles can be enacted throughout the developmental progression, including collaboration and self-reflection, connecting research to practice, and modeling. The fourth characteristic, typically not seen in the most developed teacher leadership stage, is risk-taking (Jacques et al., 2016). Kansas teachers, during the COVID-19 school closings, likely needed to jump into risk taking.

Change Agents

Teachers who are change agents positively influence peers and students. These teachers embrace change, both in and out of the classroom, and exercise agency, making intentional

choices about their work (Fullan, 1993; Lukacs & Galluzzo, 2014; van der Heijden et al., 2018). Teachers can develop into change agents. In 1993, Michael Fullan made a case for why teachers must become change agents in that moral purpose and change agentry are the cornerstone of what teaching and change all about. Donohoo et al. (2018) circled back to this idea of teachers as change agents as an indispensable piece of teachers building collective efficacy within a school culture. Change agents have a specific mindset about their profession. They exercise their expertise to influence their classroom and the school's climate and culture, described as a bottom-up influence. These skilled teachers possess an inner drive to make a difference in their students' lives, with their colleagues, and within the school community (Donohoo et al., 2018; Fullan, 2002).

In 2009, Lukacs created a Teacher Change Agent Scale. This scale breaks down the actions of teacher change agents into four categories: mastery, collaboration, entrepreneurial spirit, and commitment to lifelong learning. Teachers who act as change agents are masters of their craft. They are able and eager to guide their colleagues. They act as committed, self-assured, and positive role models within their building and behave in collaborative and collegial ways. These teachers value collaboration because they know that they grow when they work with others (van der Heijden et al., 2018). Change agents also exhibit an entrepreneurial spirit, but not because they aim to profit from their work. In this case, *entrepreneurial* refers to teachers who are innovative and receptive to new insights. They know how to apply these new insights into practice, and they are creative and willing to take calculated risks. Finally, change agents commit themselves to lifelong learning and learn from their work and their colleagues. They do not wait for their district to provide professional development on a topic they need; instead, they

seek out opportunities for further professional learning, and they critically reflect on their practices in a never-ending cycle of self-improvement (Lukacs, 2009).

Lukas and Galluzo (2014) and Van der Heijden et al. (2018) described significant personality factors that exemplify teachers as change agents. These personality factors synthesize into the following five qualities:

1. Openness to new experiences. Teachers with this personality factor are curious, creative, and eager to explore the unfamiliar.
2. Emotional stability. Teachers show this by regulating positive and unpleasant feelings and emotions. It takes emotional stability to face professional failures and grow from them or overcome nervousness from calculated risk-taking.
3. Conscientiousness. These teachers are organized, motivated, and goal-oriented. They persevere through challenging situations.
4. Some degree of extroversion. These teachers are friendly, assertive, and sometimes talkative.
5. Agreeableness. Agreeable teachers are friendly, compassionate, and committed to others. They look for common ground and are antagonistic (Lukacs & Galluzzo, 2014; van der Heijden et al., 2018).

However, personality alone does not predict whether a teacher will grow to be a change agent. Important contextual and cultural factors also play a role. The van der Heijden et al. (2018) study resulted in the development of four teacher profiles created from over 1,000 teacher survey responses. Notably, the teacher ratings in these surveys were not objective. Individual interviews or case studies could delve deeper and validate some teachers' self-perceptions, but the results of the survey were fascinating nonetheless. Profile 1 teachers were the furthest away

from being change agents. They focused the least on students or on being a professional. Many in this profile scored low on agreeableness and openness to new experiences. Profile 2 teachers were motivated professionals who focused on students. However, they did not necessarily focus on student learning. They reported enjoying working with students, but they rated low on emotional stability because they had feelings of insecurity or incompetence. Newer teachers often fell into this category. Van der Heijden et al. asserted that guidance and support could help teachers in Profile 2 grow to a higher profile over time. Profile 3 teachers were motivated, established professionals who had grown too comfortable. They did their job well and with satisfaction, but they did not look for innovation and did not score high on collaboration. The teachers in Profile 4 represented the change agents. They aimed to be as skilled as possible and focused on student learning. Van der Heijden et al. asserted:

> The relationship between focus on innovation at the school level and confidence in their own abilities may indicate that teachers as change agents, in contrast to the other teachers, have a more leading role in the change processes at school, which require having faith in their own abilities and work-related knowledge (p. 367).

This statement aligned with the work of Lukacs (2012), who argued that teachers as change agents initiate change beyond their classrooms (Lukacs & Galluzzo, 2014). It should be the principal's goal to develop more Profile 4 teachers, but leaders must also be cautious. These teachers set such high standards for themselves that they are prone to job-related stress. They can feel unappreciated and, because they have high expectations of themselves, may feel isolated from their colleagues (van der Heijden et al., 2018). Of the five significant personality factors, the research in this study showed that openness to innovative classroom experiences is essential; however, a low number of teachers self-reported being open to new experiences. This finding

represents a quandary because a low willingness to innovate may suggest a low capacity to change the school (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Thurlings et al., 2015).

Transformational school leadership plays an integral role in creating conditions where teachers can grow to be change agents (Fullan, 2002; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Three general factors set the stage for this type of growth. First, the principal focuses on the quality of education and educational change. This occurs when principals work with staff to create a shared vision for the school, giving teachers individualized attention and support and intellectually challenging them to grow professionally. Second, principals help set conditions by enabling and encouraging teachers to participate in leadership decision-making beyond their classroom. This gives teachers a degree of autonomy within their classrooms and the broader school culture. Third, the principal fosters a collaborative learning culture and supports this by creating time and space in the daily schedule for collaboration to occur (van der Heijden et al., 2018).

Change Theories

Fundamental and Incremental Change

The concepts of fundamental and incremental change are not new. The origins of Cuban's theory of fundamental and incremental change are rooted in the research of Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland, and Richard Fisch from the early 1970s, and it is no less relevant today (Waks, 2007; Watzlawick et al., 1974). Waks described fundamental educational change as adjustments and readjustments in an educational organization that change "educational ideas, norms, organizational arrangements, and frameworks that constitute education as a social institution" (Waks, 2007, p. 294). Examples of fundamental changes occurring over the last 200 years in education include closing country schools to consolidate them into grade schools and secondary schools in town, increasing qualifications for teacher licensure, and the desegregation

of schools in 1954; even providing students and families with more curricular choices can be considered a fundamental change (Cuban, 2016; Waks, 2007; Walker et al., 2007). There have been other fundamental changes, such as the shift from mostly private, religious, or short-term schools to the public, secular system designed to push all students to graduate high school and go on to postsecondary education (Cuban, 2013). Schools and districts have undergone policy changes intended to modify teaching and learning. Most of these changes were meant to be incremental, but some were intended to remove antiquated practices and fundamentally change teaching and learning. However, over time the inconsistencies play out repeatedly. Some structures have changed, but there remains an ingrained continuity in how classrooms function that is familiar to each generation (Cuban, 2013). Examples of persistent features include lectures, whole-group activities, textbooks, homework, question and answer recitations of memorized facts, blackboards and whiteboards, worksheets, paper and pencil tests, and, perhaps most importantly, teacher-directed instruction (Cuban, 2013).

An enigma exists regarding fundamental and incremental changes in U.S. schools. Many school improvement initiatives start as fundamental changes but drift into incremental change (i.e., minor alterations to existing educational components) because of the difficulty and complexity of managing fundamental change (Cuban, 2016). On the other hand, incremental changes are more marginalized and are perceived as safer because they build upon what is already widely known and accepted (Cuban, 2016; Waks, 2007). Whether changes are incremental or fundamental, those planning the changes should be intentional about how the change will grow and be sustained (Cuban, 2013, 2016). There must be stability throughout the process. Stability and change are interdependent, and this interdependence keeps organizations in equilibrium (Cuban, 2013). School leaders often opt for implementing a series of incremental

changes over time to guide them in a general direction that is more aligned with the school and district vision. However, the spring of 2020 turned school improvement upside down and necessitated fundamental change as schools flipped instruction from face-to-face to virtual or remote instructions in approximately 10 days, which left no time to implement an incremental change (Bonella et al., 2020). Kansas teachers wrestled with long-documented issues of how to manage complex fundamental change, contending with difficult questions regarding equity and ethics, and making decisions without the time to prototype and test strategies (Beckman & Barry, 2007; Scheer & Noweski, 2012; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Sheninger, 2017).

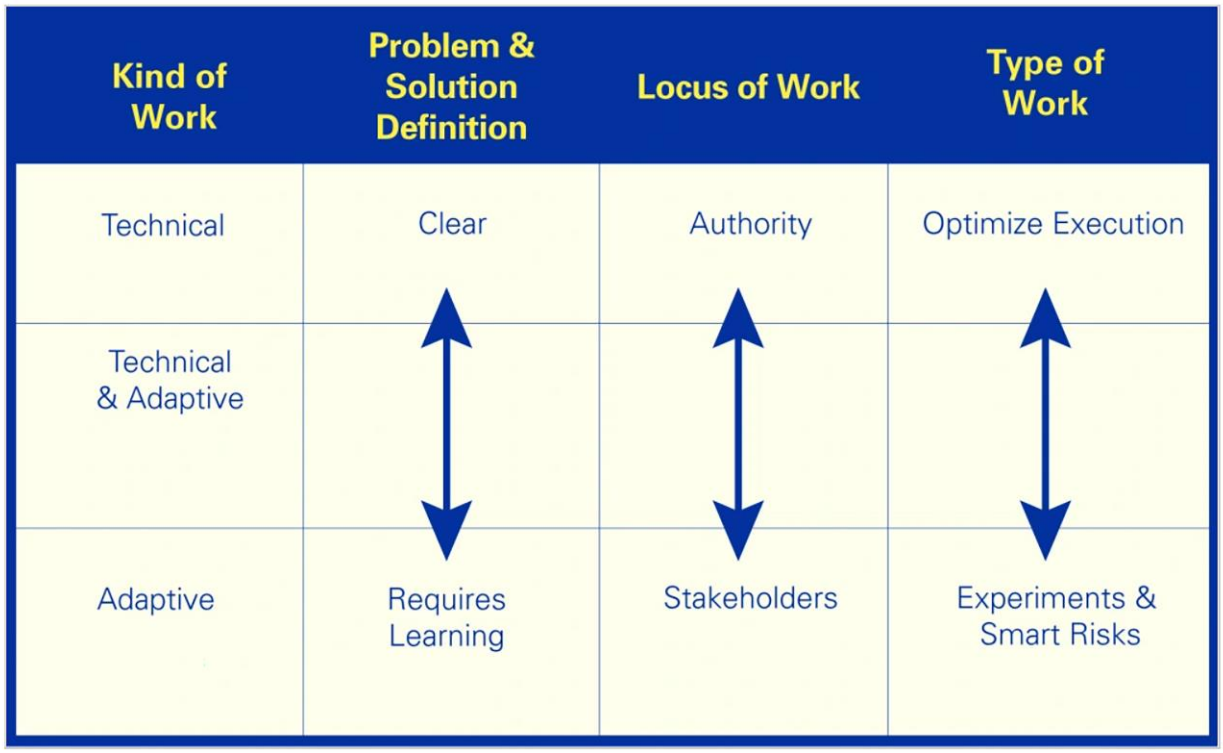
Adaptive and Technical Challenges

Another way to approach challenges is to determine if they are adaptive, technical, or a combination of the two. Whether a change occurs in business, industry, education, or personal life, if no technical manual for solving it exists and no experts can help, then it represents an adaptive challenge (Garmeston & Wellman, 2013; Heifetz, 2020; Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Roberto, 2004). Solutions to technical challenges follow a formula or a logical progression laid out in instructions (Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; O'Malley & Cebula, 2015). An educational example of a technical challenge might be the implementation of a new learning management system that teachers need to learn how to operate. In this case, the company providing the system would also provide training to walk teachers through what they need to know. Adaptive challenges require creativity and leadership because no instructions exist and no experts will arrive to help (Heifetz, 2020; Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Adaptive challenges represent the path for innovators. For decades, school leaders have tried to solve adaptive challenges with technical solutions. Such has been the traditional way of school improvement. As a result, school leaders have continually

failed to sustain their changes or reap the intended results (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Garmeston & Wellman, 2013; Waks, 2007). Leaders experience tremendous community and political pressures to fix adaptive challenges with quick, technical solutions (Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; O'Malley & Cebula, 2015). However, Linsky and Lawrence (2011) explained: "the most common cause of failure in leadership comes from treating what we call adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems" (p. 7). Even more confusing is that most challenges contain technical and adaptive aspects (Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; O'Malley & Cebula, 2015). The figure below illustrates how the approach to the challenge shifts depending on whether it is technical, adaptive, or a combination of both.

Figure 2.3.

Identifying Adaptive Challenges (O'Malley, 2014)



Determining whether challenges are technical, adaptive, or both represents just the beginning of the journey. Technical challenges are logical, making it easier to secure buy-in from

participants, but adaptive challenges produce more resistance because they require participants to examine and possibly change their values and beliefs (Linsky & Lawrence, 2011). To move forward on an adaptive challenge, the leader must provide a way for staff and stakeholders to grieve and let go of the way things used to be (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; O'Malley & Cebula, 2015). Conversations about how to solve adaptive challenges are messy and circular to the extent that Garmeston and Wellman (2013) dedicated over 300 pages of *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups* to guidance on how to facilitate meetings, develop group norms, and manage constructive conflict to help schools move through adaptive challenges. Adaptive work requires new learning that involves multiple stakeholders to try innovations and learn from them. Adaptive work is long-term, and those who engage in it must maintain an attitude of curiosity (Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Linsky & Lawrence, 2011). Because adaptive challenges and solutions are open-ended and muddled, leaders should have protocols for stepping through this type of creative problem-solving (Garmeston & Wellman, 2013).

Kansas Redesign Change Process

Kansas school faculty and staff participating in the Kansas Redesign learn to use design thinking with the 4DXs as a school improvement process. Much like designing and building a new home with the input of the family, design thinking supports creativity in building a school improvement plan using feedback from the end-users (i.e., the students and families), and the 4DXs provide a framework for ensuring that the plan is implemented (Mitchell et al., 2021).

Design Thinking

The five stages of design thinking are: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test (Friis Dam & Siang, 2020; Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018; Koh et al., 2015; Plattner, 2010). These

steps have been introduced to Kansas Redesign schools linearly, but they have not necessarily been implemented in a linear sequence because data collected throughout the process may indicate a need to rapidly and fluidly jump ahead or backtrack (Mintrop, 2016; Plattner, 2010). Design thinking is not new, but it has only recently been applied to education (Hesbol, 2017; Koh et al., 2015; Mintrop, 2016; Plattner, 2010; Schurr, 2012). Peter Rowe, director of urban design programs at Harvard, published *Design Thinking* in 1987, and the context was design in architecture and the creation of urban artifacts (Friis Dam & Siang, 2020; Rowe, 1987). The Stanford Design School created the Innovation Design Engineering Organization in 1991, and this work pushed design thinking into the mainstream business world. In 1992, Richard Buchanan of the Carnegie Mellon University published an article entitled "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," which described how design thinking integrates multiple specialized fields to jointly approach new, adaptive problems (Buchanan, 1992).

Design thinkers in education lend themselves to creative thinking and innovative behavior focused on the students (Scheer & Noweski, 2012). Design thinking offers many benefits as a school improvement framework. Using design thinking creates the conditions whereby schools' values and the ideals of visionary and transformational leaders can connect innovation with evidence that the implemented strategies produce the intended results (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018). Design thinkers remain sensitive to the local context and the complexities of implementing interventions in real-life school conditions. This approach also relies on teacher autonomy and teachers who are skilled change agents who can rapidly and creatively consider user feedback and make the necessary pivots to impact student learning (Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018; Mintrop, 2016).

The 4DXs

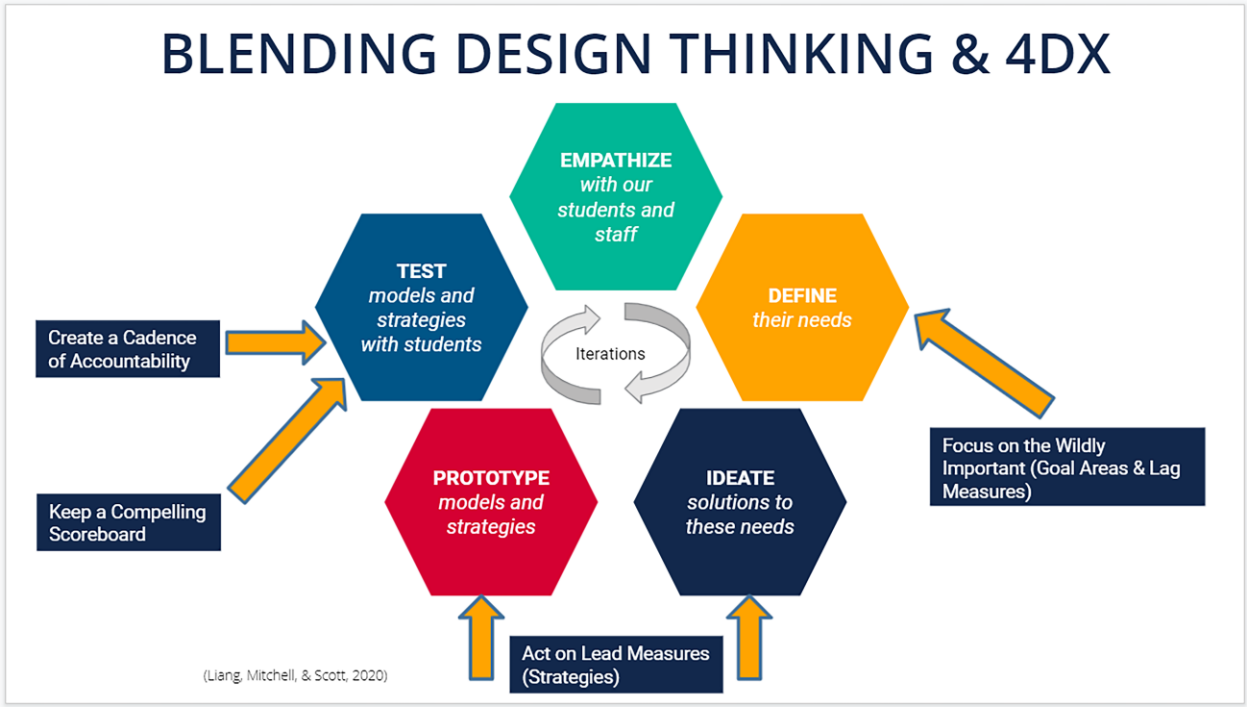
The 4DXs have been tested, refined, and proven by thousands of teams over many years around the world as effective in helping teams achieve their wildly important goals (McChesney, 2020; McChesney et al., 2012). These simple disciplines contain concrete guidelines and procedures to execute strategies that support lead measures (McChesney, 2020; McChesney et al., 2012). The 4DXs are:

1. Focus on the wildly important goal. Doing so requires that leaders identify and articulate two or three specific goals.
2. Act on the lead measure. A lead measure predicts whether or not achieving the wildly important goal is likely. Lead measures track the activities or interventions that lead to success on the lag measure (i.e., wildly important goals).
3. Keep a compelling scoreboard. Scoreboards should be transparent, straightforward, and publicly posted so that everyone (i.e., internal and external stakeholders) can maintain focus and monitor progress.
4. Create a cadence of accountability, where each team meets weekly to briefly highlight successes, analyze failures, and make course corrections as necessary (McChesney, 2020, p. 4; McChesney et al., 2012, p. 4).

The Kansas Redesign project team believed that integrating design thinking with the 4DXs would support creativity and effectiveness in transforming schools (see Figure 2.4; Liang et al., 2020).

Figure 2.4.

Kansas School Redesign Process (Liang et al., 2020).



The empathize stage of design thinking accentuates the school community's need to know and care about their students (i.e., the users) to create meaningful learning experiences. The innovator must observe or interview stakeholders (i.e., students and families) to gain a deep understanding of their thoughts, values, and priorities (Schurr, 2012). The innovator should aim to identify stakeholders' physical and emotional needs, gain deeper insights than what quantitative survey data can show, and determine if data can be pulled together to create user (i.e., learner) profiles. Educators who incorporate empathy into their practice see students with fresh eyes and honor the humanness behind every test score. Empathizing with students means looking at the whole child, including their physical and mental health, home culture, language barriers, passions and interests, strengths, and barriers (Cross & Martinez, 2017; Schurr, 2012).

The define stage of design thinking involves using feedback from users to define a problem of practice or identify a wildly important goal (McChesney et al., 2012; Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019). Challenges must be clearly defined. The artifact created in this step is a clearly defined, meaningful, and actionable problem statement that focuses on the end-user (i.e., the learner profiles). In this integral step, educators must collectively and collaboratively decide their priorities. It may be that many problems or challenges are defined, but staying focused on what is most important will set the foundation for the following stages (Plattner, 2010). For a group to define a problem, they must consider what patterns emerged from the empathize data. Synthesizing the data to express insights in an actionable problem statement will focus and frame the issue, inspire the team, offer an anchor for evaluating competing ideas, and empower the team to move forward (McChesney et al., 2012; Mintrop, 2016; Mintrop & Zumpe, 2019; Plattner, 2010; Schurr, 2012). It will also prevent the group from becoming overwhelmed. At this stage in design thinking, the first discipline of execution is applied. Identifying and then focusing on the aims of the wildly important goal means to "focus your finest effort on the goals that will make all the difference, instead of giving mediocre effort to dozens of goals" (McChesney et al., 2012, p. 23).

The purpose of the ideate stage is to brainstorm as many broad ideas as possible without worrying about coming up with the right or best idea. The best ideas will be determined in the next stage through user testing and feedback. Ideation helps problem-solvers move beyond obvious solutions and harness the collective creative perspective of the team. Creating a large volume and wide variety of innovative options keeps team members open to avoiding obvious and historically unsuccessful ideas (Plattner, 2010). Many protocols exist to help groups ideate. Brainstorming, bodystorming, mind mapping, and sketching all represent ways to spur creativity

during ideation. One common theme in these approaches to ideation is the imperative to avoid judgment. Participants should avoid saying things such as, “That will not work,” or “We have tried that before,” or “We cannot afford to do that.” Eliminating judgment frees members to use imagination and creativity (Koh et al., 2015; Plattner, 2010). There will be time for logistical trial and error in other stages. At the end of the ideation stage, teams then use a protocol to vote for their top three ideas. Those ideas will move to the prototype stage.

In the prototype stage, innovators aim to select a few ideas to test quickly and cheaply, collect feedback from users and colleagues, and decide if the idea should be scrapped or developed into a more refined prototype. A prototype is a visual plan of how the team will experiment with the ideation to see if it should stick. The plan can be anything: a sketch, a wall of sticky notes, a storyboard. Prototyping provides an opportunity to problem-solve, communicate new ideas to other stakeholders, or start a conversation about how the idea might be developed. Prototyping also allows ideas to fail quickly and cheaply, before much time and money has been invested in them. This also helps innovators identify previously hidden variables to make adaptations early (Plattner, 2010). These prototypes that will be tested may be selected as the lead measures or strategies that can be leveraged to achieve the wildly important goals while adhering to financially stringent contexts (Koh et al., 2015; McChesney et al., 2012).

In the test stage, innovators convert prototypes into actions. Tests provide another opportunity to understand the user (i.e., students) better, using more quantitative data. It is important not to base decisions on whether or not users liked the prototypes tested; instead, innovators must use data to determine if the prototypes being tested move the needle on intended lead measures. Testing is essential to refine solutions, learn more about the user, and refine the problem of practice. In the case of Kansas Redesign, school leaders have tried some of their

prototypes on a small scale. Schools use a compelling scoreboard during these stages, another discipline of the 4DX, to track the data for the prototype being tested. All these stages contribute to strengthening or reestablishing the last discipline of the 4DX, creating a cadence of accountability by using data critically and purposefully for decision-making (Adams & Kirst, 1999; McChesney et al., 2012). Lessons learned become the building blocks for constructing a comprehensive redesign plan—in this case, the culminating artifact of the first planning year of Kansas Redesign. Design thinking is not a linear process, so iteration makes the process effective. Iteration represents the foundation of good design and is a necessary part of tailoring the solutions to adaptive challenges around local contexts.

Teacher-Led and Administrator-Supported Decision-Making

Design thinking is a process that requires creativity and analytical skills. It guides and engages innovative decision makers in opportunities to experiment, create, and prototype strategies, gather feedback from stakeholders and either pivot or implement the strategy for the intended outcomes Design thinking supports creative innovation in education. Designers solve problems by synthesizing information about the end-user, which is different but not opposed to traditional school improvement, which relies on a more scientific problem-solving framework centered around data analysis (Cross, 2006). Design thinking principles were not alien to Kansas educators because they overlap with traditional plan-do-study-act school improvement cycles implemented over the past 2 decades (Learning Point Associates, 2004). However, the 4DXs combined with design thinking vocabulary and strategies were new for Kansas teachers and administrators. They required a teacher-led decision-making structure that differed from the traditional district-to-principal-to-teacher chain of command. This mindset and practice of collective efficacy presented an intentional challenge to traditional top-down school governance

(Gallagher & Thordarson, 2018; Sheninger, 2017). Using design thinking and the 4DXs to approach adaptive challenges required schools to create and sustain their learning organization's culture.

Chapter Summary

Schools are complex organizations made up of fallible human beings with talents, abilities, weaknesses, and personalities. Each one of these individuals either builds or destroys school culture. The pressure of addressing the unprecedented fundamental and adaptive challenges of the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic tested Kansas Redesign educators, causing them to dig deep into what they already knew about addressing adaptive challenges. Teachers exercising collaboration and autonomy as change agents, effective principal leaders, and a culture focused on learning represent three inextricable cords in a braid. Teacher leadership requires a collaborative culture to grow and develop (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Cansoy & Parlar, 2017). Teachers must have autonomy and exercise teacher leadership in change agents' roles (Mintrop, 2016). The transformational, learning-focused principal creates the conditions and models the characteristics that support a collaborative culture (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Fullan, 2002; Teasley, 2017). These related concepts are necessary for successful, traditional learning systems, but more teachers must be change agents when rapid innovation is required. These change agents must be empowered to experiment with innovative techniques, reflect on the successes and failures of those techniques, and collaborate to share learning from successes and failures with colleagues (Bakkenes et al., 2010; Fullan, 1993; Lukacs & Galluzzo, 2014; van der Heijden et al., 2018). The 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic required individuals within schools to become comfortable with conflict and challenging conversations (Heifetz & Grashow, 2009).

Schools that persevered and prevailed had processes already in place to address such challenges and had a culture that encouraged learning, inquiry, innovation, and exploration.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

In the literature review, I laid the foundation for what the research says regarding the growth and development of teacher leaders, including the principal's critical role in fostering a learning culture in which teachers can practice their emerging leadership skills and develop collective efficacy. In this chapter, I discuss how I conducted focus group interview research in service of the study's purpose, which was to learn more about the growth and development of teacher leaders in Kansas during the 2020–2021 school response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions that guided this study were:

- How did Kansas redesign teachers demonstrate leadership through the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do Kansas redesign teachers describe the leadership growth they experienced during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do Kansas redesign teachers describe their principal's role in supporting teacher leadership growth during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodological Framework

This study was rooted in the constructivist epistemology and the framework of symbolic interactionism. Jean Piaget (1967) established constructivism, teaching that individuals construct knowledge based upon their experiences, and each experience changes the individual's schemata (Wadsworth, 1984). Constructivists believe that people construct meaning as they engage in the world (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998) and that social players continually construct social phenomena and meaning, putting meaning in a constant state of revision (Bryman, 2016). In this research, I explored the participants' constructed meaning at a particular point in time and under the particular circumstances of the Kansas school redesign during an unprecedented pandemic.

The realities participants construct and the meanings they associate with those realities result from an ongoing construction between the self and other (society or culture) in which they reside (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004, p. 173).

Symbolic interactionism originated from American pragmatism and is based on Herbert Blumer's work and influenced by George Herbert Mead (Blumer & Morrione, 2004). Individuals grow and develop through a social process that involves continuous action, symbol manipulation, and negotiation of situations' meanings (Carter & Fuller, 2015; Mead, 1934). Individuals also assign meanings to different objects or concepts based on their first-hand experiences (Blumer, 1969; Crotty, 1998). The central idea of symbolic interactionism is that individuals use language and symbols to communicate with others (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Symbolic interactionism includes three key features:

- It can help explain how interactions with symbols create meaning in participants' lives.
- It provides a way to understand how people see themselves and others and how they think others perceive them.
- It provides a way to understand the social reality that participants experienced while interacting with and constructing meaning in their world (Bhattacharya, 2017; Crotty, 1998).

Symbolic interactionism was an appropriate choice for this study because interesting conversations evolved when groups of teachers communicated around a particular term, but the individuals involved held different, sometimes conflicting, concepts of what that term meant. For example, a pilot survey that I conducted in 2019 showed that teachers had very different ideas of what it meant to "lead" or be a "teacher leader," based on their individual experiences and social

processes (Mitchell, 2019). Humans use language and symbols to communicate with each other (Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2015); it is "how individuals make sense of their world from their unique perspective" (Carter & Fuller, 2015, p. 1). I relied on symbolic interactionism in this study to investigate how participants developed their leadership and what they interpreted teacher leadership to mean through their experiences.

Research Design

I chose a qualitative focus group interview methodology for this study. Focus groups involve small groups of participants selected to participate in a facilitator-led conversation around a particular topic (Litosseliti, 2003). I determined this method would be appropriate for this qualitative study because it would give participants the opportunity to explore teacher leadership growth through social interactions that would enhance their discussions. (Lederman, 1990; Litosseliti, 2003; Morgan, 1997). Also, focus group conversations may feel more comfortable, natural, and less intimidating than a one-on-one interview (Krueger & Casey, 2000). During them, participants influence each other, encouraging richer conversation and more in-depth data (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). I heard multiple viewpoints during the focus group discussions, enabling me to understand participants' opinions, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and experiences (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups benefit educational research because they provide a safe atmosphere, and synergy [between participants] that can give voice to participants and stimulate new thinking that may not be generated in individual interviews (Lederman, 1990, p. 120). Additionally, I chose this methodology because it was an extremely challenging year for teachers, and asking them to volunteer for a study seemed like an imposition. However, Byron (1995) stated that participants in focus group studies might, as a result of the experience, have an

increased sense of empowerment from being valued and engaged as experts as they interact with the other participants (Byron, 1995).

Focus groups have their limitations, and care must be taken to ensure that the research study is intentionally designed (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Litosseliti, 2003). For example, the potential for bias and manipulation exists because the researcher could lead participants, encouraging them to respond to the researcher's prejudices, or participants may say what they believe the researcher wants to hear (Morgan, 1997). When groups get together, those with strong personalities or similar views may dominate the conversation, and others with different views may stay quiet (Litosseliti, 2003). Researchers must also remember that certain people are more likely to volunteer for focus group studies. Anita Gibbs (1997), from the Centre for Criminological Research at Oxford University, found that focus group volunteers are primarily extroverts. However, many of these limitations can be addressed through careful and specific planning, such as the following:

- purposely planning and organizing the focus group meeting according to best practices;
- creating and communicating rules and norms, explaining to participants that there are no right or wrong answers, and the group is not expected to agree or reach consensus;
- carefully developing the questions; and
- having an additional person (i.e., observer or assistant) present when conducting focus group discussions (Litosseliti, 2003).

Relevant Study Context for Participant Recruitment and Selection

In July 2020, the KSDE administered a survey to approximately 500 public school educators who had responded to Watson's invitation to review the *Navigating Change 2020*

Guidance. The primary purpose of conducting the survey was to help inform KSDE of the teachers' and schools' professional learning needs around competency-based learning; however, a secondary purpose was to probe teachers from Redesign schools for additional information. KSDE requested the Region 12 Comprehensive Center's assistance in analyzing and summarizing the responses from three open-ended survey items. Respondents were asked to provide feedback by completing a unique survey for each content area or grade band they elected. A total of 118 participants from various cohorts within the Redesign project responded. They included individuals who were certified teachers (82%), worked in an elementary school (44%) or secondary school (38%), and worked in schools with fewer than 500 students (71%). The school location for the majority of respondents was a rural community (55%). The breakout regarding the cohort appears in Table 3.1. It was important to note that the number of participating schools in each cohort was not consistent. For example, the Mercury cohort included just 14 schools, but the Gemini II cohort represented the largest to date, with 35 schools. Also notable, Apollo represented the newest cohort, and the 2020 school closures interrupted their planning year, so although they had participated in the training, they had not yet implemented their planned strategies.

Table 3.1.

Redesign Participants by Cohort

Redesign cohort	Percentage	*N*
Mercury	13.6	16
Gemini I	37.3	44
Gemini II	30.5	36
Apollo	18.6	22

The survey included the following open-ended question for respondents who reported being part of a Redesign school: “How did your experiences as a Redesign school prepare you for teaching and leading through the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic?” There were 113 responses to this question. In the thematic analysis, responses were categorized into 11 areas shown in Table 3.2. Notably, nearly 40% of the participants mentioned their ability to apply a growth mindset, embrace change, and be flexible through the challenges. Educators also mentioned already having the technology, tools, strategies, and structures that could be enhanced during the school response. Importantly, 8% of respondents felt the Redesign training did not prepare them for the school response.

Table 3.2.

Redesign Preparation for Leadership Through Spring 2020

Theme	Percentage	*N*
Growth mindset, embracing, and being able to change, flexibility, used to thinking outside the box.	38.1	43
Had the technology or learning management systems	15.9	18
Equipped with the tools, strategies, processes, and/or had structures in place	10.6	12
Focus on collaboration and working as a team (e.g., teachers, students, parents)	9.7	11
It did not prepare	8.0	9
Did not respond directly to the question	7.1	7
Already committed to the work, but not attributed to Redesign	4.4	5
Other (singular responses not categorized into a theme)	4.4	5

The central theme that emerged from the survey was that participating in Redesign gave respondents a growth mindset and prepared them to be flexible and adaptable in an ever-changing environment.

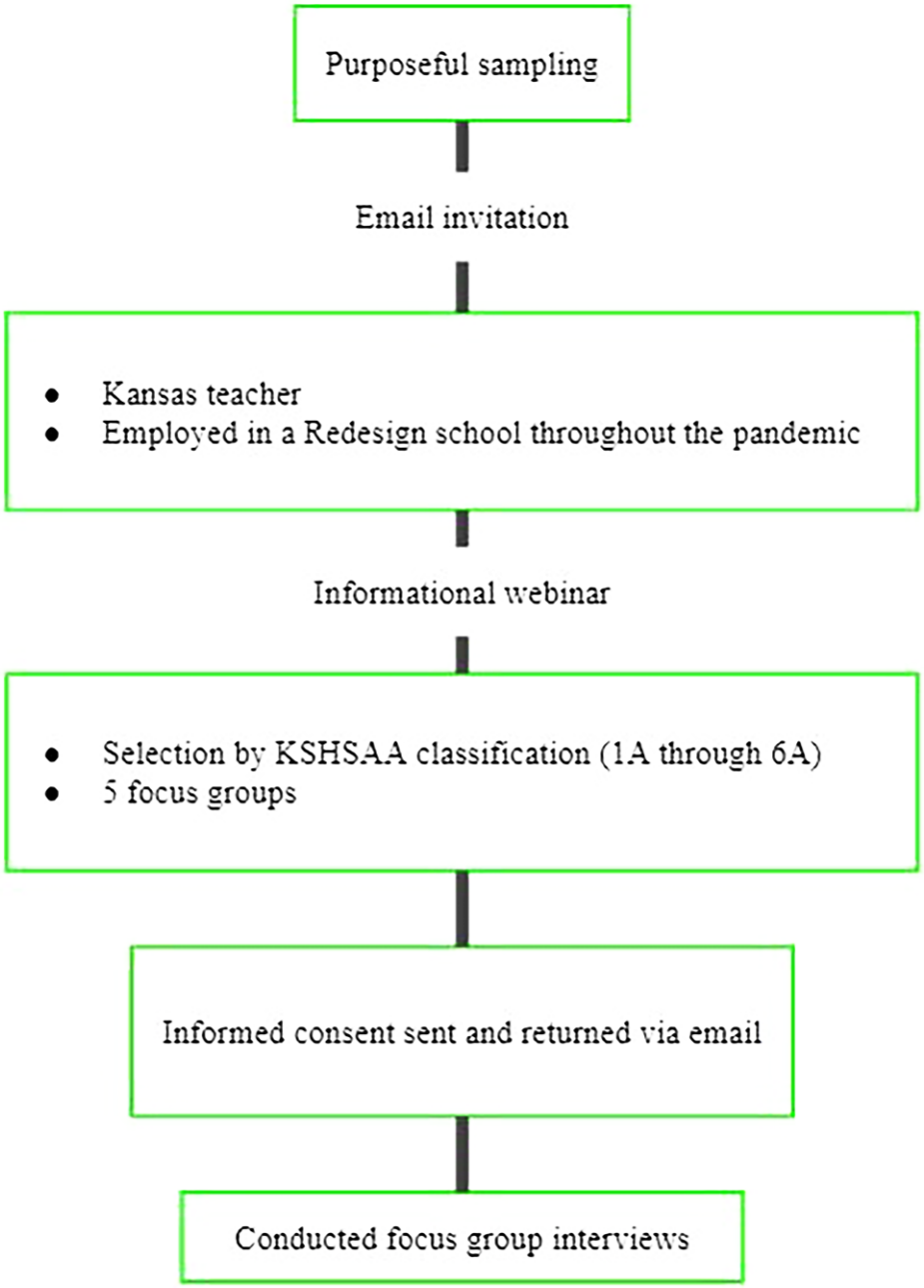
Focus groups provide an environment where participants can reveal beliefs and feelings or articulate personal experiences, which proivdes rich data, so best practice dictated having small discussion groups. The literature was mixed regarding exactly how many participants

should be in each focus group. Litoseliti (2003) and deMarrais & Lapan (2004) recommended that focus groups not be smaller than six and no larger than 10 participants (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Litosseliti, 2003). In research regarding distance nursing education, MacIntosh (1981) proposed the same numbers (i.e., no fewer than six, but no larger than 10). However, other researchers, such as Goss & Leinbach (1996), have used as many as 15 participants, and Kitzinger (1995) used as few as four. A gap also existed in the literature about how many focus groups must be conducted to reach saturation in the number and variety of themes (Guest et al., 2017). However, Guest et al. (2017) created a summary of saturation findings from empirical studies, whereby researchers conducting qualitative inductive studies may expect to reach saturation with no fewer than five focus groups. However, Guest et al. conceded this concept of saturation still presents a problem because research proposals require that the number be defined before the study, but saturation can only be determined during or after data analysis.

Litoseliti (2003) recommended that to foster conversation, each group should be as homogenous as possible so that participants will have similar needs and interests regarding the topic. This type of group selection aligns with purposive sampling, which is a nonrandom technique where the researcher decides the research scope and finds participants willing to provide information (Etikan, 2016). It was impossible to sample every Kansas teacher, but the use of homogeneous sampling created a pool of participants who shared the specific characteristic of having participated in Redesign training (Etikan, 2016). Figure 3.1 displays an outline of the participant selection process.

Figure 3.1.

Diagram of Participant Selection Processes



Participants included Kansas teachers who worked in Redesign schools throughout the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic, so they shared experiences and possibly common vocabulary

acquired through the Redesign training. I grouped participants by the size of the community they worked in, and I used the Kansas State High School Activities Association (KSHSAA) 2020–2021 classifications and enrollments document to make the determination. These classifications were based on enrollment numbers from September 21, 2020, in Grades 9–12 (Kansas State High School Activities Association, 2020). Initially, I planned to divide participants by urban, suburban, and rural communities, but this presented a problem because federal and state programs, grant applications, and individuals all define these terms differently (Igielnick, 2019). Organizing participants by these parameters would have been difficult because there is only one Redesign district with two schools located in a truly urban district. Soliciting volunteers from this district would have created an environment where participants may not have remained as anonymous as they would like. Using the Kansas State High School Activities Association enrollment classifications to sort participants created a clear and clean way to organize participants, putting teachers from 1A and 2A classifications together, 3A and 4A together, and 5A and 6A together, which helped to foster conversation as they shared their experiences.

Inviting participants from Redesign schools presented a challenge, as I did not have direct access to contact information for many teachers in these schools. I sent an invitation via email (Appendix A) on the Redesign email listserv. However, most of the recipients were building and district administrators, so I relied on them to forward the invitation to their staff. When this attempt did not provide enough participants, I resent the email invitation twice and posted an invitation on the Kansas Educators Facebook page and the @KSDERedesign Twitter account. I promoted the opportunity on several Zoom webinars with teachers and principals, and I presented my research idea to three building leadership teams at the request of their principals. I also hosted an informational webinar for all who were initially curious about participating in the

study. The aim of this webinar was to explain the study's purpose, describe the participants' commitment, and review the participant consent form. Additional objectives of this Zoom orientation appear in Appendix B. As a result, some individuals chose not to participate, but I ultimately hosted five focus group discussions with a total of 30 Kansas educators.

Participants represented each size classification with three participants representing 1A, four from 2A, four from 3A, four from 4A, six from 5A, and nine from 6A. Participants geographically represented Kansas in that there were teachers from the most urban areas near Johnson County and Sedgwick County, as well as teachers from the southwest, northcentral, and southeast regions of Kansas. The sample included 16 elementary (i.e., Grades K–6) teachers and 14 secondary (i.e., Grades 6–12) teachers. Most participants worked as classroom or core content area teachers, but the study also included two music teachers, one special education teacher, two library media specialists, two instructional coaches, and two building administrators. Three of the participants were male, and 27 were female.

Planning and Organization of Focus Group Interviews

Effective focus groups must be precisely planned and facilitated to protect the participants' data (Litosseliti, 2003). This planning includes providing participants with an agenda before the meeting, carefully planning the questions, and creating a preplanned questioning route (Krueger, 1998b). I crafted and ordered the questions in such a way as to help participants feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts while also pressing them for profound contributions (Litosseliti, 2003). As the researcher, I also served as the facilitator. In focus group research, the facilitator's role differs slightly from an interviewer's role in a one-on-one interview. The facilitator should enable group discussion, keep the group focused, and ensure all members have opportunities to speak. There are pros and cons to having the researcher

be the facilitator. The best facilitators possess a deep understanding of the topic, understand different types of questioning, and feel comfortable deviating from the script to probe for more information. The facilitator must be enthusiastic about the task, listen sincerely, inspire others to speak, manage transitions, and maintain the group's enthusiasm for the topic (Litosseliti, 2003). My background before becoming the elementary redesign specialist prepared me for the facilitator role. I had been formally trained in cognitive coaching and adaptive schools, which involves high-level questioning, listening, and facilitation skills (Costa et al., 2002; Garmeston & Wellman, 2013). I had practiced these skills developing teacher leaders and coaching administrators for over a decade, first in my roles within school districts, then in my roles at KSDE as school improvement coordinator, assistant director of early childhood, and then as elementary redesign specialist. It was also essential to have the same facilitator for each of the group meetings for consistency.

As the facilitator–researcher, I specifically planned some cautionary measures. Participants could have perceived a power differential because I worked for the KSDE (Lumby, 2012). Depending on their perceptions of this government agency, some may have worried that I might use what I learned against their school or district. Conversely, I knew some of the participants very well and was on friendly terms with them. Some participants might have tried to please me and say what they thought I wanted to hear instead of being truthful. I also took steps to avoid the human tendency to lead the participants to answer questions to support the findings I anticipated. I created and followed a specific agenda to mitigate this, and I had an observer and assistant present for each focus group. The participant agenda contained the following four parts: (a) welcome and introductions; (b) discuss goals and rules; (c) questions, answers, discussion; (d) closing.

I employed Rachel Thalman, an Inspired Leadership coach and mentor for the Educational Services and Staff Development Association of Central Kansas. Rachel specializes in coaching leaders through transformational change. She earned her professional coach's certification through the International Coaching Federation with over 500 hours and 5 years of experience. Thalman acted as my observer and assistant during focus group discussions. As Litosseliti (2003) described, this provided additional accountability for me as the primary researcher and facilitator of the focus group discussions. I had worked with Thalman on many projects and sought her coaching guidance on other occasions, so I knew her to be completely trustworthy and knew that she would hold all of these conversations in the strictest confidence. I also asked her to sign an assurance document to outline the services and need for confidentiality.

During the welcome and introductions, participants introduced themselves, shared their first names and what they taught. We discussed goals and expectations. The goal was to hear about how teachers grew personally and professionally in leadership throughout the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic. Expectations included emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers and no expectation that the group would agree or come to a consensus (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Litosseliti, 2003). Participants should have felt free to talk but not pressured to do so, and each individual maintained control of how much they wanted to disclose to the whole group. Participants understood their responsibility to maintain confidentiality by not discussing specifics of the conversation with others outside of the focus group (Litosseliti, 2003). I audio and video recorded the session and provided the participants with a transcript of the meeting with participants' names removed. I asked the participants to review the transcript and provide feedback before formal analysis. I assured the participants that I would protect confidentiality and would omit individual and school identities from the research. I put data security safeguards

in place for electronic and printed data to protect raw data and initial writings. I also openly discussed the power differential in the written confidentiality agreement presented to participants in the informational webinar before the meeting. I explained that my role as a doctoral student would remain separate from my role as an agency leader at the KSDE. Any information shared during the focus groups would not impact agency decisions involving individuals, schools, or districts.

Question Development

Focus Group Dynamics

Focus groups operate on the assumption that when people gather together, they interact and develop a synergy that leads to data that pushes beyond the participants' private thoughts (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Morgan, 1997). Research has shown that to achieve dialog that produces rich data, focus group members must move through the following stages: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Smith, 2005; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The performing stage produces the richest data; thus, I hosted the focus groups for more than 1 hr, but not more than 2 hr so that the participants had time to become comfortable enough to talk openly (Kress & Shoffner, 2007; Krueger & Casey, 2000, 2015). It was also necessary to create discussion questions that helped participants practice the meeting norms, beginning with more straightforward warm-up questions and saving the most salient questions for the performing stage (Litosseliti, 2003).

In the forming stage, participants get to know each other and do not yet feel like part of a group, so the facilitator must create an open and relaxed atmosphere where participants can feel connected to the research purpose (Smith, 2005; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). To do this, I began by welcoming and thanking participants, introducing myself and my colleague, and providing

background regarding the research. I reminded participants of the session's length, the format, and the ground rules. I also reassured them about confidentiality and reminded them that the session was being audio and video recorded through the Zoom platform.

In the storming stage, participants may feel like they want to test each other or create some impression on the other participants (Smith, 2005; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Depending on their personality, some participants may try to compete with other participants, monopolize the conversation, or interrupt others. As the facilitator, I employed facilitation strategies to settle everyone in and show accountability to the norms without creating an unfriendly or unwelcome environment. I collected the following example questions to help encourage others' participation and balance the discussion.

- Are there any other points of view on this question?
- Does anyone see it differently?
- Thank you for that point of view. Does anyone have another?
- That is helpful. Now let us hear some different thoughts (Garmeston & Wellman, 2013; Litosseliti, 2003).

Eye contact can also encourage shy individuals to express their views, but this tactic is likely more effective for in-person rather than virtual conversation. Still, I used my teaching strategies and kept track of who had spoken and who had not, and I intentionally encouraged everyone to weigh in with their thoughts. I also avoided responding with words such as "good," "right," or "yes" that could be perceived as value judgments or inadvertent expressions of preference (Litosseliti, 2003). However, as participants shared deeply, I took care to honor and validate their transparency and contributions to the discussion.

As group participants moved through the competition phase into the norming phase of the conversation, they began to focus on and engage with the issue at hand (Smith, 2005; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Comments from one participant sparked additional conversation from others. Participants debated, agreed, and disagreed respectfully and openly, which then moved them into the performing stage, where the most productive dialogue occurred. The group felt like a team, demonstrating trust and relationship to such an extent that in two focus groups, participants asked for others' contact information because they wanted to continue a collaborative relationship. I had to remind them about confidentiality and the need for anonymity. As the participants moved into the adjourning stage, questions became reflective, and I asked for any further information that the participants wanted to share on the topic. I then made closing comments, thanked participants for the discussion, and reiterated the need for confidentiality and data security.

Pilot Focus Group Discussion

I organized Chapter 2's literature review around Katzenmeyer and Moller's (2001) theoretical framework regarding the development of teacher leadership in which they stated that the principal's actions and the school's culture contribute to the growth and development of teachers as leaders. The unprecedented adaptive challenges presented by the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic stressed school cultures and principals' day-to-day managerial tasks, which made some building leaders less accessible to teachers (Heifetz, 2020). In other cases, the opposite occurred, where adversity united the staff with their principals and improved their school culture. I designed the focus group questions to test the theoretical framework and support the research questions.

Krueger (1998) advised that the researcher seek the help of a brainstorming team when creating focus group questions because developing questions individually is a disadvantage. (Krueger, 1998b). The brainstorming team may include colleagues who are knowledgeable about the study or fellow researchers. I chose to brainstorm possible questions that aligned with the literature review and the research questions with my colleagues at KSDE because these individuals were deeply embedded in Redesign, school improvement, and systems accreditation,

I sequenced and prioritized vital questions from the brainstormed questions to create the first draft of questions. Before hosting the first focus group discussion, I conducted a practice focus group with a small group of trusted teacher leaders. Focus group conversations flow as participants talk to each other instead of merely responding to me, but best practice involves having a questioning route aimed at building initial rapport before going deeper into the topic (Kress & Shoffner, 2007; Krueger, 1998b; Krueger & Casey, 2015). In this practice run, I aimed to pretest the questioning route and determine the appropriate length for the focus group sessions (Guest et al., 2017; Kress & Shoffner, 2007). I anticipated I would need approximately 90 min for these focus group discussions, but the practice run showed I would need more time. It also helped me practice facilitation, get a feel for the flow of the questions, and practice using Zoom's recording the transcription features. I also asked the practice participants for feedback on the flow, format, and clarity of the focus group questions. The following are two prepared questions from the focus group protocol. A complete list of possible questions appears in Appendix C.

1. When you think of the term "leadership" in an educational context, what skills or attributes come to mind? (Go to Menti.com and add those terms there, and we will watch the Word Cloud develop with your responses.)

2. What responsibilities did you take on during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 school closings that were not a part of your job before the COVID-19 pandemic?

The focus groups and data collection took place in April 2021. Throughout May, I validated transcripts by comparing the generated transcript to the recordings. I made many edits because the software sometimes did not accurately capture what the participants said. I also added punctuation in appropriate places for readability. Then I provided each participant with their personalized transcript, with their name displayed and the other names labeled Participant 1, Participant 2, et cetera. Participants had until mid-May to notify me of any changes to their transcript. I added the few changes resulting from this process to the primary transcript before beginning formal coding processes. Table 3.3 provides an outline of the project timeline.

Table 3.3.

Project Timeline

Month	Action	Completed by
December 2020	Brainstorm focus group questions.	December 2020
February 2021	Practice focus group discussion.	February 11, 2021
March 2021	Solicit and identify participants.	March 31, 2021
March 2021	Conduct Zoom orientation with participants.	March 31, 2021
April 2021	Conduct focus group interviews.	April 30, 2021
May 2021	Review and correct transcripts.	May 5, 2021
May 2021	Send transcripts to participants for review and feedback.	May 15, 2021
June 2021	Review and correct transcripts based on feedback.	May 30, 2021
June 2021	Conduct holistic coding analysis.	June 5, 2021
June 2021	Conduct in vivo pattern coding analysis.	June 15, 2021
July 2021	Write a summary of the results.	June 30, 2021
July 2021	Write a summary of the study and its implications.	July 15, 2021
August 2021	Edit and finalize the document.	August 15, 2021
September 2021	Defend final dissertation.	September 10, 2021

Data Collection

Primary Data: Focus Groups Via Zoom

The focus group discussions and any additional interviews took place virtually, using Zoom video conferencing technology. The number of video conferencing devices available as data collection tools for qualitative research has increased over the past decade. Early platforms, such as Skype, were inconvenient and confusing for participants, but Zoom's use has grown exponentially over the past 3 to 5 years (Archibald et al., 2019). Zoom offers many advantages for both the researcher and participants. Researchers who use Zoom for qualitative data

collection appreciate the convenience and cost-efficiency compared to hosting on-site or face-to-face interviews and focus groups. Zoom allows researchers to reach a broader pool of participants because it removes geographic boundaries and limitations. Using online methods can "replicate, complement, and possibly improve upon traditional interview methods" (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 1). Participants can also benefit from the convenience, efficiency, and flexibility that Zoom provides. In their study, Archibald et al. (2019) explained most participants preferred Zoom to telephone or other video conferencing platforms because seeing each other helped establish and maintain rapport over the telephone and other audio-only platforms. With video, researchers can respond to nonverbal facial expressions and gestures to promote a more natural and relaxed conversation. Compared to other platforms like Skype, users find the Zoom platform more intuitive and user-friendly because it can be used on any electronic device with any operating system (Archibald et al., 2019; *Zoom Solutions for Government*, 2020). Those who use Zoom from a computer can simply click on the URL in an email or meeting invitation. Those accessing by phone or tablet can install a free application or directly use the URL. Zoom offers exceptional audio and video quality, even for users with low bandwidth, and the robust security and encryption features meet Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act compliance standards with 256-bit Advanced Encryption Standard (*Zoom Solutions for Government*, 2020). One incredibly convenient feature for qualitative researchers is that Zoom automatically transcribes meetings when recording to the cloud. These transcripts, however, do require review and editing for accuracy.

There are still some challenges with using Zoom for qualitative research. A possibility exists for dropped signals or pauses, difficulty connecting because of low Internet bandwidth, poor audio or video quality, inability to read whole-body nonverbal cues, and inconsistent or

delayed connectivity, which may lead to participants talking over each other or the facilitator missing some importing timing ques (Archibald et al., 2019). During this study, one instance occurred where a participant could not complete the focus group interview because of an Internet outage in her rural area. We connected afterward, and she was able to answer the remaining questions.

Secondary Data: Individual Interviews and Researcher's Reflexive Journal

In addition to the primary data contained in the focus group interview transcripts, I also collected data from two one-on-one interviews and in my reflexive journal. Participants could request a one-on-one interview to follow up on the focus group interview if they had more to contribute but did not feel comfortable enough to share in the group setting. Litosseliti (2003) recommended permitting such one-on-one interviews as a mechanism to ensure that even the most introverted participants contribute. The one-on-one interviews occurred via Zoom and were recorded and transcribed. I checked and edited the Zoom transcripts for accuracy.

I also used a reflexive journal to enhance the rigor of the data analysis and double as an audit trail (Bradbury-Jones, 2007). It was important that I keep this reflexive journal throughout the research process because the process was much more emotional for me than I anticipated. It was difficult for me to hear about teachers' professional and personal frustrations and struggles and I felt a constant tug between being the researcher and being their coach – trying to leave space for them to share information, but also responding and encouraging them when they shared their experiences with failure. Logically, I knew that these stories would come to light, but keeping a researcher's journal during the process helped me work through my subjective reactions and connected emotions. Since 2017, I have kept a less formal journal of my work in the Redesign project, but I changed the format of this journal to better support the data analysis

process. This reflexive journal revolved around four major topics: (a) developing perceptions, (b) daily research procedures, (c) key decision points, and (d) daily personal introspections (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). According to Rogers and Cowles (1993) a reflexive journal that functions also as an audit trail can be used by the primary researcher to track evolving data analysis and help the researcher to monitor personal responses. This was important because I did feel emotional during the focus group interviews, but as I analyzed the data, conversation by conversation and line by line, I could remember the participants faces and feel their emotions all over again. Writing in this journal as I conducted the data analysis helped me to keep a running record of my decisions regarding how I worked from individual codes to themes or why I made changes in the data analysis. For example, one change I made during In Vivo coding was that I organized the data by research question, then by relationship (from holistic coding), but I also started to code strong emotion words. However, it became evident to me that all the interviews were a series of strong emotion words, so coding them was more of a distraction from the purpose of the study. Certainly the participants' emotions were important, but focusing on these emotion words would clutter the data as it aligned to the research questions (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Y. Lincoln & Guba, 1982; Rodgers & Cowles, 1993).

Data Management

I kept data collected for this study, including audio and video recordings, transcripts, observation notes, and reflexive journal entries secure in a double password BitLocker system. I collected all data after participants had signed the informed consent form, which described what the project entailed and the participants' role and expectations (see Appendix D). Upon completing each focus group conversation, I stored the recording in my password-protected Zoom account. Zoom software created the transcript that I downloaded to Google Docs. I

checked these transcripts against the audiovisual recording, made adaptations for accuracy, and assigned pseudonyms for participants. Then, I made individual copies of transcripts for each participant, identifying the participant and deidentifying the others. I sent a link to the individual Google Doc to each participant so they could review it for accuracy. This important step allows participants to provide feedback that helped verify perceptions and aided in reflection (Patton, 2001). Assigning pseudonyms for participants relieved some of the participants' burden to only check their dialogue instead of the entire conversation. Participants were also permitted to recommend removing any information if they felt they had overshared. This occurred once when a participant felt she had mentioned too many details about her community and worried she might be identified. That data, which was not relevant to the research questions, was removed from the transcript.

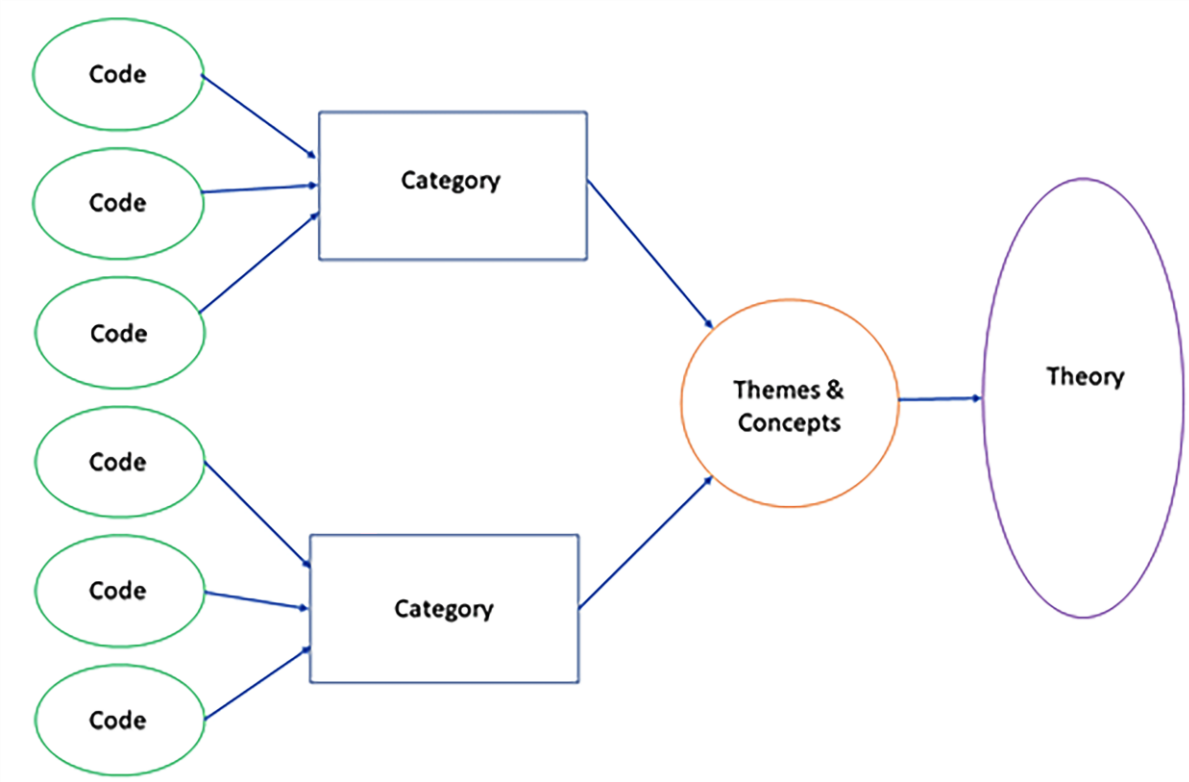
The participants experienced minimal risks and some benefits. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants could step out of the study at any time. They also had the right to decline to answer questions they did not feel comfortable answering. I explained these procedures during the webinar and reiterated them at the beginning of each focus group interview. The benefits for participants included sharing the story of their leadership growth and the challenges they had overcome. Other teachers may learn about this research and recognize their leadership growth as a result. The educational community will have the opportunity to learn how teacher leaders in Kansas navigated the 2020–2021 school response to COVID-19 and how their leadership and growth perspective changed during that time.

The institutional review board approved Proposal Number 10188 on July 13, 2020, with Dean Mercer's permission, so that survey data from summer 2020 could be included to provide context for this study. The approval certificate appears in Appendix E.

Data Analysis

Analyzing qualitative data requires thorough and diligent attention to the details of language and deep reflection on emerging themes and patterns that describe the human experience (Saldana, 2009). As a novice qualitative researcher, the amount of data and the processes for analyzing could have been overwhelming if it were not for the structure of analyzing the data in cycles (Saldana, 2009). In the first cycle of analysis, I deconstructed the data, identified themes, and assigned codes to be grouped and regrouped (Grbich, 2007). I then organized those codes into categories. In the second round of data coding, I took codes and categories and put them together into themes and concepts that informed the theory or theories. Saldana's (2009) portrayal of the codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry (see Figure 3.2) provided the general guide for my data analysis process.

Figure 3.2.
Code to Theory Model for Qualitative Inquiry

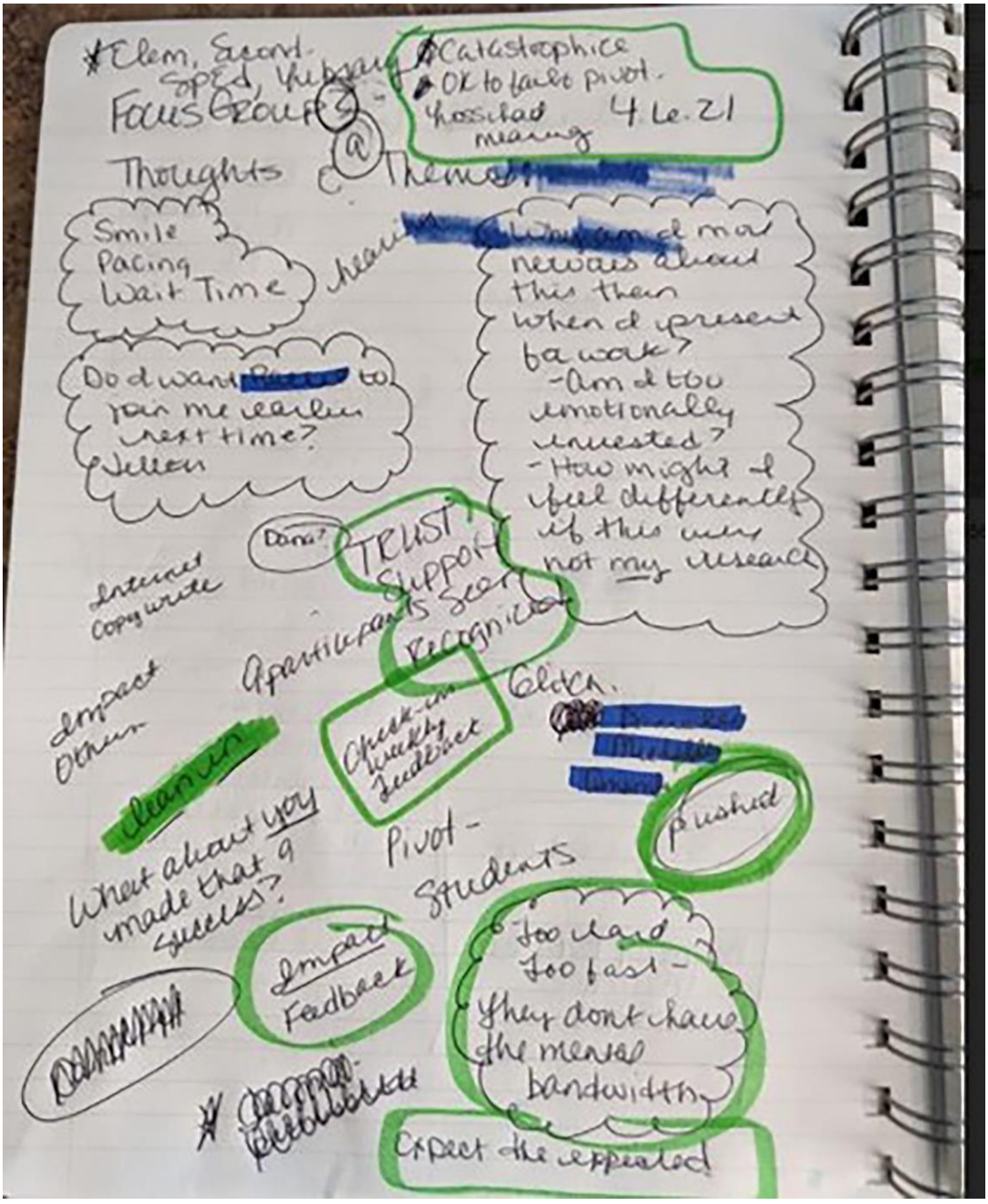


Focus Group Notes

The data analysis began informally during the first focus group conversation as I took notes regarding possible emerging patterns and possible themes (Patton, 2001; Weiss, 1994). Figure 3.3 shows an example of notes from one focus group conversation. Although the notes may appear random, I wanted to be intentional and show participants that I listened intently to them. On Zoom, that meant looking at the camera and participants' faces in gallery mode. Looking down to write copious notes would have broken that eye contact. I also knew I could go back and review the video recording if necessary. You can see in Figure 3.3 that I also prewrote facilitation reminders to smile, slow down the pace, and give appropriate wait time.

Figure 3.3.

Focus Group Notes



Data collection and analysis overlapped as I analyze verbatim transcripts of the focus group dialogue and notes after each focus group session, looking for emerging codes, connecting them to categories and themes, and connecting themes across the different focus group

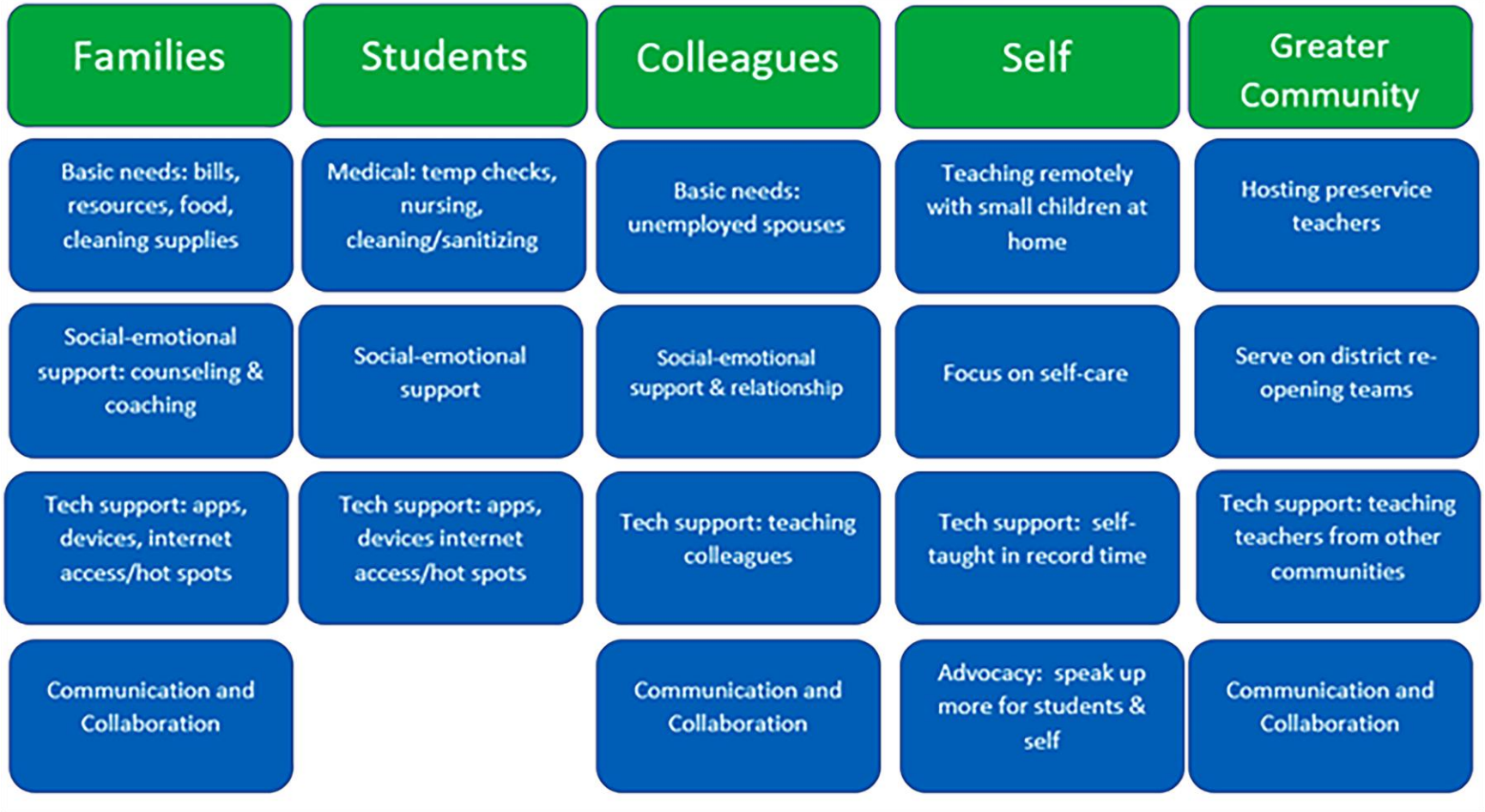
conversations. Creswell, (2007) described this process when he describes that data analysis can be performed concurrently with data collection, interpretation and writing.

Holistic Coding

I broadly coded data from the transcripts and my researcher's notes using holistic coding. As an exploratory and preliminary coding method, holistic coding provided a loose structure for me to familiarize myself with the data as I applied codes to large portions of data (Bhattacharya, 2017; Saldana, 2009). To accomplish the task of manual holistic coding, I printed each transcript and read them multiple times, using different colors for each preliminary code. Initially, I could see that nearly all focus groups addressed the topic of taking on medical or health tasks, new technologies, and providing social–emotional support. Therefore, I arranged these broad codes around those three categories. However, after further reflection using large chart paper to display and organize the holistic coding, I rearranged these broad categories to show the different relationships that teachers engaged in and their responsibilities within each of these relationships. For example, as teachers took on additional leadership roles and responsibilities, they described new and challenging roles across multiple groups and interactions. Figure 3.4 represents the findings of the holistic coding.

Figure 3.4.

Holistic Coding



In Vivo Coding

In vivo coding refers to a type of qualitative data analysis where researchers derive codes come from the participants' own words. It can be used as a first-cycle coding method or as the primary method for a study (Matthes et al., 2017; Saldana, 2009). Some researchers call this "verbatim coding" because the data used are taken verbatim from the focus group transcripts. To support my in vivo coding process, I chose to use computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software because the volume of data provided by this study was initially overwhelming. Using a program helped me manage large amounts of qualitative data and codes. The program I chose to use was NVivo because it is relatively easy to import data to the program from nearly any source and in any format. In addition, there it provides some useful query and visualization tools and convenient annotation and memo features.

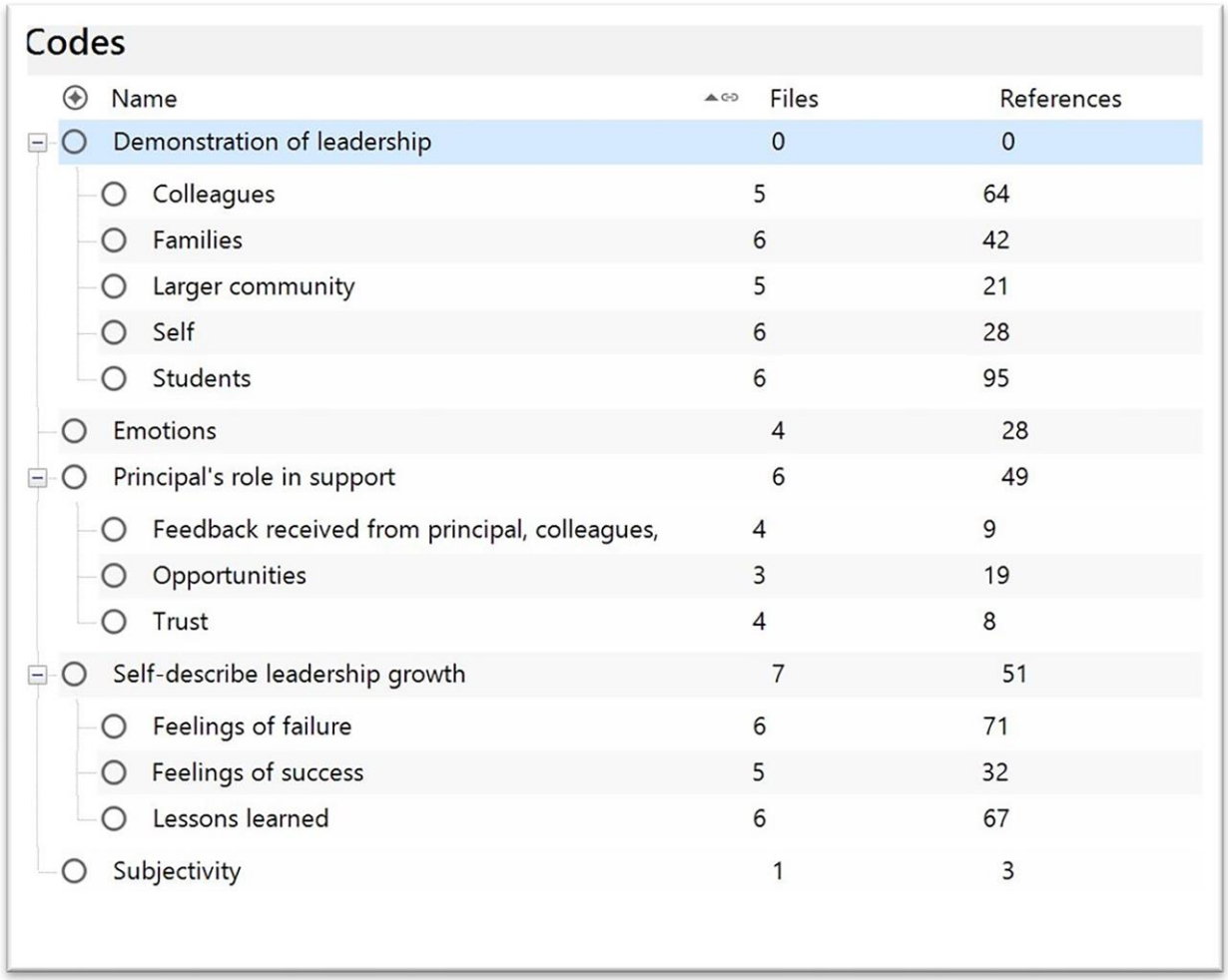
Initially, I used codes I discovered through holistic coding; however, this proved confusing because that organizational structure did not tightly align with the research questions. As a result, I looked for more resources that could explain the coding and organizational processes in more detail. Through this study, I became reassured that it was acceptable to organize the codes and connected data by research question to achieve coherence in the final research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Dissertation by Design, 2021).

Figure 3.5 shows the codes I set up in NVivo. I arranged them by research question topics: demonstration of leadership, principal's role in support, and self-described leadership growth. I also created a separate code for strong emotional words and dialogue where my subjectivity or positionality may have surfaced, however after further reflection, I stopped coding the emotional words because each focus group interview was very emotional so tracking these words seemed to detract from the purpose and research questions.. Under the demonstration of

leadership code, I added these subcodes: colleagues, families, larger community, self, and students. Under the principal's role in support code, I added the subcodes: feedback received from principals and colleagues, opportunities, and trust. Under the self-described leadership growth code, I added the subcodes: feelings of failure, feelings of success, lessons learned. Transcript data were analyzed and coded at the phrase level. If there were five files, that reflects the five focus group transcripts. In areas where there are six or seven files, that indicates where the transcripts from the follow up interviews contained supporting data. The numbers under References, in the figure indicate how many sentences or phrases were coded to each category. The numbers are high for the questions regarding demonstration of leadership and self-described leadership growth, but the numbers for the questions regarding the principal's role in support are much lower. This shows that, for the questions on this topic, there were fewer responses. Answering questions was voluntary, and while some participants were willing to share, many did not, even after further questioning, prompting and being given additional wait time. For an example of coded data in the subcode of colleagues, see Appendix F. The project codebook appears in Appendix G.

Figure 3.5.

Code Book



Researcher's Subjectivity

In qualitative research, the researcher must deeply consider their subjectivity and positionality deeply. Peshkin (1988) defined subjectivity as "the amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one's class, statuses, and values interacting with the particulars of one's object of investigation" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Qualitative researchers attend to their subjectivity meaningfully, intentionally, and systematically because subjectivity shapes the study's inquiry, and it also influences the interpretations of data and reported outcomes (Peshkin, 1988, 1993). In his research on schools and communities, Peshkin (1988) stated, "By monitoring

myself, I can create an illuminating, empowering personal statement that attunes me to where self and subject are intertwined" (p. 20). This ongoing monitoring of subjectivity represents a disciplined subduing of emotions and reactions to guard against becoming a defender or cheerleader of the participants and avoid the temptation to shy away from the harder edges of the data that may not align with an anticipated stance.

Throughout the first 3 years of my work as the elementary redesign specialist at KSDE, I kept a reflexive journal as I worked with schools and grew my leadership skills. Until October 2020, I formatted that journal in two columns labeled "Notes/Tasks" and "Reflections/Responses." In mid-October 2020, in response to my new learning from the writings of Peshkin (1988) and Smith (1999), I reconfigured my reflexive journal to record and monitor my feelings and reactions regarding my work as it aligned with this research topic and the data gathered from teachers' responses during that period. In addition to tracking procedures and decisions, I recorded notes on introspections regarding my positionality and subjectivity. This journal served as a subjectivity audit that identified what Peshkin (1988) called "subjective I's" to categorize and describe my subjectivity throughout the research process. As of this writing, I have identified the following categories of my subjectivity: Kansas proud, cheerleader/defender, and teacher of adults.

Kansas Proud

I have always lived in Kansans and am a fourth-generation American with primarily German and English heritage. I was raised in a middle-class family with a college-educated father, who was the primary wage earner and a business owner, and a mother who served as a homemaker who dedicated her time to philanthropy, Christian service, and artistic endeavors. My father owned a pharmacy with three locations in a midsized Kansas town. I worked at the

store for my first paying job. I am a third-generation educator after my grandmother taught in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Russell County, where she educated her nieces, nephews, cousins, and other neighbor children.

In 1990, I began my professional career as a third-grade teacher in a small 1A district in central Kansas, not far from the ruins of my grandmother's one-room schoolhouse. In my 5 years at this school, I looped with third graders to fourth grade the following year. Then I moved to first grade and looped with that group of students to second and third grades. We were innovative out of necessity. When we struggled to meet our 35 third graders' diverse reading needs, my colleague and I went to Salina, Kansas, to observe a new program they had put in place, called Success for All, which Robert Slavin founded and based on his reading research. Then, research showed that when children are taught just above their proximal development level, groupings are flexible across grade levels, and based on data, students could learn to read and catch up with their peers (Slavin, 1987). We did what we thought made sense and looked for results (i.e., action research). With the help of our special education teacher and Title I teacher, my colleagues and I shared students to create smaller reading classes. Our data at the time showed that it worked.

My subjective category of Kansas proud means that the stories that arise from small school districts in Kansas resonate with me. When these schools innovate, it may be out of necessity more than a desire to be on the leading edge of an educational movement. When they implement a strategy that works for them, they are not likely to be convinced to change strategies just because research from somewhere else said it may be evidence-based. When schools or educators struggle with change, the local political pressure can be intense because, in a

community where everyone attends the same churches, eats at the same restaurants, and shops at the same downtown stores, public pressure can be intrusive.

Cheerleader/Defender

One of my first roles at the KSDE was that of school improvement coordinator. During the federal guidance of No Child Left Behind, states were required to identify low-performing schools under the ESEA. In Kansas, those schools were on improvement and labeled as priority schools and focus schools. Nearly all 33 PRIORITY SCHOOLS were in Kansas' urban districts (KSDE, 2014). My job was to coordinate and oversee a cadre of coaches assigned to work with individual schools to implement a rigorous school improvement process. Part of my responsibilities included visiting many of these schools to conduct an implementation audit and coaching quality check.

During this time, I observed, first-hand, the stark poverty, trauma, neglect, and inequities of education in our state. The strategies that the U.S. Department of Education required schools on improvement to put in place would not help these schools because technical assistance could not address these deepest of adaptive challenges (Garmeston & Wellman, 2013; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Linsky & Lawrence, 2011). Indeed, many could have benefitted from a tighter alignment between curriculum, Kansas standards, and professional learning for teachers, but those strategies alone would not close the gap for children who show up day after day too traumatized by life to learn. These teachers could not engage their students with old or dilapidated books, manipulatives, or materials. In these conditions, no amount of cheerleading on my part would make a difference either. As my perspective shifted, I became angry and incredibly determined. I made it my passion to inform KSDE leadership about the dire need for trauma-informed teaching and learning and counseling support for students and families. I was

determined to convince agency leaders that these schools were not bad. Rather, they had students in communities with the highest needs and were worthy of receiving more funding, resources, and support. My cheerleader/defender category is provoked whenever I hear stories from underfunded, underresourced, underappreciated, and overworked schools. For children in these urban communities, their school may be their only safe place, where they receive hot, nutritious meals and meet caring teachers who work to teach them and help fill the gaps in their basic needs. When these schools report a victory in students' and families' lives, I want to cheer, and when they are unfairly criticized or overlooked, I can be a most stubborn defender.

Teacher of Adults

Through my work as a Redesign specialist at KSDE, I coach principals and teacher leaders through the Redesign process, which I described in Chapter 1. The participants in this study were teachers from Redesign schools. I hope that the lessons they have learned through Redesign helped them develop an optimistic growth mindset and that changes in their school culture made them more resilient through the unprecedented uncertainty of the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic. During the research, I did not want to assume this to be accurate; instead, I sought to hear what participants said in their own words. The relationships I had with some participants were advantageous, but those relationships could also hinder me. Through this work with Redesign schools, I began to see a story emerge, which deserves more in-depth investigation. Although I did not know all the participants, many, if not most, knew me. I did not coach at every elementary school because Redesign had spread to approximately 194 schools at the time of this writing. However, I have been a keynote speaker at conferences, guest speaker at regional trainings, and a facilitator on countless Zoom webinars. Those who volunteered to participate in this study likely did so because they trusted me and wanted to have their stories

told. Because of my position at KSDE, participants may have felt like they need to give the right answer to questions rather than their honest answers. Also, I needed to guard against the temptation to look only for data that supported my hope that their learning made them more resilient and be sure to include data in my write-up that told a different story.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I reiterated this study's purpose and research questions, unpacked the methodological framework involving constructivism and symbolic interactionism, and explained why the research design of qualitative focus group interviews was an appropriate fit for this study. Specifically, I anticipated that a focus group conversation would feel more comfortable and less stressful than a one-on-one interview. In a year when teachers had been stretched beyond what they could have imagined, I aimed to create an environment where participants could share their opinions, experiences, and feelings about their leadership growth and development and perhaps gain an increased sense of empowerment through the interaction (Byron, 1995). In this chapter, I also summarized the research design of this qualitative focus interview study and described the data collection, data management, and data analysis processes. Finally, I addressed and disclosed my subjectivity, describing how I used the reflexive journal to question and examine my interpretation of the data and positionality throughout the research project.

Chapter 4 - Findings

In Chapter 3, I described the methodology for organizing and implementing this research study, including the research design, data collection, and analysis. In this chapter, I discuss the findings as they relate to the research questions. The premise of this study was that while facing the daily challenges of teaching through the 2020–2021 pandemic, Kansas teachers grew in their leadership capacity. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to learn more about the growth and development of teacher leaders in Kansas during the 2020–2021 school response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

- How did Kansas redesign teachers demonstrate leadership through the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do Kansas redesign teachers describe the leadership growth they experienced during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do Kansas redesign teachers describe their principal's role in supporting teacher leadership growth during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?

The significant findings were that teachers took on more leadership roles than they could have ever imagined. Undoubtedly, how teachers led their students changed and expanded, but most teachers also discussed leadership roles that extended beyond the classroom. Teachers led their colleagues, families, and stakeholders within the larger community. They also learned poignant and sometimes painful lessons about leading themselves as they expanded their efforts for balance and self-care throughout a very anxious and fear-filled time. Another significant finding was that teachers learned leadership lessons through their successes and failures, but articulating their leadership growth proved challenging for them. Most teachers needed scaffolded support, presented through a word cloud, to reflect and describe their leadership

growth. A third significant finding was that although some teachers expressed that their principal intentionally supported their leadership growth during the pandemic, most participants responded that principals' support for their leadership growth was either incidental or nonexistent during this time period.

I analyzed the qualitative data through the epistemology of constructivism and the framework of symbolic interactionism outlined in Chapter 3. Constructivism and symbolic interactionism provided the perspective that as teachers interacted, their understanding of leadership changed (Crotty, 1998; Piaget, 1967). The descriptions of interactions in the focus groups and comments or quotes from participants illustrated this phenomenon. I organized the findings based on the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2. Specifically, when principals intentionally coach and provide opportunities for teachers to practice leadership and when the school's culture supports teachers' collaboration, teacher leadership grows

Findings

The purpose of this study was to learn more about the growth and development of teacher leaders in Kansas during the 2020–2021 school response to the COVID-19 pandemic by exploring and examining data to answer the research questions. The first finding aligned with the first research question regarding the demonstration of leadership. The second finding aligned with the second research question regarding self-described leadership growth. Finally, the third finding aligned with the third research question regarding the principal's support of leadership growth.

Finding 1: Demonstration of Leadership

All teachers who participated in this study reported that they demonstrated leadership as they took on more responsibilities than they could have imagined before the COVID-19

pandemic began. These responsibilities included health and safety tasks, building and maintaining professional and collaborative relationships, and leading oneself. Health-related responsibilities included:

- taking temperatures and general nursing duties,
- delivering lunches,
- helping families navigate COVID-19 protocols in and out of the classroom,
- delivering cleaning supplies to families, and
- performing janitorial cleaning duties such as disinfecting between classes and as students moved about the classroom.

Teachers across all focus groups described supporting colleagues, students, and families with greater intensity and leading in their district or greater community. Teachers also expressed the need to learn how to lead themselves better.

Colleagues

Throughout the focus group discussions, participants led the conversations with thoughts regarding how they supported and received support from colleagues. I organized these responses into three subcategories: relationships, communication, and technology support. Relationships were stressed under pressure, but as information changed rapidly, many took on the role and responsibility of being a communicator. Teachers also provided technology support to colleagues.

Relationships. An overwhelming majority of teachers discussed their efforts to intentionally work to have good relationships by regularly checking in with colleagues to express encouragement and gratitude and provide social–emotional support. Some teachers said they used the social–emotional strategies they taught students in the past with adult colleagues

throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. One teacher put it this way: “I think just having good relationships with people that I work with and that kind of piggybacked off some of the stuff we did with Redesign because we did ‘Capturing Kids’ Hearts’ [a social–emotional learning curriculum].” Part of this intentional effort to support colleagues involved showing vulnerability and authenticity and admitting to others when they were struggling too. Another teacher described the move to model vulnerability as being human and authentic. As the pandemic progressed, maintaining motivation and positive morale proved a considerable challenge. Participants explained that responding to changing requirements and students’ needs as they all moved in and out of quarantine was incredibly draining. One teacher stated that they had to “lean on each other a little harder and emotionally check in with each other.” Some teachers shared how they supported colleagues who struggled with basic needs as spouses lost jobs or were laid off during the pandemic. These teachers provided food and clothing and organized monetary collections to help colleagues pay bills, such as rent, during this time.

Communication. Another role that all of these teachers took on was to be a source of information. Most teachers spoke of using more emails than they had ever imagined between colleagues, administrators, families, and the local teacher’s union. One teacher described this role as that of “translator” because they took administrator “speak” and reworded it in ways that would be understood and accepted by colleagues. Many teachers shared that they spoke up on behalf of their colleagues to administrators. For example, one special education teacher said she went to her administrator about the workload because the requirements were 10 times the work of what core area teachers were experiencing, and the administration did not understand. Another teacher described it this way:

> It made me feel personally like I was overstepping my boundaries a lot, and it was uncomfortable because usually, when you communicate face-to-face, it is less formal. But on Zoom, you have to learn how to be more direct and unapologetic.

In most instances, collaboration increased between colleagues as everyone relied on each other to share what was and was not working. Some teachers talked about how sorry they felt for their first-year teacher colleagues and how they tried to take them under their wing and help them as much as possible. One said they did this "even though I didn't know what I was doing, and I felt like a first-year teacher myself."

Technology Support. Another way that an overwhelming majority of teachers supported colleagues was with technology training and coaching. Teachers talked about learning new technology and apps as fast as possible and immediately sharing new learning with colleagues. Some spoke of sharing technology tips with colleagues in their building and using Twitter, Facebook, and virtual professional learning communities to share with colleagues across the state. One music teacher shared that she had more flexibility in her schedule, so she could step in with classroom teacher colleagues to help them figure out Google classroom or help them work through technology issues. Another teacher shared how she helped colleagues with video recording lessons by encouraging them to let go of perfectionism and not get wrapped up in video editing. This respondent explained: "It's more humble. Nobody is going to win any Pulitzers with this." However, supporting colleagues with technology issues came at a price. One teacher explained there was considerable pressure to teach tech skills to colleagues, and many were panicked and needy. One teacher explained how the lines between personal and professional lives blurred: "I had to take my phone off the hook and just stop responding to emails because it was 24/7, and I needed to get my stuff done [with my family]."

Students

I expected that teachers would have taken on additional responsibilities to teach and lead students during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the extent and intensity of this support were extraordinary, especially in light of the unprecedented and unpredictable challenges. I sorted teachers' responses into two categories: students' motivation and engagement and social–emotional support.

Student Motivation and Engagement. Teachers explained that getting and keeping students motivated and engaged in learning was a huge challenge. Most participants expressed that students of all ages struggled to learn remotely. Getting students to show up to regularly scheduled virtual meetings, keeping them engaged through the duration of the meeting, and involving them with learning once the Zoom meeting ended represented adaptive challenges that teachers had to address quickly. For example, one elementary teacher said she used every trick she could think of with her kindergarten students, including wearing silly hats, offering prizes, singing songs, sharing silly and fun facts, and telling jokes just to get them to look at the camera so that she could determine if they were paying attention at all. Many shared that they did everything they could think of to provide some kind of normalcy for students. Some of the activities teachers tried replicated more typical in-person experiences. These included virtual field trips, virtual birthday celebrations, library checkout, and remote Kansas Day activities. Beyond activities, many participants talked about helping students set attainable learning goals, encouraging them to tap into intrinsic motivation and track individual progress, and celebrating with them when they attained their goals. One secondary teacher shared a unique effort to maintain a sense of normalcy when she described enforcing the school dress code for attendance on Zoom. Although it felt like she was overstepping to tell a student how to dress in his own

home, she said: “I had to be clear that it is not okay to show up to school in clothing that is obviously inappropriate.”

Students’ Social–Emotional Needs. One likely barrier to students’ motivation and engagement during this time could be the rise in the frequency and severity of students’ social–emotional needs. Participants reported supporting students' social–emotional needs like never before, and sometimes this support challenged conventional practices and safety protocols. Students of all ages displayed signs of fear, anxiety, worry, anger, and depression. One high school teacher talked about the complexities and her personal emotional anguish of navigating an incident where a student cried on Zoom while the teacher had her own children in the room at home. It was hard for this teacher to maintain confidentiality and listen empathetically to this student while simultaneously supporting her elementary-age children during their own remote learning.

Another secondary math teacher expressed that sometimes, instead of learning the math lesson for the day, students needed to talk about what was happening in the world. Helping students grapple with current events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the police murder of George Floyd, and the politics around the attack on the Capitol, was timely and necessary. This teacher explained she did not feel prepared to lead these discussions. She said: “It’s a lot for a young person to absorb. They are fearful, knowing they are months away from adulting, but unsure of the world they are being launched into.” Elementary teachers reported making extra efforts to help children feel safe and cared for because elementary students carried the fear and anxiety of the adults in their lives. However, everyone wearing masks and staying 6 feet apart created obstacles. Children could not see others’ facial expressions, nor could the caring adults always read a child’s face to see how they were feeling. Teachers who typically gave hugs, high

fives, fist bumps, or pats on the back could not show physical care or emotional acknowledgment to students, which felt wrong for many participants. One teacher described how she grappled with the challenges of doing what was right versus doing what was right within the context of the pandemic. She wondered how much screen time was too much for young children in this context and how children could learn to cooperate and collaborate while remaining 6 feet apart. One teacher described working with a little boy who was sad, scared, and crying. Even though the teacher knew it was against safety protocols, and she was unsure if she would be reprimanded, she broke the rules and hugged him because she believed it was the right thing to do.

Families

Family engagement has been an integral part of education in the United States and is currently an ESEA requirement (KSDE, 2019b). However, the ways teachers supported families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic went beyond the currently accepted definitions and requirements of family communication or engagement. Teachers supported families with communication, technology support, and social–emotional needs. This support did not always move in one direction, from teacher to family; teachers reported additional support from families to teachers.

Communication. Most of the participants in this study shared that they often served as a conduit of information between administrators and families, taking information transmitted from more formal sources and trying to translating it into more understandable and relevant language for families. One teacher described it this way:

> I feel like in my role, I ended up being a salesman for why all the measures were being taken. I felt like I had to do a lot of convincing and strategizing, and I was also a coach, so it was . . . like being a liaison between directives that were coming from the state

> board, the local board, and the coaches association to the parents who really didn't understand and didn't want to understand. I kind of had to balance those relationships that were emotionally triggered. [Parents] were invested emotionally, so it wasn't just about one or two things, it was about a myriad of things that were playing a role in people's feelings, and I felt like that was draining, to say the least.

Many teachers found themselves trying to convince families to do everything possible to follow health and safety protocols so that students could stay in school. This task represented a considerable feat when parents disagreed with mask mandates or believed that information about the COVID-19 pandemic was motivated by politics. Nevertheless, most teachers shared that the COVID-19 pandemic caused them to rethink how to communicate with families and shared that they would keep using video conferencing tools in the future. Some teachers experimented with hosting a virtual parent camp, which was initially successful, but as the pandemic progressed, participation fell off. The reasons for this were unknown at the time of the study, but teachers said they wondered if families had tired of being on Zoom.

Technology Support. Teachers also provided technology support to families. Participants helped families learn to log on and use school-provided devices, find Internet services, and in some cases, locate financial support to pay for Internet services, and teachers even helped repair electronic devices. Internet access for families presented problems across all areas of the state. In some remote areas, teachers worked with principals and local Internet and cellular providers to set up hot spots for families. However, in some areas with no cell service or with service that did not support broadband usage, these attempts failed. In the more urban regions represented in this study, cell service and hot spot challenges also arose, but schools could provide drive-up Internet cafés, a solution that did not work as well as teachers wanted.

Most teachers talked about providing one-on-one technology support with families by making phone calls or getting on Zoom to share their screen and show families how to access and help their youngsters log into the various programs needed for remote learning. Some teachers talked about building their own Google site or Google classroom just for parents to help answer their questions. When asked to describe what this support looked like, one teacher explained it this way:

> I would go to their houses and stand in the yard, yelling through the closed window to instruct parents how to get online and how to help their child log into Zoom. I did that a lot. Without a willingness to do that, there would have been a lot of kids who would not have connected.

Another teacher shared that when all school buildings closed in the spring of 2020, she gave out her personal cell phone number, letting students and families have round-the-clock access via text because many parents in her community performed shift work and could only ask questions outside of school work hours, including between midnight and 6:00 a.m.

Basic Needs. Participants shared that some families struggled to meet their children's basic needs. Some parents were without work, and some had to quit work to stay home with children who no longer attended school. Initially, teachers helped distribute food and cleaning supplies, but that need tapered off as community resources became more available. Some teachers also shared that as a conduit for information, they also helped locate resources for families, such as community resources to assist in paying bills or finding medical advice. When children did not show up on Zoom, teachers went looking for them. They made phone calls, porch visits, and in some cases, contacted relatives or church pastors to see if their students and families were okay. In fact, porch visits were typical among these participants, especially during

remote learning. One teacher said: “I have been able to encourage parents just to keep doing the right thing and just kind of come alongside them and build a team [to support their student].”

Social–Emotional Support. One responsibility that teachers said they were unprepared to meet was the need to provide social–emotional support to families. As teachers engaged students and families through virtual meetings, the boundaries between private and public blurred. At times, this led to teachers seeing or hearing things that caused concern or highlighted a need for families to receive social–emotional or counseling support. One participant explained:: “I’m not a counselor, but through Zoom, you’re in their home, and they’re in mine, which meant a loss of boundaries.” Others in that focus group nodded in agreement. Another participant expanded on this:

> Usually, there are some boundaries there, but when you’re inviting them into your home through Zoom . . . there were a lot of divorces, and there were a lot of things going on, and then it evolved into something I was not prepared for.

Teachers reported many challenging interactions, arguments, and inappropriate behavior from the adults in homes where children were connecting via Zoom. One teacher said that she and her principal had some hard conversations with parents about what was going on at home. They had to address it because all the other students could see and hear what was happening. Overall, most teachers said they learned to be more empathetic toward parents and families. Seeing where their students live and how hard families were trying to help them was humbling and enlightening.

Families Supported Teachers. One noteworthy turn in the data involved instances when families supported the teachers in unprecedented ways. Teachers shared how appreciative families were, sending positive notes and messages and complimenting them on how hard they

worked to remotely teach their children. One participant explained: “One grandpa was helping his [kindergarten] grandson with learning through Zoom. Every day he would tell me that I was doing a great job. I really needed that because I just didn’t feel like it.” This particular teacher worked to keep 20 kindergarten students engaged on Zoom while she had her 4-year-old and 2-year-old at home. Her husband worked in a hectic industry during spring 2020, her daycare had closed, and support from grandparents could not happen because of the stay-at-home orders.

In other instances, parents helped teachers by loaning them technology. These teachers had a school-provided laptop or tablet, which proved inadequate for long-term remote teaching. One parent loaned the teacher a set of Bluetooth earbuds with a microphone so she could teach without background noise from her home transmitting over Zoom. When split screens proved too small, another parent loaned a large monitor and helped the teacher set it up so she could have dual screens to show her presentations and see her students simultaneously. It may seem odd that the schools did not provide this type of equipment, but many were technologically unprepared for the unprecedented need for weeks-long remote education.

Larger Community

To some extent, teachers reported volunteering for leadership responsibilities that served a community beyond their school. For example, several were asked to participate in their district’s reopening committee to help decide how health and safety measures might be implemented in classrooms. These opportunities put teachers in the limelight in ways they had not experienced before. This level of scrutiny stretched teachers, as they had never been in a position to have to respond directly to the public. One teacher explained:

> We were making decisions about how many times to sanitize or how to spread the desks apart and whether kids could bring their backpacks or not. All of these little tiny details

> that I never thought I would have to ever think about. We didn't have an answer either, so we kind of had to just do what we thought was best. Having people ask questions because I was on the committee, not just colleagues, but community members as well . . . I didn't anticipate having to just lean into anything like that.

Another way that some teachers served the greater community was to volunteer for the KSDE to create the Navigating Change guidance for reopening schools and the possible use of competency-based learning. This guidance and supporting training were used to populate the Kansas Teaching and Leading Project website at https://kansasteachingandleadingproject.org/. Between January 4, 2021, and June 23, 2021, this site had approximately 11,000 users, with 10,000 virtual learning sessions attended and over 27,000 page views.

It is also important to remember that preservice teachers still sought internships and student teaching opportunities, so some participants also supervised and supported interns. One teacher who supported three interns during this time reported that she was proud that she could help the interns do something on Zoom. She needed every possible adult to help lead remote small group discussions, so her interns received that experience.

Self

Finally, another way that Kansas teachers demonstrated leadership was to learn to lead themselves better. Teachers shared that they learned to be brave enough to be vulnerable and authentic with colleagues, which they described as challenging and empowering. The term "vulnerability" came up in three different focus groups, which I thought was interesting. Teachers practiced working through feelings of being overwhelmed and afraid. One teacher said: "[The pandemic] was like a mood when we first started, like holding your breath the whole time." Another teacher said that she felt burned out, like she was a terrible teacher, but she tried

just to keep showing up for her students. However, a turning point occurred for many where they chose to be more open-minded and not afraid to approach things entirely differently. Some said they had to learn to let go of perfectionist ideas and realize it was okay to fail and learn and pivot. Some said that they discovered balance—to say no and not take on too many things. With that, they learned an important leadership lesson, that it is also okay to let other colleagues fail because "I can't always rush in and rescue, and their failure will lead to their learning."

In this study, all teachers took on more leadership responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, including supporting colleagues, students, and families; leading in the greater community; and learning to lead themselves. Teachers may not have initially recognized these responsibilities as opportunities to grow in their leadership, but as they interacted with others in the focus group, some began to think differently about this concept of teacher leadership, which is an example of symbolic interactionism. The next section addresses how these teachers described their leadership growth.

Finding 2: Self-Described Leadership Growth

Through the pilot focus group, I learned that teachers are often humble and find it difficult to talk about themselves, so asking them to describe their leadership growth outright would have likely been met with silence. To get them talking, I asked them to express their leadership success and failures and then reflect and talk about their leadership growth perceptions.

Growth From Successes

I asked participants to reflect and share a leadership success they experienced through the COVID-19 pandemic and how they knew they were successful. Their responses showed growth and triumphs in remote and in-person learning, relationships with colleagues, and

communication. Additionally, teachers described a change in their willingness to try new things, expanding their growth mindset and willingness to pivot when things did not go as well as they planned.

Remote and In-Person Learning. Although teachers expressed challenges with remote learning during the spring of 2020, most of the participants were better prepared for teaching remotely by the fall of 2020. There were no considerable improvements in the infrastructure that provided broadband Internet, but schools took additional measures to offer hot spots, drive-up Internet cafés, and better devices to students. In addition, teachers had time over the summer to learn new technologies, collaborate with colleagues, and participate in professional learning communities with teachers who had experience in virtual schools before the COVID-19 pandemic. Being able to handle online and in-person instruction simultaneously proved challenging. However, many teachers said that remote learning offered a viable option for keeping students engaged and learning for short amounts of time, such as during a quarantine, with the support of parents or caregivers at home. “Being able to handle students online and in-person at the same time was something I would never have imagined before, but it went better than I expected,” said one upper elementary teacher. Another elementary teacher shared that when they started with in-person instruction in the fall, they were very intentional about teaching students and families how to log on and use critical programs and applications. One teacher explained: “I do feel successful in leading my students and families through that. I think they were pretty confident when they left for remote learning that we were actually going to learn and do things.”

Relationships. Successes described for in-person learning included making sure that students felt safe and cared for. Teachers and students also felt fear and uncertainty about having

children in the classroom. One teacher described helping students feel comfortable with in-person learning as crucial:

> If they took their masks down for a minute, it was going to be okay and making the kids feel comfortable too that they weren't going to get sick at school. They weren't afraid, and so I think taking on that role or that leadership style in your classroom, it's something that I think has been successful.

Another teacher said, “I think that [modeling not being afraid] was an important success for me.”

Additionally, many teachers expressed an increase in the sense of community within their school and among their colleagues. Some described it as everyone coaching each other and sharing openly about what was and was not working. Others said it was apparent that everyone tried to elevate and encourage each other. Finally, most teachers across all of the focus groups agreed that they were more willing to try and experiment with new strategies and pivot when necessary, something they said they learned through Redesign. However, as one teacher put it, “Through the pandemic, we were redesigning our school every 2 weeks, so there were lots of opportunities to practice.”

The lessons learned through these successes revolved around how teachers knew they had succeeded. I expected these teachers might choose hard data to describe their leadership successes during this time. However, that was not the case. Statements such as, “My colleagues listened to me,” or “Colleagues were responsive to my ideas” characterized the feedback these teachers valued as evidence of their success. Some teachers said they knew they were successful because their principal praised or personally thanked them for their efforts. Additionally, teachers felt successful when they saw others succeed because of the help they provided. For example, one teacher who helped with the Navigating Change work said he felt successful in that

work because “the whole state and other states used that guidance.” In other words, teachers experienced first-hand that although leadership is challenging and risky, it is also appreciated and rewarding.

Growth From Failure

Another interview question relating to the topic of leadership growth was: “Tell me about something you led this past year that was a complete failure. What did you learn from it?” I found this question difficult to ask. Participants were low and disheartened at this point in the question map as this question sparked tears for many participants across four of the five focus groups. It took additional questioning, and I switched roles from researcher to coach to help them see their lessons learned through failure. The lessons can be sorted into three broad categories: remote learning, in-person learning, and communication.

Remote Learning. Many participants described their attempts to provide high-quality instruction in a remote learning environment during the spring of 2020 as a complete failure because no matter what they tried, it fell short academically. One teacher said: “No matter how engaging my lessons might have gotten over time, I could not compete for my [elementary] students’ attention when 13 other people are living in a small house and siblings are fighting and crying.” Another said that elementary children would not or could not show up for their class meetings without family support. One secondary teacher said she became distraught, to the point of personal anxiety and depression, when students did not show up for weeks and texts and emails went unanswered. She knew some students were not living in entirely safe conditions under normal circumstances. The lessons learned from these supposed failures included driving by students’ homes, doing porch visits, making more phone calls, and networking with local

churches and community members who might know the family to check in. One elementary teacher said she learned to "just keep trying, no matter what."

An elementary teacher, who was also the grade-level instructional leader, provided another example of a failure experienced during remote learning. She said that in the beginning, she did not have any answers: "I just short-circuited and wasn't there for my colleagues. It was hard for me to say, 'I don't know what to do, and I don't know where to lead you.'" This teacher learned that her colleagues could pick up the slack as they started taking on more leadership roles. She said: "It showed me that I don't have to have all the answers. When I stepped back, they stepped up because it was necessary, and they had the opportunity to do so."

Other challenges and failures faced with remote learning came from teachers who were not classroom or core subject teachers. One instructional coach said she felt utterly useless because her colleagues looked to her to be a leader in instructional practices, but she did not know what to do: "It was uncharted waters. My job is usually to support them, and I . . . felt helpless there for a while because I didn't know how to support." Another teacher, who described herself as a Title I teacher, said:

> I didn't know how I fit in. I didn't want to overwhelm the students and parents and add more Google meets [for tutoring]. I just kind of felt that they didn't really need me, and yet I wanted to help.

A library-media specialist shared that she was just a little too "gung-ho" trying to help classroom teachers with ideas, virtual field trips, and many emails with resources. Colleagues nicely told her to stop bugging them because they did not have the "bandwidth" to deal with all of her suggestions. Another library-media specialist agreed that in her enthusiasm, "I went too hard and too fast and too in their face, and they just could not deal with that." Both expressed

that they learned to give their colleagues space, be available for help, and check in regularly, but to stop being so pushy.

In-Person Learning. Teaching in person during the pandemic also did not always go smoothly. Elementary teachers, especially, shared that keeping children distanced and separated with masks was not good pedagogy and felt morally wrong. They experienced constant internal struggle as they balanced sound educational practice with the pandemic's safety requirements. One kindergarten teacher said that learning centers were a complete failure because "Kindergarten is about learning to share and talk with other children." Elementary teachers expressed that learning should be very interactive. However, the challenge of keeping all hands-on manipulatives and learning tools separate for each child and sanitized between uses created a problem and a concern. One teacher said she learned that she needed to collaborate more with colleagues instead of figuring everything out on her own An upper elementary teacher expressed similar concerns regarding the students' need to collaborate. They said the English learners in her class needed to speak, listen, and watch others to learn how to form English speech sounds and clearly hear vocabulary:

> I can agree with that feeling like the worst teacher because there's the way we're forced to do things this year, sometimes it's just not the way it should be done . . . and having to keep them separate and 'you can't touch this, and you can't touch that.' It just doesn't feel right. I have 19 kids and six languages in my classroom, and they're not seeing how to form English sounds and . . . I've got kids that lack social skills, and they need to see facial movements and stuff because emotionally, they need that to learn how to act, and they're missing out on all that."

I could tell by her voice and facial expressions that she was upset. When I asked her what she learned from this failure, she shrugged and turned off her camera for a little bit.

Communication. Failures that participants shared regarding communication can best be described as miscues. As teachers transmitted information between different stakeholder groups in new ways, they made some missteps. Information rapidly changed based on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and KSDE, so rapid communication was also needed. One teacher described her missteps as either jumping in and communicating way too early and ruffling feathers, or waiting too late, which was perceived by colleagues as a lack of transparency. Other teachers expressed that they regretted not speaking up more on behalf of students and colleagues. These teachers recognized missed opportunities because they felt uncertain about what was "in their lane" and what was out of bounds. Many teachers said they learned to have more sympathy for administrators regarding communication because timing and content were so essential. Some also expressed that they learned to step up and say what needed to be said in a way that was honest, true, and nonconfrontational.

Teachers also made missteps when communicating with parents and families. For example, many teachers were in the habit of taking pictures of students and posting them for parents to see. It was part of their culture through their Redesign effort to show children actively engaged in project-based learning or interacting with others; however, one participant reported that she did a poor job throughout the pandemic. She said she worried about backlash if pictures showed students closer than 6 feet apart or if a little one's mask slipped below his nose in a photo. She said: "It was a disservice to families because it would have given them so much peace of mind to see their child learning in school." The lesson she wanted to carry forward was to be

bolder and less worried. Other participants expressed frustration and failure in communicating with parents and families because the traditional, face-to-face opportunities were not going to work. However, they learned to push through feelings of failure to build trust with families through remote opportunities and old-fashioned phone calls.

Communicating with colleagues and administrators also provided opportunities to learn through failure. In the stress of adapting, many reported that relationships temporarily fell to the wayside. One teacher expressed that several colleagues from her school left the profession, and she felt terrible that she did not do more to stay connected and build relationships. Another similar thread involved teachers feeling like they forgot to express gratitude in the midst of all of the changes, especially to foodservice and janitorial colleagues. Several participants felt concerned about their colleagues who, after a year of innovating and learning to use new technologies to meet students' needs, just wanted things to go back to normal. One teacher sounded disappointed as she said: "I thought [my colleagues] were motivated to make and keep the changes that we know are good for kids." The lessons she learned about change were authentic and gritty. She explained: "Crisis drives change, so what I thought as a paradigm shift was just a reaction. Real change takes a very long time." Another teacher worded it this way: "I need to understand what is within my control and what isn't and learn to have more empathy for those who are uncomfortable with change."

Self-Described Leadership Growth

The teachers in the first focus group struggled to articulate and describe their leadership growth when asked directly. After an entire year of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were exhausted, nervous about state assessments, and in some cases, visibly anguished that they

could not do enough to help their students. To address these concerns, I changed the facilitation by adding a warm-up exercise early in the interview. I used Mentimeter at menti.com to pose the question: “Think of the best educational leader you have ever worked for (or the worst leader). What are the skills and attributes you believe are essential for good educational leadership?” The Mentimeter feature I used was the word cloud, so participants could see, in real-time, the brainstormed responses. The participants had no trouble brainstorming these descriptors when thinking about how they applied to someone else (i.e., their best educational leader). Each focus group collectively created its own unique word cloud. To create a visual example (see Figure 4.1), I consolidated the terms from all five word clouds.

Figure 4.1.

Consolidated Word Cloud

At the end of this part of the focus group interview, I asked participants to reflect on the word cloud they generated at the beginning of the session. Only this time, I wanted them to think about their own leadership growth throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. I asked them to take a few minutes to read the word cloud and notice which terms resonated with them. I asked which ones they might use to describe their own leadership growth. This question provoked extremely personal and deep reflections from most of the participants.

The first focus group listed terms such as flexible, empathetic, relationships, and resilient as keywords reflecting their leadership growth. One teacher put it this way: "If you weren't resilient this year, I think you probably quit already because there's been a lot going on, but we still gotta be there for the kids." The second focus group listed collaborator, decisive, transparent, vulnerable, trustworthy, encouraging, and goal-oriented. One participant said: "I circled the word 'vulnerable' as I was listening to others." She continued:

> I think our teachers and our colleagues and our peers need to see us as being vulnerable and being human like everything is just not peaches all the time. It's hard, and we need to be able to feel our feelings.

The third focus group added understanding and sense of humor to their list, with one participant saying, "I think that looking at these words, I feel like a sense of humor. We've learned to laugh a lot because, you know, I think we've cried, and we also have laughed a lot because we had to."

The fourth focus group emphasized patience, empathy, and being a better listener. One participant explained that growing in these attributes was challenging and emotional:

> I feel just every moment my mood has been all over the place. One minute I'm empathetic, the next I'm angry and mad that people aren't doing more, and so I feel like

> my leadership has been like a roller coaster this year with, you know, moments I have high levels of compassion and then other moments . . . I just feel like it's inconsistent."

This participant was emotional, angry, and teary-eyed as she shared this, and rather than just leave the participant in the emotional struggle, I broke out of the researcher role and stepped into a coaching role and said: "It sounds to me like you grew your awareness," to which the participant looked like she was able to take a deep breath as she agreed.

The fifth focus group also listed listener, but they added motivates, inspires, and encouraging. One teacher said:

> I feel like I've kind of had to be a cheerleader all year long and motivate kids to do the right thing. Be a good human, wear your mask, wash your hands, use hand sanitizer. Let's all take care of each other.

Participants elaborated responses fell into the following categories: communication and collaboration and social–emotional growth.

Communication and Collaboration. The growth of communication and collaboration with these teachers was exponential during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the participants described their development as learning to be more encouraging, motivating, and inspiring with everyone they engaged. Some expressed learning to be better listeners because their natural temperament was to be aggressive go-getters or talkers. One teacher described her growth as learning to use "a bit more finesse" with the other person in mind so that her message would be heard and more openly received. Others, with a quieter natural temperament and a tendency to go with the flow, expressed learning to be bold and speak up on behalf of students and colleagues. One unexpected growth area involved learning to moderate their facial expressions

because seeing themselves on Zoom helped them realize this was an area of communication that needed work.

Teachers also expressed growth and a deeper appreciation for opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. During the spring of 2020, when all school buildings closed, many of these teachers expressed feeling isolated and alone. However, they articulated that they learned to intentionally fight professional isolation and ask others for help and ideas. Many not only looked to their immediate colleagues, but engaged in state-wide professional learning communities, listened to podcasts, and stayed connected with education professionals through Twitter and Facebook. Some expressed an emphasis on working as a team to solve problems. On teacher-leader explained: "As a leader on my team, it is my responsibility to be as inclusive as possible, helping others to find their place on the team and appreciating the diversity of thought that each individual brings to our challenges." Another teacher mentioned her interest in participating in this study because she wanted to talk to others who might be like-minded and learn about leadership.

Social–Emotional Growth. Most participants expressed that some of the most significant growth they experienced as leaders was personal social and emotional growth. They described social growth as learning to be more empathetic with colleagues, understanding that everyone was doing their very best, and trying to understand where others came from rationally and emotionally. Many described this idea of being more open and personal with colleagues, using terms such as "vulnerable" and "transparent" regarding what was and was not working, and dropping the idea that they needed to be "fake-positive" or put on a show for colleagues. The participants described emotional growth as learning to temper their passions, be less reactive, and demonstrate patience. A strong thread related to personal growth emerged regarding learning

to feel their feelings without hiding them and being brave enough to talk to someone else if they needed help.

As teachers faced challenge after challenge, they learned to be resilient, to "try, try, and try something else and not give up." However, they also learned to temper the impulse to keep trying by being realistic about what was possible, which required them to learn to say no to some things, shut work down at a reasonable time, and be more intentional about self-care. The spring of 2020 felt like a sprint to May, but as summer went by and the COVID-19 pandemic grew more extensive, these teachers realized that this would be a marathon, not a sprint, and without self-care, they would burn out. Every teacher in this study did not claim to do this well. They still felt guilty that their efforts seemed to fall short and that any time spent for self-care felt selfish. However, many expressed that they also got better at being organized and staying focused on what was essential: their students.

Finding 3: Principal's Support of Leadership Growth

The literature review in Chapter 2 showed that teachers develop their leadership skills when the principal's actions and the school's culture create the conditions for that growth to happen (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). Under typical circumstances, great principals invest in their staff's leadership development by modeling and coaching learning leadership, so the question was how this transpired during the COVID-19 pandemic. I intended to answer the third research question by asking participants to describe how their principal supported their leadership growth throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, many participants could talk about how principals helped students, teachers, and families throughout the pandemic, but most had trouble describing how their principal intentionally supported their individual leadership growth. Answering questions throughout the focus group was voluntary, so not every

teacher added to this topic. Some were able to elaborate on their principal's support. A few expressed experiences that were not positive. The majority, however, were quiet during this part of the interview, and even though I asked additional questions and gave time for other responses, many stayed silent. While I do not know why certain individuals did not participate in this question, I suspect there may be a couple of reasons for their hesitancy. One reason might be that the power differential of my position at the KSDE may have made some participants reluctant to share criticism or a negative response. Another reason might be because these participants are "Kansas nice" (O'Malley & Cebula, 2015), in that they would rather choose to keep silent rather than voice criticism of their boss. Some participants expressed having more empathy for their principals, as they too were experiencing unprecedented pressures and adaptive challenges as they worked to try to lead schools through the pandemic.

Teachers who responded said that principals supported them by giving timely and actional feedback while maintaining high expectations. These principals also provided teachers with opportunities to lead and invested time and monetary resources to ensure that teachers had professional development opportunities that would help them learn and collaborate more as leaders. Many teachers talked about the mutually trusting relationship they had with their principals throughout the discussions of the various types of leadership development support.

Feedback and High Expectations

Those teachers who could articulate how their principal supported their leadership growth consistently talked about receiving high-quality and meaningful feedback. Several mentioned they had predictable—some said weekly—sit-downs or check-ins with their principal. These opportunities seemed to have a coaching rather than a supervisory tone, where principals asked teachers how they were doing and what challenges they faced, provided suggestions of tactics

teachers might try, and held teachers accountable through constructive criticism. As I analyzed the data, I noticed two individuals from two different focus groups answered this question almost identically. When I went back through the participants' lists, I discovered they came from the same school and, therefore, spoke about the same principal. These two teachers said their principal maintained high expectations for them throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. One explained: "She was empathetic and did all she could to check in with us, but she didn't lower her standards." Others talked about how their principals push them to take on leadership opportunities, such as presenting to the local school board or presenting at conferences beyond the local school district. One teacher described it this way: "My principal sees things in me that I don't see in myself. She's always trying to stretch me beyond my comfort zone."

Opportunities to Lead

Many teachers expressed that throughout the pandemic, their principals provided many opportunities for teachers to practice leadership. Some described their opportunities as intentionally planned, and others described opportunities as incidental because of the emergency. One way that principals shared leadership was to deliberately push and encourage teachers to lead committees and professional learning communities, serve on district committees, present to local school boards, and guide parents and families in virtual conferences. Teachers said this shared leadership made them feel empowered to act. One explained: "[My principal] gave the opportunity to do what I needed to do—not necessarily total freedom but do what you need to do, and we can always discuss it later." Another teacher said: "I felt like she handed it over to us since we were the ones in the trenches—that was this principal's way of giving us autonomy and increasing buy-in."

Interestingly, when this conversation developed during one focus group, a participant admitted the focus group discussion changed her perspective regarding administrative leadership during the pandemic:

> I kind of cringe because I've been kind of angry at my assistant superintendent and my superintendent because they didn't have a good vision at the beginning of all this. I wanted it laid out with all of the steps so I could get it done, and he didn't. He kind of allowed us to do it. And I was angry because he made us do it.

Conversely, some teachers shared that any leadership opportunities that came their way during the COVID-19 pandemic were more incidental. In some cases, the principals had no choice but to relinquish top-down control because they were quarantined much of the time or were so swamped with district meetings that day-to-day managerial responsibilities had to be taken up by teachers. When asked to describe her principal's leadership during this time, one teacher shared: "All I can say is that my principal supported us from behind." Another teacher responded to the question about leadership opportunities and said that his principal "had no clue and wanted deniability if things went downhill."

Trust and Belief

Those teachers who could speak about the intentional support they received from their principals said that relational trust was a key component. They reported: "My principal trusts me to do my job," "My principal trusts my decisions," "He knows he can count on me." These comments showed that teachers felt their principals trusted them. Another teacher put it this way: "My principal trusts my decisions and backs me up, even if things don't go exactly as planned." Another added: "Knowing that my principal trusted me gave me a little bit more confidence [to lead the next thing]." In other words, principals gave trust and confidence to teachers, which

increased the likelihood that teachers would take on additional leadership roles. Teachers also felt like their principals believed in them because they invested time and money and encouraged teachers to engage in professional learning related to leadership or sent them to conferences in person or virtually. Even when principals forwarded the email invitation for this study, it was seen by some of the participants as an act of belief and trust. This trust is a two-way relationship. Those who reported that their principal maintained high expectations and pushed them to lead more said they had a relationship with their principal where they trusted her. It felt somewhat safe to be pushed and encouraged to take on projects or assignments that would stretch their leadership skills.

Chapter Summary

The teachers in this study reported taking on roles and responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic beyond what they could have imagined. These additional responsibilities crossed over nearly every professional relationship: students, families, colleagues, and the greater community. Teachers enjoyed their successes and learned painful lessons from their failures. When teachers described their leadership growth, they referenced their skills and confidence regarding communication, collaboration, and social–emotional development. When teachers explained their principals' support, most could talk about how their principals supported students and teachers, generally. However, many had difficulty describing how their principals intentionally helped their leadership growth during this time. Those who could contribute to this topic said that shared leadership, relational trust, and intentional opportunities to practice leadership skills with support, coaching, and feedback were needed to help them feel successful. In the next chapter, I tie these findings back to the theoretical framework on teacher leadership development, as reviewed in Chapter 2, and the methodological framework of constructionism

and symbolic interaction as described in Chapter 3. I also explain research implications and future recommendations for professional development organizers, building and district educational leaders, and policy makers. Last, I describe this study's limitations and discuss opportunities for future research.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Implications

Introduction

The findings discussed in Chapter 4 and the conclusions and implications discussed in this chapter may be important considerations for educators as they rebuild and reconnect throughout the remainder of the pandemic and beyond. President Abraham Lincoln said in his annual message to Congress on December 1, 1862,

> The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country. (Lincoln, 1862)

As educators emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic—an occasion also piled high with difficulty—and work to help students and families contend with the aftermath of social–emotional consequences, mental health needs, and learning loss, they must also think anew and act anew. The traditional ways of thinking about school no longer fit. The pandemic accentuated and compounded opportunity gaps and racial disparities that always existed but were hidden or ignored. All educators: teachers, principals, district leaders, community stakeholders, state leaders, professional development providers, and higher education providers must think anew and resist going back to the way things were because it was not working for all students. Educators must ask themselves what lessons can be carried forward beyond the pandemic.

In this research, I explored the participants' constructed meaning of teacher leadership at a particular point in time and under the particular circumstances of the Kansas Redesign during a pandemic. The individual realities constructed by the participants and the meanings they associated with those realities represented ongoing constructions between the participants' self

and their society or culture (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). This study, which was grounded in the methodological framework of symbolic interactionism, was an exploration of the participants' constructed understanding of what it meant to grow their leadership capacity during a crisis (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic). The study addressed three research questions:

- How did Kansas Redesign teachers demonstrate leadership during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do Kansas Redesign teachers describe the leadership growth they experienced during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do Kansas redesign teachers describe their principal's role in supporting teacher leadership growth during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic?

The theoretical framework articulated in Chapter 2 showed that teacher leadership develops when the principal's actions and the school's culture create a positive environment for growth and exploration (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). The pandemic, which had lasted over a year and a half at the time of this writing, put this theoretical framework through a rigorous and unprecedented test. Compounding the challenges of building and sustaining a learning culture during a crisis, teachers sometimes did not see themselves as leaders beyond the classroom. Many tended to equate the idea of leadership with being an administrator or "the boss," but when leadership was described as an action instead of a noun, it opened up opportunities for everyone to perceive themselves as leading at some point and in some way (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Fullan, 1993; Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; O'Malley & Cebula, 2015).

Significance of the Study

The findings described in Chapter 4 support the existing literature on the growth of teacher leadership and the support required of the principal and school culture. In times of

unprecedented change, such as a world-wide pandemic, the need for teachers to step up and act as change agents is intensified, which is not a surprise. What is surprising, and what adds to the literature regarding teacher leadership development is that during this time, teachers took on unprecedented roles and responsibilities and had increased opportunities to practice leadership. Teachers practiced leadership by leading their colleagues through stressful times to finding new and creative ways to engage students on video. Teachers led families in ways that went well beyond typical family engagement activities – standing on porches giving tech to support to families so that students could be online or delivering meals and cleaning supplies to shut-in families are tasks teachers readily accepted – tasks that no teacher contract has ever specified.

Other opportunities for leadership growth that were unique to this COVID time frame and add to the academic literature are the ethical dilemmas that teachers worked through and decided to stand on. Rushworth Kidder in his book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices; Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living* (1995) discusses how ethical dilemmas are right vs. right decisions. For teachers in this study, right vs. right decisions were some of the most gut-wrenching dilemmas. Teachers learned and practiced putting the best interests of students at the center of all decisions (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). However during this time the best interests of keeping students healthy seemed to clash with the best interests of students' learning. At no other time in recent history must a teacher choose between good teaching pedagogy, such as helping students to collaborate through cooperative learning, and the COVID safety protocols of social distancing and wearing masks. Teachers in this study also had to choose between being a good and obedient employee or speaking out to their supervisors on behalf of students and colleagues. Teachers defied stay at home orders to do porch visits, deliver supplies, and give technology support to families. One school counselor shared how hard it was to defy safety

protocols of social distancing to give a little 8-year-old boy a hug because he was scared and crying, but it was the right thing to do. Nearly every teacher in this study shared the ethical dilemma of trying to be available to students, families, and colleagues 24/7 during remote learning and needing to be present and attentive to their own children and families.

During normal circumstances, teachers have a sort of safety net with the principal and district administration providing communication to the community and fielding questions, but during the COVID 19 pandemic, these participants often found themselves as the primary communicator with families and the larger community. Teachers are usually somewhat sheltered from local politics through their principals and district administrators, but during this time, teachers dealt first hand with the political climate as they answered questions about mask mandates, safety protocols and explained why protocols were one way in the classroom, but different for athletic events. Teachers, who served on district reopening committees fielded questions directly from stakeholders, which grew teachers' leadership capacity as they learned tough lessons about communicating too much too quickly, or too slowly. The traditional hierarchical roles were blurred as teachers stepped in to take on roles that were either intentionally delegated or needed because of the unavailability of the principal. Unlike any other time in recent history, teachers questioned what was in their lane and what was out of bounds. This left teachers feeling uncertain if they had pushed their principal too far when they questioned decisions coming from administration or when they spoke up on behalf of colleagues and students. Teachers expressed that they learned to empathize with building and district administrators, who often must navigate local politics when communicating during a crisis.

The literature on growing teacher leadership is extensive, but when these teachers talked about their leadership growth and how they knew they were successful, their answers were

simple. Teachers knew they were successful and growing because someone cared enough to tell them. Someone thanked them. Someone sincerely praised them. When they failed, someone encouraged them – coached them through authentic and specific feedback. This regular and positive feedback gave teachers the confidence to try again. Sometimes in education, when we see a problem or an issue, we spend time, money, and resources to create a new program or write a new book. What if we stopped making programs and started really focusing on relationships? If schools are to be learning communities where there is true psychological safety for all, then relationships must be at the heart of the culture. Noticing when someone has put forth extra effort and thanking them is so simple that it is often forgotten, but it makes a difference in teacher leadership growth in ways that are difficult to measure.

Recommendations

This study's findings led me to consider a diverse range of recommendations for teachers, principals, district leaders, community stakeholders, professional development organizers, and higher education providers as they seek to support teacher leadership through times of crisis. This chapter also outlines recommendations for future research, limitations of this study, and the study's conclusion.

Teachers

All teachers can grow their leadership skills. Leadership happens whenever an individual manages self, energizes others to move toward a collective purpose, and intervenes skillfully by speaking from the heart and raising awareness on challenging issues (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; O'Malley, 2014; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Every time a teacher volunteers for a project or assignment that is outside their comfort zone, they grow their leadership capacity. Every time a teacher collaborates with others to find a better way to meet students' needs, they grow their

leadership skills. The NNSTOY definition of teacher leadership includes the following characteristics:

- foster a collaborative culture to support colleagues' professional development,
- use research to improve professional practice,
- promote professional learning focused on continuous improvement,
- facilitate instructional improvements that lead to student learning,
- promote appropriate use of assessments and data to inform decisions,
- improve collaboration with families and community,
- engage in shaping educational policy, and
- advocate for students and the teaching profession (Jacques et al., 2016).

This study's findings illustrated multiple examples of how teachers led themselves and recognized their needs for self-care, relationships, and social–emotional support. These teachers engaged others (i.e., students, families, colleagues, administrators, and the broader community) in bold and unconventional ways. These efforts did not always go smoothly. They made mistakes along the way, but any time an individual practices a new skill, mistakes will likely occur. The lessons learned through mistakes and failures make the difference between an individual's growing or giving up. Throughout the Redesign, teachers have taught students to maintain a growth mindset and persevere through difficulties. Throughout the pandemic, these teachers learned and practiced those same lessons on an adult scale. The task proved more complicated than expected, but working through these struggles caused teachers to empathize with others in their challenges. Empathy marks the beginning of trust, and positive relationships require trust.

Principals have a professional responsibility to model and share leadership, but teachers must also be willing to accept the responsibilities that come with shared leadership and power

(Angelle & Teague, 2014; Kools et al., 2020). This give-and-take requires mutual trust and respect. Teachers interested in growing their leadership capacity should consider having a conversation with their principal about growing their leadership capacity and should ask for small stretch leadership assignments and opportunities to debrief. Principals who are busy with managerial tasks, especially during times of crisis, may not want to burden teachers with additional responsibilities, and they may be reluctant to schedule coaching or mentoring time with teachers. Mentoring and coaching teachers to help them expand their leadership capacity represents one way a principal can model and support learning leadership. Relationships between principals and the teachers they lead are not always ideal for a variety of reasons. Therefore, a teacher may find just the act of scheduling such a conversation with a principal to be a stretch, which would make it the beginning of leadership growth.

Sometimes principals get used to going to the same teachers repeatedly because they have an established relationship and mutually high regard. Some of the teachers in this study functioned as the go-to person for their principals. These teachers jump in and volunteer for every opportunity, which is typically a noble and beneficial undertaking. However, teachers who always accept new responsibilities can overcommit and burn out quickly (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; van der Heijden et al., 2018). Teachers who become their principal's go-to person may want to reflect and consider why they like to be in that role every time. Maybe they enjoy being helpful, but perhaps there are less savory reasons. For example, they might want a hand in controlling outcomes, enjoy the power, or feel insecure and need constant approval from their superior. This is not to say these reasons always exist, but the situation warrants deep reflection. When colleagues perceive favoritism between the principal and specific teachers, it can erode school culture, damage trust, and, if unaddressed, lead to a hostile and unfriendly work

environment. One solution would be for these go-to teachers to work with their principals to shift their energy into mentoring or coaching other colleagues to help more teachers grow their leadership capacity.

Principals

Principals balance many different roles, and crises pull them in many directions simultaneously. Many principals discussed in this study were highly occupied with the managerial aspects of ensuring a safe and healthy environment, and rightly so. Some situations require directive leadership. In times of crisis, teachers look to the principal for direction (Goodwin et al., 2018). The principal must keep communication open, foster collaboration, and provide order or structure within the chaos (Heifetz & Grashow, 2009; Moeckel, 2020). Directive leadership, however, must be balanced and shifted to shared leadership whenever possible because empowering, transformational leadership improves teachers' motivation and commitment to the school, influences school culture, and increases teacher efficacy (Dumay & Galand, 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2014). According to Angelle and Teague (2014), "Principals have to be willing to give power, release control, and give respect and trust, and to set up conditions where teachers can practice empowerment" (p. 748).

Dissatisfied employees turnover and cost organizations money, time, and resources (Balthazard et al., 2006). In education, where money does not typically function as a motivating factor for staying in the profession, relational trust, positive culture, and transformational and shared leadership emerge as more essential. When some principals were "supporting from behind," they may have created conditions that could contribute to a dysfunctional culture. A dysfunctional culture should be addressed as soon as possible because the research has shown

that it results in dissatisfied employees, a deterioration of relational trust, and a resistance to collaboration (Teasley, 2017).

Principals' words matter enormously. If the participants had seen the interview questions ahead of time, they might have sought the data to prove their leadership endeavors succeeded, but in the moment when they lacked access to that data, they offered softer and more nuanced descriptions of success. Teachers said they knew they had succeeded and felt supported because others offered positive comments and timely feedback. Some teachers described their appreciation for having regular, weekly check-ins—even during the pandemic—where the principal first checked on them emotionally then coached them through leadership challenges. When teachers had that connection and feedback, they felt encouraged and trusted. Feeling encouraged and trusted made them were more likely to take on other leadership responsibilities. This cycle of leading, receiving feedback, and trying again contributes to a positive learning culture. Within this trusted relationship, principals can set high expectations of their staff, and staff will rise to meet those expectations. Angelle and Teague (2014) asserted:

> Efficacious teachers may be willing to lead beyond the classroom but can only do so if principals are willing to provide these opportunities to lead. Schools with the greatest extent of teacher leadership receive the greatest empowerment from the principal who shares leadership and provides opportunities to share expertise, which have been connected to increased collective efficacy (p. 748).

Principals must not forget to show appreciation to teachers who have stepped up during the pandemic to lead formally and informally.

Finally, principals have an enormous and lonely job, especially during a crisis. They need a network or professional learning community of other trusted principals with whom to

collaborate, support, and learn. The district may provide this type of opportunity, but if not, principals should connect with professional associations or other sources for professional learning and engage in regular, facilitated dialogue around their unique problems of practice.

District Leaders

Twenty years ago, an education professional could expect to spend time as an assistant principal before becoming principal and an assistant superintendent before becoming superintendent, but that is no longer the case. With nationwide shortages of educators, the pipeline from teacher to building leader to district leader has become extremely abbreviated. In Kansas, we see more examples of educational leaders taking leadership positions without the on-the-job training afforded to people a few years ago (Doll, 2021). As district leaders hire and supervise principals, some might assume principals already know how to lead. Principals may have the credentials, but that does not equate to experience. New principals certainly need high-quality mentoring and opportunities to receive timely feedback, but it is unclear who is mentoring them. Modeling learning leadership may not be how principal mentors led their schools 25 years ago. Perhaps those in a mentoring role with principals may perpetuate the idea that principals function as middle managers. Mentors should be trained explicitly in mentoring and coaching to equip them to build others' leadership capacity and not just give advice. This study did not include research regarding principals' efficacy to lead or their sense of efficacy to teach and develop leaders, but these issues are worth considering. More could be known about whether principal efficacy and strong pedagogy are embedded into professional development designed for building leaders. Principals should have opportunities to gather and discuss issues and adaptive challenges unique to their roles and responsibilities. These opportunities may take place within the district if there are enough principals to create professional learning

communities. Alternatively, principals from smaller districts could benefit from connecting with other principals through professional learning communities hosted by higher education institutions or professional associations.

Community Stakeholders

Community stakeholders include people, groups, or organizations with an interest in students' success. Although that could include everyone, this section outlines recommendations and implications specifically for state policymakers, local boards of education, professional development providers, and higher education institutions.

State Policy Makers and Local Boards of Education

First and foremost, state policymakers and local boards should understand, respect, and appreciate how much teachers put into caring for students and families' social–emotional, physical, and academic needs throughout the pandemic. No teacher contract requires teachers to go door-to-door, stand on porches, and shout login instructions through closed windows so students can access education, but it happened. Nor are teachers expected to give out personal cell phone numbers to answer calls and texts 24 hr a day so that parents can get their questions answered, but that happened too. Wherever teacher leaders saw a need, they stepped in and bridged the gap, demonstrating a passion and care that goes beyond professionalism. The pandemic created hardships for everyone, and teachers were not immune. Some teachers became ill or had family members who became ill; some had spouses who lost their jobs; most who were also parents had few childcare options for when they taught remotely. Teachers provided instruction while bouncing their babies on their laps and guided their own children through remote learning. When classes could return in person, many of these hardships and vulnerabilities still existed, including inadequate childcare opportunities, economic hardships,

physical illness, and mental exhaustion. State policymakers and local boards of education should consider ways to advocate for and honor teachers for their caring dedication and work during unprecedented times.

State policymakers and local boards should understand and respond to the professional development teachers need by creating and sustaining the necessary policy and funding. Teachers certainly need the most current training in content delivery, how to meet all learners' diverse and dynamic needs, and how to create engaging lessons. Current systems lack adequate time for the frequency and depth of professional learning necessary to meet this need, but policymakers could help with appropriate funding formulas that honor professional development time. Also, because schools struggle to stay current with technology, teachers could benefit from having the best technology available to support students' learning. Collaborative learning could help teachers learn new technologies and share their new knowledge with colleagues. Teachers could also benefit from leadership training, particularly as it relates to their roles and responsibilities as leaders. This, in turn, could impact teachers' collective efficacy and its relationship to better student outcomes.

Finally, state policymakers should be informed and involved in initiatives that support the development of district, building, and teacher leaders, but they should refrain from hands-on management of such initiatives. Instead, state policymakers should, when possible, designate federal, state, or local money to financially support organizations that provide leadership coaching and professional development for leaders at all levels. They should also hold these organizations accountable for outcomes and fiscal responsibility while leaving the program development and implementation details to the organizations.

Higher Education and Professional Development Providers

Higher education and professional development providers play an essential role in preparing and supporting teachers, principals, and district administrators. These two groups of stakeholders take education policy and translate it into practice. Therefore, they should be well versed in adult learning styles that foster collaboration and model structures that, over time, grow teachers' collective efficacy. Professors and professional development providers should be knowledgeable about the constructs of what it takes to build and sustain a positive learning culture and teach these constructs actively, purposely, and frequently. I would say that teaching and coaching teachers and principals about building and maintaining a positive learning culture should be the top priority, even before subject area content. This is because adults who have the structures and relationships in place to learn together can tackle the various complex and adaptive challenges that are inevitable in normal times and undeniable in times of crisis.

Another recommendation for higher education and professional development providers is to frequently and intentionally discuss what it means to be a leader. Teachers must understand the differences between technical and adaptive challenges and principals may change their leadership style or deploy different tools with staff to address them differently. Teachers should also understand leadership as an activity and not a position or job description (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Fullan, 1993; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; O'Malley & Cebula, 2015). Researchers have described the foundation for this type of leadership as self-care, managing the self, or personal mastery (Cashman, 2000; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; O'Malley & Cebula, 2015). Teachers must know their strengths, vulnerabilities, and triggers. They should become accustomed to uncertainty and conflict and have strategies to confidently address communication challenges with others. Teachers must practice deep reflection and dedicate regular time to introspection so they can recognize areas of needed growth and consider who they might reach

out to for mentoring or advice. Students need teachers who are whole, healthy and resilient, and higher education programs and professional development opportunities offer two strong avenues through which teachers can immerse themselves in this kind of content.

A final recommendation for higher education and professional development providers is to consider teaching teachers how to be wise consumers of readily available professional learning when using social media as a learning tool. Teachers turned to Facebook, Twitter, and virtual professional learning communities during the pandemic to collaborate across district boundaries, state lines, and even national borders. These connections provided essential lifelines for teachers who otherwise felt isolated, frustrated, and afraid. However, information and connections found on social media are not always accurate, reasonable, or appropriate. Teachers should understand the need to question what they see and hear on social media and conduct research using reliable and reputable sources.

Recommendations for Future Research

An immediate and obvious recommendation for future research would be to conduct a similar study with teachers from schools not involved with Kansas Redesign. Such a study could determine how teachers from other Kansas schools describe their leadership growth through times of crisis or how they perceive their principal's support for their leadership growth? Results from such a study could be compared to the current study to assess similarities and differences. The findings of this dissertation sparked questions and provided possible ideas for a more extensive, quantitative, or mixed-methods study with participants from other U.S. states or countries.

Another recommendation for research would be to compare and contrast different groups of teachers' leadership experiences throughout this time. How did the leadership experiences of teachers of core subject areas compare to those in specials subjects (e.g., music, art, physical education)? A few of the participants in this study represented special education, music, and library media. In some cases, their experiences differed slightly from the core area teachers, so it would be useful to learn more about how their skills and talents contributed to educating students during the pandemic, whether they felt included or left out, whether they had opportunities to lead, and how they would describe their leadership growth. Another comparison might be to compare elementary teachers' and secondary teachers' perceptions. The numbers of elementary and secondary participants were nearly even in this study, however comparing the two groups was not part of the purpose or research questions for this study. Also, this study had many more female than male participants, how might leadership experiences and perceptions of support be similar or different when comparing responses by gender?

I also recommend researchers conduct a similar study with principals and ask about their perceptions of how they supported teacher leadership growth before and during the pandemic. More could be understood if principals' support changed during the pandemic or whether supporting and coaching staff in leadership represented a new or unchartered area for them.

In my final recommendation for research, I suggest a follow-up with these same participants in the spring of 2022 to check in and see if their perceptions of their leadership growth changed over time. This study took place just as the first vaccines became available and schools had begun to relax some safety protocols, but at the time of the focus groups, these participants still felt stressed, worried, and exhausted. It would be interesting to see if they view their leadership growth differently 1 year later.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study was the relatively small number of participants. Having 30 participants over five focus groups represented an appropriate number for a focus group interview study, but studies using other methods, such as a quantitative or a mixed-methods survey study, could have engaged many more participants.

Another limitation involved the fact only teachers from Kansas Redesign schools received an invitation to participate. This purposeful selection of participants occurred because I had direct access to these schools, and it was necessary to limit the scope of the study. The perceptions of these participants may or may not reflect how teachers from schools not engaged in Redesign would have responded. In some cases, I knew the participants because I had worked with their schools for 4 years. In other cases, participants may have known me from various presentations and conferences, but I did not know them. One benefit may have been that participants trusted me and felt they could share deep thoughts and reflections with me, but my familiarity may also have created a limitation by causing some to withhold information they might have shared with a less familiar facilitator.

Teachers' Zoom fatigue could have created another limitation. Early research published in April 2021 from Stanford University found that women are especially susceptible to experiencing Zoom fatigue (Fauville et al., 2021; Gupta, 2021). Specifically, the increased use of video conferencing, sometimes for hours on end with very little time to transition between meetings, created situations where mirror anxiety (i.e., looking at yourself all the time), hyper gaze (i.e., constantly searching the facial expressions of others), feeling physically trapped, and producing nonverbal cues combined to create cognitive overload. The exploratory data showed less fatigue for extroverts than introverts and more significant fatigue for women than men

(Fauville et al., 2021; Gupta, 2021). The study for this dissertation was conducted via Zoom in April of 2021, 1 year into the COVID crisis and near the end of the school year, a time when teachers generally feel tired under normal circumstances. I am unsure if Zoom fatigue affected the quality of the collected information. It may have negatively impacted the number of participants, as people may have wanted to participate in a conversation about their growth but did not want to commit to another Zoom meeting.

Conclusion

The purpose of qualitative research is to gain deep insight or understanding into participants' perceptions, opinions, or experiences. Therefore, researchers must be cautious not to read these findings through a cause-and-effect lens. The reader must also remember that constructivists believe individuals' understanding constantly changes and grows. Therefore, it should be possible to ask the same participants the same questions again and collect different ideas, possibly resulting in different interpretations.

In the book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Van Der Kolk (2014) recalled that researcher Beatrice Beebe, clinical psychology professor, once said that "most research is me-search" (p.111). which means that researchers are most likely drawn to research topics that resonate personally. This is true of this dissertation. The leadership lessons learned and described in this study resonated with me because, in some ways, they are my lessons as well. Readers may recognize their own leadership growth here too. Perhaps throughout the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic, educators have developed a greater appreciation for relationships and opportunities to collaborate. Perhaps everyone expanded their technology skills. Some surely experienced leadership successes that left them feeling as if they had made a significant difference, and others must have felt the sting of failure or shed tears when their very best attempts ended in

disappointment. Many readers could examine the word cloud shown in Figure 4.1 and find terms that resonate with them to help them describe their leadership growth and determine areas of needed growth.

This journey and this dissertation began with a detailed description of the Kansas Redesign. At the time of this writing, KSDE had just approved the final official cohort of Redesign schools: Apollo III. It was always the intention that KSDE would work closely with Redesign schools, learn from them, and scale Redesign elements to all public and private systems accredited by the KSDE. If one thing must move forward to undergird school improvement or redesign, it should be the proven truth outlined in the Chapter 2 literature review. Teachers, who are the adults in the system closest to the students, must learn to be bold, speak out, and lead colleagues, students, and families. Teachers must act as change agents who are willing to take calculated risks to innovate and make the learning environment better for each student in their charge. It is not the teachers' responsibility to do this alone and unsupported. Administrators must create a culture conducive to collective efficacy and data-driven decision-making, where school staff members are empathetic, trustworthy, sincere, and dedicated to a shared vision. Principals exercise tremendous influence over culture because they are responsible for the building and for coaching teachers to increase their leadership capacity. The academic literature was clear, and the teachers' stories from the pandemic illustrated how this held true, even in extreme circumstances.

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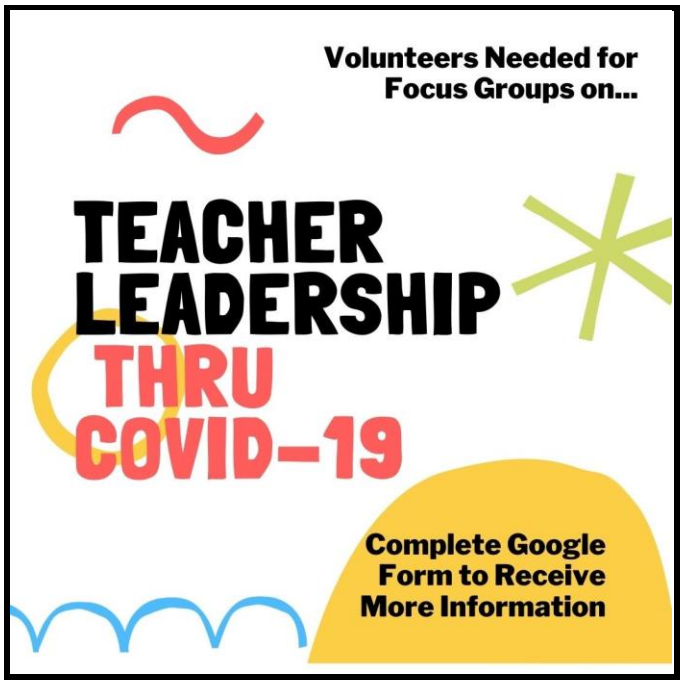
Appendix A - Letter to Participants



Background: On March 17, 2020, the unimaginable happened. In an era where everything we knew about educating children changed with the swipe of a pen, here you are, a year later, navigating the complexities with creativity and innovation! Governor Laura Kelly was the first governor to make a proclamation to close all school buildings because of COVID-19.

I would like to invite you to participate in a focus group interview study this spring. This study will

1. Give you the opportunity to reflect with other Redesign teachers from around the state on how you've grown professionally through all of the challenges of teaching through the 2020–2021 response to COVID-19.
2. Provide rich qualitative data (conversation transcripts) for my dissertation as I work towards my doctorate degree from Kansas State University.
3. Add to the academic literature on the growth and development of teacher leadership during this unprecedented time in world history.

I hosted a practice focus group in February with a small group of teachers, and they described the experience as "meaningful," "a great opportunity to reflect," and "fun to think of how much I've grown."

Even if you do not feel like a "leader," if you were a teacher in a Kansas Redesign school during this time, I would love to hear from you!

Commitment: The commitment is minimal. Participate in one focus group discussion via Zoom with a small group of Redesign teachers, check your part of a transcript for accuracy, and be willing to talk with me one-on-one if I have any points to clarify from the focus group discussion.

If you are curious and would like more information, please complete the information on this Google form, and I will contact you. *There is no obligation, and your participation is voluntary.*

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeaapNHjVtjFYdH-wmDeakNRpBgRTmNuxnYO4-KkAdAXbcmNA/viewform?usp=sf_link

Please do not hesitate to contact me at tmitchell@ksde.org if you have further questions!

Thank you for your consideration!

Tammy Mitchell

Appendix B - Informational Webinar

Slides -

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1Fa5QYIA9NYX2_4n800d00N3FLCWzomz2oY4yijOnLf0/edit?usp=sharing

Welcome - Hello there and welcome! Thank you for joining or viewing this quick chat about this research project, entitled "Teacher Leadership in Kansas During the 2020–2021 COVID-19 Response." My name is Tammy Mitchell, and my professional role is Elementary Redesign Specialist for the Kansas State Department of Education. I am also a K-State doctoral student, and this research study is part of my dissertation requirements.

Purpose - This study is a qualitative focus group study that will help us learn more about your growth and development as teacher leaders in Kansas during the spring 2020 COVID-19 school closures. I will host 4 to 6 separate focus group discussions, which will be on Zoom and will be recorded to create a transcript. The transcripts are the qualitative data analyzed through a coding process that systematically identifies themes and patterns across all focus groups.

Due to the unprecedented responsibilities of flipping to remote instruction in as little as 2 weeks, I believe you likely took on leadership responsibilities that you may not have considered volunteering for under normal circumstances. Conducting focus group conversations and the data these chats will provide will help others see leadership through your lens.

Commitment:

If you choose to volunteer to participate, you will be asked to attend and participate in one 90-minute focus group conversation on Zoom.

You will be able to request a one on one follow-up interview if you would like.

You will have the opportunity to review and recommend corrections to your portion of the written transcript.

Your rights as a participant:

As a participant, you have the right to:

- Speak as openly as you are comfortable
- Abstain from discussing specific questions if you are not comfortable

There are no right or wrong answers - there is no expectation for you to agree or come to a consensus.

The group will agree to keep the information discussed confidential.

Confidentiality safeguards

All transcript data will be kept secure.

Your name or identifying information will never be shared with anyone beyond the focus group discussion. All data will be de-identified.

Appendix C - Question Route and Discussion Guide

Welcome - Hello there and welcome! I am so thankful that you are willing to give your time this evening to talk about your leadership growth throughout this past year, given all that you have navigated through COVID-19. My name is Tammy Mitchell, and my 8 to 5 role is Elementary Redesign Specialist for the Kansas State Department of Education. My role here tonight is lead researcher, facilitator, and listener. I am joined by my friend and colleague, Rachel Thalman. Her 8 to 5 role is to work for Educational Services and Staff Development Association of Central Kansas and lead training and coaching in InSpired Leadership. Her role here tonight is to be another set of eyes and ears for me, to remind me to record this Zoom, and otherwise serve as some administrative support. (Or, maybe Rachel would like to do her introduction?)

Agenda -

- **Welcome and introductions**
- **Purpose, goals, and norms**
- **Q & A discussion**
- **Closing**

Purpose - This study will help us learn more about your growth and development as teacher leaders in Kansas during this past year. You may or may not know the other members here tonight, but you are all Kansas teachers from redesign schools. You share some common language and training. Due to the unprecedented responsibilities of flipping to remote instruction in as little as 2 weeks, you may have taken on leadership responsibilities that you may not have considered volunteering for under normal circumstances. Conducting focus group conversations and the data these chats will provide will help others see leadership through your lens.

Types of Information - This Zoom session is being recorded to have a transcript of the conversation. The transcript is your words - that are my data, and I will use qualitative coding processes to analyze the data systematically.

Discussion Norms –

- Your participation is voluntary
- Speak as openly as you are comfortable
- It is okay to abstain from discussion specific questions if you are not comfortable
- All responses are valid - there are no right or wrong answers - there is no expectation for you all to agree or come to a consensus
- Please respect the opinions of others, even if you disagree
- Try to stay on topic - I may need to interrupt so that we can cover all of the material
- Avoid revealing very detailed information about your health
- Help protect others' privacy by not discussing details outside of this group

Opening Question and Introductions:

Please tell us your first name, where you are from, and one thing you like to do when you are not working.

Change your Zoom name to the first name only

Introductory Questions:

When you think about the term "leadership" in an educational context, what skills or attributes come to mind? Go to Menti.com and add those terms there, and we will watch the Word Cloud develop with your responses.

Transition Questions:

- What are some responsibilities that you took on during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 school closings that were not a part of your job before the COVID-19?

- Describe an instance where you felt successful in a leadership role. How do you know that you were successful?
- Conversely, describe an instance where you feel like you failed at a leadership role. What did you learn from that experience?

Key Questions:

- How have you changed as a result of these experiences?
- How would you describe your leadership growth?
- Do you feel like your principal supported your leadership growth during this time? Why? How?
- If you were in charge of hiring a new principal, what qualities would you want to see in light of what you learned in the spring?

Closing Question:

- Is there anything else that you would like to share?
- As a result of this conversation, are there any other leadership skills or attributes you would like me to add to the word cloud? Go ahead and add them at Menti.com XXXX.

Closing:

- If you have anything else you would like to share on this topic and would like to request a one-on-one discussion, please email me at tmitchell@ksde.org.
- Within the next few weeks, you will receive a de-identified copy of the transcript with just your name on it. Please check your words for accuracy and let me know if there are any corrections or clarifications.

Thank you so much for your time and contribution to the research on the development of teacher leadership.

Questions to engage more voices:

- Are there any other points of view on this question?
- Does anyone see it differently?
- Thank you for that point of view. Does anyone have another?
- That is helpful. Now let us hear some different thoughts.

Appendix D - Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE:

The Development of Teacher Leadership in Kansas During the 2020–2021 schools' response to COVID-19

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:	6.1.2020	**PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:**	6.1.2021	**LENGTH OF STUDY:**	1 year

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dean Debbie Mercer

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Dean Debbie Mercer, 785-532-5525, dmercer@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506 785.532.3224

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the growth and development of teacher leaders in Kansas during the 2020–2021 schools' response to COVID-19. Throughout the 2020-2021 school years, the teachers in this study were likely functioning in crisis mode. Due to the unprecedented responsibilities of flipping to remote instruction in as little as two weeks, teachers took on leadership responsibilities they may not have considered volunteering for in normal circumstances. Information will be gathered by conducting a qualitative focus group study with teachers from Redesign schools. This data will be analyzed through the epistemology of constructionism and the theoretical perspective of interpretivism, emphasizing symbolic interactionism

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

Focus group interviews and optional follow-up individual interviews.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

Risk is minimal, and you, as a participant, will have the right to decline to answer questions you do not feel comfortable answering. All data collected will be strictly confidential, and every precaution will be taken to de-identify the data using pseudonyms for participants and generalizations for the schools and districts they work for. By the time this study is completed, hundreds of schools are involved in Kansans Can redesign, so identifying individuals in this study will be unlikely. Data documents will be stored in a secure manner and password protected.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

As a participant in this study, one of the benefits you may experience is that you will have the opportunity to share the story of your accomplishments and challenges you have overcome. The research may serve other teachers in Kansas and across the nation as they may be able to related it to their experiences as well. The educational community will have the opportunity to learn how teacher leaders can grow professionally over a relatively short period of time.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

This data will be stored on the researcher's Google drive. The researcher has a redundant system of security to access this Google drive. 1.) The computer login is password protected. 2) The Google drive login is password protected. 3) Individual files within the Google drive are password protected. Printed materials will be stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher's office until such a time as they can be converted to digital artifacts. The researcher, Tamra Mitchell, and the principle investigator, Dean Mercer, will be the only people to have access to all of the data and privacy/security provisions. Electronic documents will be password protected as described above. Data that is not electronic will be scanned or photographed so that it is stored electronically. Once the data is secured electronically, the physical data will be shredded.

As a participant in the focus group and/or individual interviews, you will not be anonymous to the researcher. However, the data that is reported and any possible vignettes written will not disclose your identity.

Deidentified data may be used for future research studies without additional consent required.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS ☐ Yes ☒ No

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME:

ARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:

DATE:

Appendix E - IRB Approval

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | University Research Compliance Office

TO: Dr. Debbie Mercer
Dean of Education
Bluemont Hall

Proposal Number: 10188

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 07/13/2020

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "The Contribution of Teacher Leadership in Kansas During the 2020 COVID-19 School Closures."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for <u>three years</u> from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 07/13/2020

EXPIRATION DATE: 07/12/2023

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

☒ There is no more than minimal risk to the subjects.
☐ There is greater than minimal risk to the subjects.

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All

approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced postapproval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Appendix F - In Vivo Coding Sample

<Files\\Focus Group 1\\April 1 Finalized Transcript (1)> - § 8 references coded [2.07% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.10% Coverage

we just establish some check-ins with our people.

Reference 2 - 0.03% Coverage

checking in.

Reference 3 - 0.65% Coverage

We discovered that we had you know, a staff member who was struggling you know reached out and got some donations to help that person, and also my teachers lounge does not have a pop machine or vending machine, so we got a mini fridge and I run a little concession stand up there, and people are so happy to have a candy bar and pop.

Reference 4 - 0.12% Coverage

our focus really for our care team this year, was the adults

Reference 5 - 0.16% Coverage

wellness committee that's what we're calling it so it's a social emotional learning

Reference 6 - 0.52% Coverage

And we kind of started getting into some things like it was like January, and my one of my colleagues who was on the redesign team was feeling very frustrated and not heard and she was like I just need to take a break, and I was like well i'll go and for you instead.

Reference 7 - 0.42% Coverage

And I could take my words and like she would get telling me what she was thinking, and I could say it and people were very responsive and so people when people are responsive, then that makes me feel successful.

Reference 8 - 0.07% Coverage

relationships with other teachers.

<Files\\Focus Group 2\\April 6 Deidentified Transcript (1)> - § 24 references coded [5.58%

Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.29% Coverage

I never in a million years thought I would have to track the number of kids or teachers that have COVID or having to collect that data is something that I would have never expected to have had to do.

Reference 2 - 0.01% Coverage

copyright,

Reference 3 - 0.17% Coverage

It was just a whole new realm where I didn't quite know where I fit in into it and so that was a real struggle for me.

Reference 4 - 0.26% Coverage

you didn't know where to fit in all right, I kind of felt the same way, being an instructional coach because it was uncharted waters like I didn't know how to support the teachers

Reference 5 - 0.04% Coverage

I didn't know how to support.

Reference 6 - 0.30% Coverage

I was able to step in, because I do have a little bit of freedom in my schedule, I was able to step in with those teachers and help them to figure out a Google classroom or just work through the technology

Reference 7 - 0.06% Coverage

I was just the source of communication,

Reference 8 - 0.03% Coverage

translate messages,

Reference 9 - 0.23% Coverage

Appendix G - Codebook

Teacher Leadership Through COVID Pandemic

Name	Description	Files	References
Demonstration of leadership	How did Kansas redesign teachers demonstrate leadership through the 2020–2021 COVID pandemic?	0	0
Colleagues		5	64
Families		6	42
Larger community		5	21
Self		6	28
Students		6	95
Emotions		4	28
Principal's role in support	How do Kansas redesign teachers describe their principal's role in supporting their leadership growth during the COVID pandemic?	6	49
Feedback received from principal, colleagues, or parents		4	9
Opportunities		3	19

Name	Description	Files	References
Trust		4	8
Self-describe leadership growth	How do Kansas redesign teachers describe their leadership growth during the COVID pandemic?	7	51
Feelings of failure		6	71
Feelings of success		5	32
Lessons learned		6	67
Subjectivity		1	3