

DEVELOPING TEACHER LEADERSHIP DURING UNPRECEDENTED TIMES OF CHANGE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For this study, teachers working in Kansas Redesign schools shared their perspectives on their leadership development throughout the pandemic. Research shows that teachers who exercise leadership within a psychologically safe learning culture with a principal who coaches and supports leadership growth are more satisfied, focused, and likely to stay in the profession. It is no surprise that during the pandemic, teachers took on roles and responsibilities that were well beyond their typical duties; however, the frequency and intensity of these roles and responsibilities were unprecedented. Teachers were proud of their successes and learned painful lessons from their failures. Teachers reported growth in their skills and confidence regarding communication, collaboration, and social-emotional support. 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. There is much to do if education is to come out of this pandemic, retain talented teachers, and address equity and learning gaps for students. The system must have teachers who lead from their position and positively influence the school's learning culture, and it must have school leaders who turn their attention to developing more teacher leaders.

INTRODUCTION

Research shows that teacher leadership develops when school culture is supportive and when principals intentionally develop teacher leadership (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Kools et al., 2020; Redding & Corbett, 2018). However, what did teacher leadership growth look like during unprecedented change? Throughout the 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic,

- How did Kansas Redesign teachers demonstrate leadership?
- How did these teachers describe their leadership growth?
- How did they describe their principal's role in supporting their leadership growth during this time?

These are the research questions that guided this qualitative focus group study.

METHODS

In April of 2021, the researcher hosted five virtual focus group interviews. Each group had four to eight participants; of the participants, 16 were elementary educators and 14 were secondary educators. Most participants were classroom or core content teachers. There were also two music teachers, one special education teacher, two library media specialists, two instructional coaches, two building administrators, and one school counselor.

The researcher facilitated each focus group using a pre-planned question map, which helped ensure that the

flow of questions went from easy, conversational questions to more profound questions related to the research questions, then closing on a high note with an opportunity for reflection. To start the conversation, the researcher asked participants to brainstorm a list of attributes of the best educational leader they had ever worked for. Near the end of the time, the researcher asked participants to reflect on these terms and use them to talk about their leadership growth. As expected, teachers took on roles and responsibilities beyond their contracted duties. However, what was unique was that every relationship teachers had was drastically impacted simultaneously, so those roles and responsibilities were magnified in intensity and frequency. Teachers were proud of their successes and crushed by their perceived failures. Some principals continued to develop teacher leadership through the crisis, but others offered little or no support.

Finding 1 – Demonstration of Leadership

Teachers demonstrated leadership by voluntarily taking on roles and responsibilities well beyond their contract requirements and teaching responsibilities. Some of these responsibilities were health-related, but most were relational. Teachers checked in and collaborated much more frequently. They took extra measures to find students who were not showing up to virtual class meetings, such as calling families, doing home visits, and contacting community members who may have a relationship with the family. Teachers provided tech support and emotional support to colleagues, students, and families.

Finding 2 – Self-described Leadership Growth Successes

The researcher framed the discussion questions by asking teachers to describe the leadership successes they experienced and how they knew that they were successful. Responses could be sorted into four categories: remote or hybrid teaching, in-person teaching, leading colleagues, and communication. Through the summer of 2020, teachers worked to learn new technology and plan for the upcoming year so that when they did need to be remote or hybrid, they felt more prepared. When students were in-person, teachers felt good about their efforts to help students feel safe, and they were prepared to front-load procedures and tech support so that students and families were more ready for future remote or hybrid learning. The participants also elaborated on successes in leading their colleagues, which was described as coaching each other, elevating and encouraging each other, experimenting with new strategies, and making changes as needed. Participants knew they were successful in leadership tasks because of feedback. Teachers said things like, “My colleagues listened to me,” or “Colleagues were responsive to my ideas.”

Failures

Next, the researcher asked participants to describe their failures and leadership lessons. Their failures could be categorized similarly: remote or hybrid teaching, in-person teaching, leading colleagues, and communication. Many teachers shared that they felt like remote learning in the spring of 2020 was their worst failure because it fell short academically no matter what they tried. “No matter how engaging my lessons might have gotten over time, I could not compete for my [elementary] student’s attention when 13 people are living in a small house and siblings are fighting and crying.” Teachers of all grade levels shared that they felt distraught about students who did not show up day after day. They said they learned to persevere, drive by students’ houses, do porch visits, and collaborate

"I would go to their [students] 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."

with local churches and community members to check in with families.

Regarding leading colleagues, there were failures there too. One teacher who was the grade level leader shared, “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.’” The lesson learned was that it created space for her colleagues to step up and practice leadership.

Word Cloud Reflection

When participants were asked to reflect on the word cloud, this time thinking about their leadership growth, teachers described growing in flexibility, empathy, resilience, vulnerability, and listening. Growing in these attributes was challenging and emotional. One focus group emphasized learning to have a sense of humor through it all. “We’ve learned to laugh a lot because...I think we’ve cried, and we laughed a lot because we had to.”

Finding 3 – Principal’s Support of Leadership Growth

When the researcher asked teachers to describe how their principal supported their leadership growth during this time, not everyone could answer. Teachers were kind and said that their principals had a lot on their plate, but it was clear that only a handful of them could describe intentional support in their leadership development. Those who responded said that their principals provided timely and actionable feedback and maintained high expectations, which was done through conversations that took place almost weekly and to teachers felt more like coaching than supervision. These principals also opened up opportunities for teachers to lead, and COVID created many such opportunities for teachers to practice their leadership skills. These opportunities included serving on district committees, presenting to the local board, leading colleagues through professional learning communities, and leading families in conversations through virtual technology. 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.”

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 teachers had to take on day-to-day managerial responsibilities. 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.”

CONCLUSIONS

This research 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. In times of unprecedented change, such as a worldwide pandemic, the need for teachers to step up and act as change agents is intensified, which is not a surprise. What is surprising and adds to the literature regarding teacher leadership development is that teachers took on unprecedented roles and responsibilities during this time and had increased opportunities to practice leadership. Other unique leadership decisions included the ethical dilemmas that teachers worked through. For these teachers, right

"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."

vs. right decisions were some of the most gut-wrenching dilemmas. Teachers continued to prioritize students' best interests in all decisions. (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). However, prioritizing students' health clashed with prioritizing students' learning. At no other time in recent history must a teacher choose between strong pedagogy, such as cooperative learning, and COVID safety protocols of social distancing and masks. Teachers defied stay-at-home orders to do porch visits, deliver supplies, and give technical support to families. One school counselor shared how she defied safety protocols of social distancing to hug a little 8-year-old boy 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 being available to students, families, and colleagues 24/7 during remote learning and needing to be present and attentive to their children and families.

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

If educators are to come out of the pandemic and help students regain lost learning, they must use this opportunity to reimagine what school looks like (St. George et al., 2021). To move forward, education must have whole, healthy teachers with their creativity and collective efficacy intact. If "collective efficacy" is the group belief that teachers can make a difference in the success of each student, then collective efficacy has taken a hit during the pandemic. Now is the time for teachers, administrators, state policy makers, higher education institutions, and professional development providers to refocus on the future. It starts with rebuilding and maintaining a positive learning culture that supports the growth and development of teacher leaders with principals who keep leadership development a priority. (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017; Saha & Kumar, 2018).

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