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# Centering the Teacher: How an Autonomy-Supportive Environment Impacts Arts Educators' Sense of Agency and the Collaborative Culture of Their Education Networks

Kyle Andrew Anderson

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CENTERING THE TEACHER:  
HOW AN AUTONOMY-SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT IMPACTS ARTS  
EDUCATORS' SENSE OF AGENCY AND THE COLLABORATIVE CULTURE OF  
THEIR EDUCATION NETWORKS

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## ABSTRACT

In this action research study, I adapted statewide systems of support for visual and performing arts educators in an effort to promote a positive sense of professional identity and strengthen the collaborative culture of the support systems. Prior to this study, the educator network met monthly for professional learning sessions planned and facilitated by a leader in a non-teacher role. As an action researcher, I restructured the sessions to create an autonomy-supportive environment to foster educators' leadership skills and promote authentic collaboration. Study participants had autonomy over the planning, aims, content, and facilitation of the networking sessions. A basic qualitative research design surfaced several conditions of the teacher-led environment that informed participants' social connections with each other, sense of validation, self-confidence, and sense of agency.

The findings indicate that teacher-led networks can be a tool to support agency and a positive sense of self among members of the network. Additionally, the collaborative dynamic is stronger when networks are teacher-led. In addition to the problem of practice, research design, and findings, I discuss implications of this research for facilitators of similar teacher-led networks and possibilities for using the networks as a catalyst for local or statewide sustainable change in traditionally top-down systems.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BPS .....	Boston Public Schools
ESSA.....	Every Student Succeeds Act
NCLB .....	No Child Left Behind
NDEA .....	National Defense Education Act
NEA .....	National Endowment for the Arts
PLC .....	professional learning community
SDT.....	self-determination theory
STEAM.....	science, technology, engineering, arts, and math
SVDC.....	SummerVision DC

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the 2020–2021 school year, educators grappled with new demands brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, having to develop approaches to virtual instruction while ensuring equitable access to learning. As the visual and performing arts coordinator for a northeastern state, I also recognized how the pandemic amplified an additional issue among my constituency. Whenever schools and districts rework their schedules and revisit their instructional priorities, the arts tend to be an easy area to sideline. Students have limited or no stand-alone arts classes while arts teachers struggle to establish or maintain a prominent presence within their context. Although the pandemic has made this marginalization more pronounced, arts teachers have always been in a position that often feels isolated from non-arts classrooms, school-wide professional development, and collaborative learning (McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). Nevertheless, the opportunity to develop and maintain professional relationships is critical for any teacher’s sense of agency and identity (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Lowery-Moore et al., 2016; Margolis, 2008). As arts teachers across the state experienced these limitations in conjunction with a sense of isolation, I was concerned about the impact on their perceptions of their role and agency.

Positive perceptions of professional identity are essential for supporting both arts and non-arts teachers’ feeling of job-satisfaction and sense of value (Allen, 2018; Izadinia, 2013; Elliot & Stokes-Casey, 2019). Communities of learners can aid arts

teachers' sense of identity and agency (Milbrandt, 2006; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017), in part as reflective and teacher-directed dialogue allows groups to determine approaches and strategies that are effective for their contexts while supporting ownership and autonomy (Dierking & Fox, 2013; McComb et al., 2019; Shabani, 2016). Collaborative and social elements of professional development for arts teachers are no exception (McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017; Schlaack & Steele, 2018). The challenge that I addressed in this study was the need to develop strategies and formats for the community support systems I had in place for arts teachers across the state. These systems—or networking sessions—served as regular opportunities for educators to receive updates, hear new strategies or research, and share resources. Though they had been a platform to stay updated and make some work connections, they did not intentionally provide collaborative learning opportunities or maintain a collaborative culture. Importantly, the educators with whom I work had no concrete channels in place for expanding upon their role and identity as cohorts of arts teachers and professional learners. The networks' structure offered limited opportunity for relationship building, reflective dialogue, and exploration of professional interests and goals.

McComb et al. (2019) stated, “the more we realize that working together fosters positive relationships, the more we will grow as artists and art educators. Building rapport with colleagues increases success for everyone” (p. 12). To ensure equitable and meaningful learning for all students, approaching this new and uncertain context required a teacher-led path anchored in empowerment, reflection, collaboration, growth, and advocacy (Grant et al., 2020). Elements of teacher self-governance and autonomy (e.g., teacher-led professional learning, reflective dialogue on localized issues, and peer

planning support) could aid in strengthening social learning opportunities in the arts education networking sessions.

### **Teacher Autonomy, Leadership, and Professional Identity**

In trying times for the education world, many teachers need to explore and reestablish their professional identity while preparing their schools for post-pandemic learning. Izadinia (2013) described professional identity in the context of education as teachers' "perceptions of their cognitive knowledge, sense of agency, self-awareness, voice, confidence[,] and relationship[s]" (p. 708). Opportunities to explore these components of professional identity are noticeably limited in schools, yet formal and informal leadership roles have proven to be a source of confidence and career satisfaction among new teachers (Allen, 2018; Lowery-Moore et al., 2016; Margolis, 2008). Specifically, teacher leadership can support positive perceptions of professional identity and sustained quality teaching practices (Allen, 2018). In addition to contributing to professional identity, teacher leadership may lead to increased engagement and positive attitudes toward professional growth among less responsive teachers. For example, Abramovich and Miedijensky (2019) explored teachers' interests in professional development and advancement through a qualitative study of a three-stage professional development model. Teachers who had gone through the first basic phases of the model (e.g., workshops or seminars on professional development) eventually took on leader roles (e.g., mentoring new teachers, coaching, and providing feedback based on observations). Despite an evident barrier in sustained pursuit of professional challenges (not even half of the initial participants chose to transition to leadership roles), the

researchers found an increased sense of empowerment and professional growth among those who chose to take on leadership roles.

Because the teaching profession is increasingly complex, teachers need to operate as self-directed professional learners and leaders if they are to navigate unforeseen barriers in the education world. A contributing factor to effective teacher leader structures is participant-driven learning and peer support (Bennett & Broman, 2019; Margolis, 2008). In a teacher leader professional development initiative to guide schools through technology integration, Bennett and Broman (2019) outlined a structure to increase support in a transformative and sustainable fashion. Though the study focused largely on technology support and integration, the approach for growing building-based teacher leaders lends itself to overarching criteria on which systems can base formal and informal teacher leader structures: (a) strong content knowledge, (b) motivation to learn and commit to new initiatives, and (c) the ability to construct and maintain positive collaborative relationships. Such components contribute to professional identity (Izadinia, 2013), but teacher-led collaborative reflection is an especially prominent common denominator in sustained professional growth and teacher leadership (Bennett & Broman, 2019; Cheung et al., 2018; Gutiérrez et al., 2019).

The benefits of both teacher leadership and collaboration among colleagues are clear: positive perceptions of professional development and professional identity, a sense of empowerment and satisfaction, and increased interest in learning (Abramovich & Miedijensky, 2019; Allen, 2018; Bennett & Broman, 2019; Gutiérrez et al., 2019). Evidence also suggests collaborative learning and teacher autonomy support student engagement and achievement (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Burns et al., 2017; Daniels, 2015;

Zeichner & Liston, 2014), thus expanding access to quality education. These factors motivated my aim to increase teacher autonomy in the professional networks, establish collaborative structures, and implement subsequent activities and initiatives in my context to better support arts educators' collaborative cultures and professional identities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The framework with which this study operated synthesizes social-cognitive theory and self-determination theory (SDT). Both theories illuminate critical aspects of teacher motivation, learner agency, and professional growth (Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020) while focusing on different factors of the problem of practice for this study: a lack of collaboration and autonomy among the educators with whom I work.

As I discuss further in Chapter 2, collaborative learning supports the efficacy of a leadership role and job-embedded professional development (Schlaack & Steele, 2018). Broadly speaking, collaborative learning experiences support higher thinking processes and growth (Knight, 2009; Shabani, 2016). Moreover, including teacher-led elements in professional learning provides the ownership needed to sustain growth and engage teachers in change efforts (Bennett & Bromen, 2019; Cheung et al., 2018; Gutiérrez et al., 2019).

In the context of teacher professional development, intersections of social collaboration and SDT can contribute to perceptions of knowledge, agency, and self-awareness (Allen, 2018; Izadinia, 2013; Jansen in de Wal, 2020). Additionally, contexts that prioritize autonomy, competence, and relatedness create a more supportive learning environment (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Vansteenkiste et al. 2004). Within SDT, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are the three basic psychological needs for overall well-

being and agency (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When learning experiences recognize and meet these needs, learners tend to be more intrinsically motivated, confident, and interested in taking on challenges (Kaur & Noman, 2020; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In Chapter 2, I elaborate on the intersections of social-cognitive theory with the needs related to SDT, as well as the impact they have on professional learning and teachers' self-perceptions.

Beyond the needs of individual learners, collaborative culture is key to school reform—and contingent on teacher leaders (Cheung et al., 2018; Lowery-Moore et al., 2016). Autonomous motivation can support teachers' transforming their systems into more collaborative learning spaces (Jansen in de Wal, 2020; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Vansteenkiste et al. 2004). As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, a teacher-led collaborative effort can engender real change by fostering empowering, collaborative cultures within education networks (Cheung et al., 2018; Goh, 2019).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

Components of teacher leadership and autonomy (e.g., teacher-led professional learning, reflective dialogue among peers) can lead to positive perceptions of professional identity (Gutiérrez et al., 2019; Schlaack & Steele, 2018; Shabani, 2016). These perceptions can lead to increased engagement in professional growth, job satisfaction, and retention of new instructional practices (Allen, 2018; Cheung et al., 2018; Margolis, 2008). However, teachers have few opportunities to sustain autonomy in their roles through formal or informal leadership opportunities within their schools and systems (Crowther et al., 2009).

I have been both a teacher and a coach in systems where scripted curricula was the norm for schools with low test scores. I have both given and received required

professional support. Such top-down approaches diminish engagement and ownership of practice and, ultimately, threaten the sustainability of new practices and initiatives (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). Years ago, I taught in a southern urban district in schools performing at the bottom 5% of the state. The district responded by assigning curricula in tested areas, such that teachers lost ownership of their practice. Consequently, they became less reflective and more technical, abiding by a set of procedures rather than designing an approach that worked for their students. This lack of ownership was reflected in professional learning, too; educators were uninterested and disengaged with their own growth as professionals.

The pandemic's limitations have further limited opportunities for authentic reflection. However, providing opportunities for arts teachers to expand their professional identities and strengthen their learning community through teacher-led activities and elements of autonomy could sustain strong collaborative cultures among networks of educators and influence perceptions of professional identity. Most broadly, this problem of practice encompassed arts educators' sense of isolation and feelings of being less-than-essential. To ameliorate this problem, I explored how incorporating teacher governance within the statewide arts education networks could influence arts teachers' perceptions of the networks' collaborative culture and the teachers' sense of agency.

To determine how teacher autonomy influences professional identity and the arts education networks' collaborative culture, I invited participants to adapt their roles to align with teacher leader model domains (Cosenza, 2015), emphasizing autonomous and collaborative components of professional learning, collaborative planning, mentoring,



and shared desired outcomes of the sessions. This study, therefore, explored the following research questions:

1. How can fostering elements of teacher autonomy influence the collaborative culture of arts educator networks?
2. How do teacher-directed arts educator networks influence perceptions of professional identity?

Exploring these questions illuminated the teacher-led elements' impact on perceptions of collaborative culture and professional identity, thus providing valuable insight for structuring the state's arts educator networks. Both questions surfaced evidence-based outcomes of collaborative culture, teacher autonomy, and positive professional identity, thereby enabling me to identify standards for teacher autonomy and conditions for teacher leadership that can support education communities in developing strong collaborative cultures and positive perceptions of professional identity.

### **Positionality**

Positionality includes a researcher's philosophy, background, position, beliefs, and role in the study (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As a state-level content specialist, I conducted this study within multiple cohorts of arts education networks. My professional role was to offer guidance and protocol for districts to consider within their locally governed organization, providing support to specialists in the field (e.g., coaches, teachers, principals, superintendents) in implementing best practices in content-related initiatives and advocating for school-based visual and performing arts teachers. Since completing this action research, my role has shifted to broadly focus on systems transformation and methods by which the state agency sustains initiatives and

recommends policy. As I investigated the behavioral side of program innovation for this study, my findings have a direct impact on more facets of my work than originally anticipated, as I discuss further in Chapter 5.

My professional background includes work as an elementary visual arts teacher, a gifted and talented teacher, and an instructional coach for a district-wide arts integration professional development program. These past roles covered both coordinating and attending professional development; piloting and leading first-year-teacher professional development programs; and offering job-embedded support to teachers via coaching, co-teaching, and modeling lessons. Prior to holding the state-level position, I supported schools in implementing or preparing to implement district-mandated innovation strategies. These strategies took the form of scripted curricula, which led to observably obstinate teachers. This experience, in part, motivated me to seek a state-level position, as I sought to support districts in implementing empowering reform initiatives of which teachers and communities have ownership.

These experiences fueled the themes for this study: teacher empowerment and autonomy, collaborative cultures, and education improvement. I have been involved in schools with required curricula aimed to “reform” the institutions while leaving teachers out of the process of choosing how these initiatives might work in their context. Teachers and students have pushed back on such initiatives. Essentially, these experiences have led to my belief that teacher autonomy can support collaborative professional learning and positive self-perceptions among teachers.

In terms of role and position in the study, I occupied two areas on the continuum of positionality (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Pieces of this study took the form of

participatory action research whereby I collaborated with teachers and educator networks to foster and assess teacher autonomy, collaborative cultures, and perceptions of professional identity. Additionally, components of the study allowed me to be an outsider investigating insiders (e.g., educator networks and teachers). I maintained this positionality throughout data collection, as detailed in Chapter 4.

### **Overview of Methodology**

Chapter 3 elaborates on my efforts to improve the state's arts educator networks by incorporating more teacher-led elements, but this section offers an overview of the context and methods of data collection and analysis. Through a basic qualitative approach using interviews, observations, and closed- and open-response surveys (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I invited a purposeful sample of teachers who were involved with and planned to continue in the networks to participate. I use pseudonyms for participants as I describe the experience, omitting names of regions, schools, school districts, and the state where the study took place to maintain anonymity. To shift the arts education networks and networking sessions to a participant-developed and participant-led structure, I asked participants to design a new structure for the sessions through a series of teacher leader seminars and planning sessions. I studied their implementation of their ideas over the course of two teacher-led arts education network sessions.

### **Context of the Study**

The study took place in a northeastern state in the United States, consisting of primarily rural and suburban school districts. Inviting participants with prior involvement in the statewide arts educator networking sessions enabled me to collect pre- and post-intervention data to see the impact of the teacher-led elements (i.e., I conducted

interviews and surveys prior to and after implementing teacher-led phases). These sessions were intended to support arts teachers from across the state to connect and share resources or strategies, ideally ameliorating the problem of practice identified in the introduction: many arts educators struggle to connect and engage in social learning with people in similar contexts.

### **Data Collection**

Collecting data through semi-structured interviews (Appendix A), observations, and closed- and open-response surveys (Appendix B) provided multiple means of identifying teacher autonomy's influence on collaborative culture and professional identity. This qualitative approach offered participants opportunities to share their experiences through their own lens, explain their sense of autonomy and professional identity, and engage in collaborative education networks. Participants embedded elements of teacher autonomy and leadership into the structure of the sessions using the teacher leader model domains (Cosenza, 2015). The group identified specific elements, as I explain in Chapter 4, and pre- and post-intervention data captured the teacher-led elements' impact.

### **Data Analysis**

I used thematic inductive analysis by organizing each data set by measure and determining thematic trends among the sets. Emerging themes offer a sense of the core elements to include in future work related to the arts education networks, teacher-led initiatives, and social learning contexts. This approach acknowledged the individual and collective benefits of my data sources. Through the semi-structured interviews, participants were able to self-reflect on their autonomy and efficacy as teacher leaders.

Surveys allowed participants to share their experiences within the networking sessions and their overall sense of the efficacy of the networks. Observational data added to the other data sets by substantiating the interview responses and surveys from my perspective as coordinator. I discuss the overarching process for data analysis in further detail in Chapter 3.

### **Significance**

Teacher voice and leadership support positive perceptions of work and self while engendering sustainable change to school climates (Allen, 2018; Daniels, 2015; Margolis, 2008). This study sought to promote collaborative cultures and positive perceptions of professional identity through intentional opportunities for teacher leadership. Within the context of a small northeastern state of the United States and with a selective group of participants (e.g., arts teachers), I gained insight into how to plan and coordinate effective and empowering participant-led education networks to support arts educators' professional identities.

Though findings are limited to the context of this study, I hope the results challenge conventional formats of expert- or administrator-led professional development and systems change efforts, which have little impact on retaining reform efforts or local and statewide initiatives (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). Schools that integrate formal or informal leadership roles and actively pursue a positive collaborative culture see much more promising outcomes, both for teachers (Abramovich & Miedijensky, 2019; Allen, 2018; Bennett & Broman, 2019; Gutiérrez et al., 2019) and for students (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Burns et al., 2017). Therefore, professional development coordinators, school or district leaders, and state education officials can consider the findings in this study as

they aim to foster teacher engagement and sustainable support systems. By determining factors that lead to positive perceptions of professional identity, systems can engender real and lasting change among teachers and education networks.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

As schools across the country shut down in the spring of 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, arts educators started to panic for their programs and their profession. At the onset of the nationwide closures, the National Art Education Association (2020) released a statement with a significant backing of 52 national arts organizations that described the continued need for arts education. Arts teachers are well-acquainted with the consequences of shake-ups in the education world; the discipline has been sidelined for at least the last 60 years. As arts educator Steve Seidel stated:

Sputnik was the wake-up call to America as a society but also to American education. [...] The notion that we might not be up to par [with] the Soviet Union brought intense scrutiny. More funding was put toward science in education. [...] The arts, and, in truth, the humanities, [continue to] take a back seat to math, science, and technology, and while we have a focus on literacy, history, and the humanities broadly, and while they have a secure place in the curriculum, the arts are seen as peripheral. (Tamer, 2009, para. 14)

Today's arts educators have only ever known this position of isolation from non-arts classrooms, school-wide professional development, and collaborative learning (McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). Designations that lack acknowledgment of arts teachers' roles and responsibilities as teachers could be a self-fulfilling prophecy: arts teachers are sidelined from school-wide learning or decision-making, assigned titles that

imply they are “other” than the non-arts teachers, and then internalize a sense of being less-than-essential (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019).

Strong and consistent professional relationships are critical for any teacher’s sense of agency and identity (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Lowery-Moore et al., 2016; Margolis, 2008). Without a positive sense of agency, professional identity, and a strong community of learners, how can arts teachers break free of this isolation? How can they be empowered to grow as leaders of education, rather than support staff? As arts teachers across my state experienced the limitations of the pandemic and the ongoing perceptions of the arts in the education world in conjunction with a sense of isolation, I was concerned about the impact on their perceptions of their role and agency.

As discussed in Chapter 1, participant-directed collaborative learning communities can support teachers’ perceptions of their professional identity. Therefore, I adapted the statewide community support systems—or networking sessions—that had been in place for arts teachers, guided by the following research questions:

1. How can fostering teacher autonomy influence the collaborative culture of arts educator networks?
2. How do teacher-directed arts educator networks influence perceptions of professional identity?

This chapter discusses concepts embedded in these research questions by describing the broader problem of arts educators’ isolation and feelings of being less-than-essential, a phenomenon amplified by the pandemic’s demands and limitations. In this study, I endeavored to ameliorate the issue through an intervention guided by my theoretical framework. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the tenets of SDT, its intersections



with social-cognitive theory, and how these theories fit together in the scope of my problem of practice. Then, I offer a historical overview of the problem. After a discussion on offering equitable access to unified arts educator professional learning, I share research related to my study. The chapter concludes with a summary of these concepts.

### **Literature Review Methodology**

The Educational Resources Information Center was my primary database, although an occasional Google search enabled me to identify recent works or ideas from the field or obtain copies of laws that informed historical perspectives of arts education. Education and teacher professional development material related to SDT, social-cognitive theory, and arts education professional learning, all of which came from peer-reviewed journals, also contributed to my literature base. Boolean phrases were a key element to searching for new literature, especially studies on arts education, collaboration, professional identity, teacher agency, and the history of arts education. Identifying and searching for key terms directed me toward related research or literature reviews that substantiated the problem I identified in my context. The main terms and phrases I used included teacher leadership, arts education, transformative learning, professional identity, learner agency, teacher autonomy, motivation, and perceptions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As I explained in Chapter 1, this study's framework synthesizes social-cognitive theory and SDT. Social-cognitive theory explores "the effects of cognitive processes, such as conceptions, judgment, and motivation, on an individual's behavior and on the environment" (American Psychological Association, n.d.-b, n.p.) while SDT is the "concept that regulation of behavior varies along a continuum from externally controlled

(e.g., to obtain rewards or avoid punishments) to autonomous or intrinsically motivated (e.g., to have fun or explore interests)” (American Psychological Association, n.d.-a, n.p.). The intersections of these theories play a critical role in teacher motivation, learner agency, and professional growth (Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017; Schlaack & Steele, 2018). In the context of teacher professional development, collaboration and self-determination can enhance participants’ cognitive knowledge, agency, and self-awareness (Allen, 2018; Izadinia, 2013; Jansen in de Wal, 2020). Therefore, in a symbiotic fashion, both social-cognitive theory and SDT address different factors of the problem of practice for this study: a lack of collaboration and autonomy. In this section, I explain the tenets of SDT and how they inform my study. Additionally, I share how the reciprocal model of social-cognitive theory via collaborative learning folds into the relatedness tenet of SDT and, in turn, the collaborative culture of the arts education networks in which this study took place.

### **SDT: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness**

Conditions that support self-determination and autonomous motivation are essential for teachers’ confidence, satisfaction, agency, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). Key figures in SDT since the 1980s, Deci and Ryan (2000) have described how intrinsic motivation and self-determined behavior affect goal pursuits, expanding on their original ideas by identifying psychological needs related to self-determination. SDT synthesizes a set of needs theories to define needs—pertaining to self-determination and behavior—as “innate psychological nutrients that are essential for psychological growth, integrity, and well-being” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 229). The three needs that support autonomous motivation include (a)

autonomy, teachers' control over their practice and initiatives, (b) competence, use and expansion of teachers' expertise, and (c) relatedness, teachers' sense of belonging and connection to others (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020). Autonomy is especially critical: it can inform a sense of relatedness and competence, but relatedness and competence may not increase teachers' autonomous motivation outside of an autonomy-supportive environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020). Such environments give teachers a sense of control over the experience, opportunities to set relevant goals, and high-stakes decision-making responsibilities (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020). Autonomy-supportive environments, in turn, lead to a more positive experience and increased pursuit of learning, no matter how difficult (Grant et al., 2020; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004).

For the arts education networks in my context to become autonomy-supportive environments, they needed to be restructured. Thus, autonomy was a key element of my intervention, which granted participants control over the networking sessions and provided high-stakes decision-making opportunities, in alignment with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020). Moreover, I considered the seven domains of the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Cosenza, 2015) to structure elements of teacher autonomy via teacher leadership throughout data collection. Specifically, I used the questions to investigate teachers' overall perceptions of their abilities for each domain; the level to which they felt that they had voice, control, and value in the networks; and the impact their new networking session structure had on the culture of the networks.

Although autonomy is key in a professional teaching context, all three needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—have a positive influence on intrinsic

motivation and even engagement in activities of little interest to participants (Koestner & Losier, 2002, as cited in Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020). Nevertheless, because autonomy has a leading role in motivation and satisfaction, Jansen in de Wal et al. (2020) suggested education leaders should provide teachers with meaningful choices and opportunities to make important decisions in self- and school improvement, which can foster commitment to professional learning and a positive sense of agency.

### **Self-Determination Conditions in the Arts Education Networks**

At the outset of this study, my program did not meet all the conditions to support self-determination but did promote competence. Educators who attended the networking sessions shared teacher-developed or applied strategies and resources (i.e., the program recognized them as experts in their field). The networks were also collaborative in the sense that educators could discuss and share resources, but simply sharing resources without active reflection and collaborative learning will not ensure a sense of relatedness (Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). Authentic social learning experiences that yield a strong collaborative culture and sense of relatedness among arts teachers require reflective dialogue, constructive social learning experiences, co-planning, modeling, and positive relationships (McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017; Schlaack & Steele, 2018). Further, autonomy was limited in the arts education networks. Teachers could choose what they shared with the networks, but I facilitated the sessions and determined the objectives, topics, and learning format. The educators, therefore, lacked a sense of control over the experience, opportunities to set goals relevant to their interests and work, and the chance to engage in high-stakes decision-making that impacts their tasks and the environment, which are necessary for cultivating a commitment to professional learning,

a positive sense of agency, and a strong network of professional learners (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017).

For autonomy, competence, and relatedness to support each other and, ultimately, autonomous motivation among the arts teachers, the networks needed to offer consistent opportunities to expand upon their professional identity and a platform for meaningful collaboration. Therefore, my research questions focused on autonomy’s role in relation to teachers’ perceptions of their professional identity and of the networks’ collaborative culture. Because the established networking sessions already offered a conducive setting, autonomy served as the intervention condition. With more autonomy-supportive conditions in place, I collected data to gauge autonomy’s influence on the network’s collaborative culture and the participants’ self-perceptions. Figure 2.1 illustrates how the networking sessions and my research questions align with the tenets of SDT.

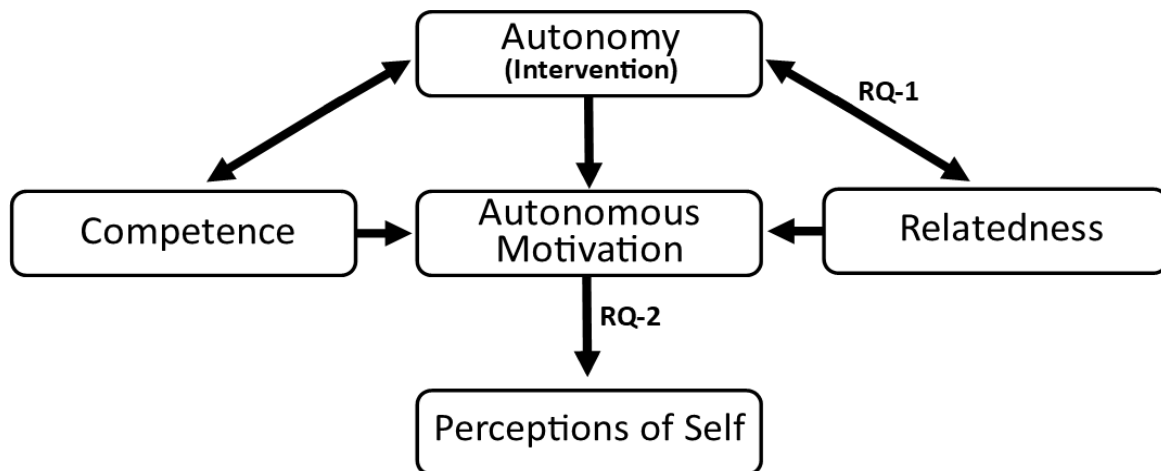


Figure 2.1 *Tenets of SDT Reflected in the Arts Education Networks*

To support teachers’ sense of agency and promote autonomous motivation, I redesigned the statewide arts education networks by inviting a small cohort of teachers to take on a leadership role, thereby meeting their need for autonomy. They collaboratively determined the aims of the program and the tasks and content on which to focus, and they

also led the networking sessions. The teacher-led elements and autonomy-supportive environment of the networking sessions also made them a co-planned experience, which can support the networks' collaborative culture.

### **Elements and Intersections of Social-Cognitive Theory and Teacher Autonomy**

Using Bandura's reciprocal model of social-cognitive theory, Schlaack and Steele (2018) found that collaboration can make leadership roles (e.g., coach or mentor) and job-embedded professional development more effective. Collaborative learning promotes professional growth and engagement (Knight, 2009; Schlaack & Steele, 2018; Shabani, 2016). Shabani (2016) explained, "thinking processes needed for optimal professional practices are inherently social and start at the intermental level between and among people. Hence, for the professional development to get realized, the teacher should participate in social activities and groups" (Implications for Designing Professional Development section, para. 2). Additionally, teacher-led initiatives allow educators to lead themselves, as a learning community, to identify and learn new instructional practices, thus giving them a more in-depth understanding of those practices and how to apply them (Bennett & Bromen, 2019; Cheung et al., 2018; Gutiérrez et al., 2019). So, the relatedness need informs a sense of belonging among participants, while the social learning elements of the experience investigated for this study inform knowledge of and skills in leadership and collaboration.

Collaborative culture, key to school improvement, is contingent on teacher leaders (Cheung et al., 2018; Lowery-Moore et al., 2016). While SDT addresses psychological needs that support autonomous motivation, social-cognitive theory is directed toward cognitive knowledge and collaborative learning. In other words, though relatedness is a

factor in both theories, SDT is about having a sense of belonging while social-cognitive theory is about gaining knowledge by constructing it with others and observing the collaborative environment. Autonomous motivation can spur teachers to lead their systems toward more collaborative and positive environments for students and teachers (Jansen in de Wal, 2020; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Vansteenkiste et al. 2004).

Leadership roles in the context of collaborative learning networks provide teachers with ownership of their practice and opportunity to reflect on collective professional practices (Goh, 2019), thus meeting their need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020; Vansteenkiste, 2004). In terms of collaboration, teacher leaders can effectively support teachers when approaching learning and modeling bidirectionally (Cheung et al., 2018). In other words, school improvement and instructional reform initiatives can develop through collaborative cultures and teacher networks, rather than top-down initiatives. Teacher autonomy (via formal and informal leadership roles) can play a key role in establishing this culture while fostering a commitment to professional growth and identity. I thus embedded elements of teacher autonomy into the state arts education networks with the aim of identifying structures that can strengthen the networking sessions and support teachers' sense of agency.

### **Autonomy's Impact on Professional Identity and Collaborative Learning**

SDT suggested meeting the conditions of self-determination—relatedness, competence, and autonomy—would instill in arts educators the autonomous motivation essential for their professional growth. Jansen in de Wal et al. (2020) studied teachers' autonomous motivation in a country that does not have accountability systems for recertification and noted that teachers in such settings need to be intrinsically goal-

oriented. In the context of my study, all teachers had an accountability system for licensure yet lacked a system for accountability in terms of continuous improvement, given that they operated in isolation (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; McComb et al., 2019) and were separated from school-based improvement efforts (Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). These conditions likely hindered the autonomous motivation that would give them increased job satisfaction, a positive professional identity, and relatedness to colleagues (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019). Therefore, for this study's intervention, I sought a professional learning format that supports arts teachers' sense of belonging and agency, thus ameliorating their isolation and raising their esteem.

### **Historical Perspectives of Arts Education**

My problem of practice was rooted in the history of arts education in public schools. Today's arts educators are isolated from their peers in non-arts disciplines (McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). Some schools do not even label arts educators as teachers (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019), which impacts teachers' perceptions of their professional identity, job satisfaction, and interest in professional growth (Allen, 2018; Izadinia, 2013).

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the United States prioritized "core" disciplines during the Space Race (Shaw, 2019; Tamer, 2009). A surge of interest in science and math aligned with a nationwide increase in scholar academic perspectives (Schiro, 2013), but the ideologies that define "core" disciplines—and arts education's role in schools—have been around for much longer. Historic events and national interests have led to education initiatives that prompt many administrators, non-arts teachers, and even arts teachers themselves to perceive arts education as less-than-essential (Allina,



2018; Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; Keisling, 2019). In this section, I discuss the historic role of arts education and identify resurgences of national interests that continue to prioritize “core” areas over the arts. Throughout, I revisit the potential impact that trends in general perceptions and priorities in education have on perceptions toward arts education and how that dynamic informs today’s arts teachers’ roles and sense of agency.

### **Arts Education in the United States**

Arts education programs have been around in public schools, whether formally or informally, since at least the early 19th century, with Massachusetts being the first state to officially adopt an arts program in 1870 (Whitford, 1923). Industry was an integral part of society and the economy at the time, so social efficiency informed school programs (Schiro, 2013). Designed to produce functioning citizens with skills and behaviors to contribute to society, the first mandated arts instruction program in the 1870s focused on drawing skills only (Whitford, 1923). With the production of high-quality arts materials and a more globalized society, some form of arts education in schools became increasingly popular throughout the 20th century and, eventually, led to programs focused purely on making art, not on preparing students for industry (Whitford, 1923). However, this shift made the purpose of arts education variable and somewhat unclear. As a result, the pendulum very easily went back toward an industry focus in the 1920s (Whitford, 1923), while some city systems’ arts educators pushed to prioritize observing beauty and aestheticism in nature and fine art (i.e., arts appreciation) as an integral part of arts education (Efland, 1983). Nevertheless, the dwindling educational resources in Depression-era schools in conjunction with an incoherent vision for the arts in education placed many arts programs on the chopping block (Efland, 1983).

### ***Depression-Era Perspectives***

Dewey's (1934) *Art as Experience* advocated for art-making to support holistic understanding. Despite broad ideological shifts toward constructivist, learner-centered instruction (Schiro, 2013), arts education, along with most aspects of society, struggled throughout the Great Depression (Efland, 1983). One year before Dewey published *Art as Experience*, the Office of Education surveyed 700 cities to investigate the Depression's impact on arts education: over a third cut arts programs in addition to nearly 10% reducing arts instruction (Efland, 1983). Significantly, the survey excluded rural areas, where thousands of schools closed in the late '20s and early '30s (Efland, 1983).

As some cities in which arts programs remained through the 1930s promoted arts education as a community and cultural need, others deemphasized the need for a school-based teacher with specialized training in the arts, suggesting classroom teachers could fill the void (Efland, 1983). Simply, the resources available to school systems shifted administrators' perspectives regarding the need for arts education. Throughout the 19th and nearing the middle of the 20th century, ideas about arts education had been swinging back and forth from arts for the sake of industry, arts for the sake of self-expression, and arts for the sake of culture and community (Efland, 1983; Whitford, 1923). Arts education's role in schools has always been in question and the Depression made programs susceptible to cuts (Efland, 1983), but its place on the sidelines seems to have solidified with the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) in 1958.

### ***Lobbying for Core Designation***

NDEA is among the first examples of national interest influencing nationwide curricula via federal legislation (Hunt, 2020). Its passage made science, math, and

technology national priorities in teacher preparation and public education (Hunt, 2020; NDEA, 1958). Despite ideological shifts that indicated progress, albeit slow, in arts education efforts in the 20th century (Efland, 1983; Whitford, 1923), a focus on math and science fields deprioritized the arts in public schools (Tamer, 2009).

Struggling to garner national support for arts education and the arts in general, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) concentrated on the Arts on Radio and Television program while, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, arts educators sought alternatives to garner systemic support and expose U.S. students to art (NEA, 1973, 2009; Shaw, 2019). Despite the NEA's efforts, along with congressional lobbies for arts in the public schools throughout the 1980s (Shaw, 2019), the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) released *A Nation at Risk*, advocating for increased emphasis on science and math to ensure the nation's global standing. The report and its aftermath effectively sidelined arts education by prioritizing tested disciplines, a trend that continued in the early 1990s as efforts to standardize math, science, history, and geography took precedent at the highest levels of government (Shaw, 2019). After arts education advocates lobbied to have arts included as a core subject in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994), a second iteration of the bill recognized art as a core discipline in U.S. schools (Lehman, 1993).

### ***Arts Education's Place in the 21st Century***

Upon Goals 2000's passage, the National Standards for Arts Education were developed (Mahlmann, 1994), presaging today's National Core Arts Standards (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2015), though with less of an explicit emphasis on 21st-century skills (Allina, 2018; Mahlmann, 1994). As these standards gained traction

throughout the 1990s, No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) once again shifted public school priorities to tested areas like reading and math. Though the arts still fell under the “core” subjects label, schools emphasized areas that secured funding via accountability measures, which excluded the arts (NCLB, 2002). Additionally, the go-to priority areas experienced a resurgence, as evident in the emergence of the STEM acronym, denoting fields catalyzed by NCLB and the 2008 economic recession (Allina, 2018). As the arts struggled to maintain prominence, advocates worked to embed arts and design thinking into STEM initiatives, such that STEM became science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM), but a consistent understanding of arts’ role in these interdisciplinary experiences was missing (Allina, 2018). In response to continued advocacy, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) listed arts disciplines among subjects needed for a well-rounded education, which made them eligible for Title I funds. ESSA also loosened accountability measures and penalties for achievement targets on reading and math tests; this major difference from NCLB (2002) lessened the emphasis on historically “core” areas, opening opportunities to focus on the arts.

### **The Culture of 21st-Century Schools and Arts Educator Identity**

Though arts education has gained some recognition in recent years, particularly with the passage of ESSA (2015) and with general STEAM initiatives across the nation, arts educators remain largely sidelined, which inhibits their professional identities and sense of job satisfaction (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; Keisling, 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). In its infancy, arts education in the United States was being primed for a place on the sidelines. Throughout the 20th century, arts education advocates and education policy-makers engaged in an ongoing battle to prioritize arts education in

legislation or designate the arts as core disciplines. Though the second half of the 20th century witnessed clear efforts to advocate for the arts, allowing the arts to remain on the backburner has become a part of U.S. education culture. As the next sections illustrate, studies suggest that arts educators' perceptions of their own professional identity and sense of isolation from historically "core" content areas and school initiatives reflects a turbulent—and often discouraging—journey (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; Keisling, 2019; McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). Identifying paths to ameliorate these problems was a central aim of this study.

### **Equitable Access to Transformative and Sustainable Professional Learning**

The current state of educators' perceptions of self and lack of involvement in collaborative learning can lead to equity issues related to continuous improvement and student access to quality arts curricula (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; Keisling, 2019; McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). To achieve satisfaction, agency, and well-being, teachers need access to meaningful collaborative learning opportunities anchored in transformative and empowering professional learning (Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017; Schlaack & Steele, 2018). The state in which this study took place is no exception to these equity concerns. Students' arts education depends on their arts teachers' interpretation of the arts standards, how to teach them, and how to assess them, largely due to the lack of coordination across districts and emphasis on local control from district-to-district or even school-to-school (Perille, 2016; Siegesmund, 1998).

This fragmentation is a widespread issue in a discipline with limited accountability systems (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; Keisling, 2019). For example, Boston Public Schools' (BPS, 2016) Arts Expansion Case Study found:

Some schools offered rich arts instruction to students, with full-time arts teachers in multiple disciplines, while others didn't offer anything. Some schools had rich partnerships with nonprofit arts and cultural institutions, while others had none. An official arts education policy existed, but there was little incentive or support for schools to meet the requirements . . . Arts teachers rarely convened as a group for professional learning, with most teachers working in isolation within their buildings. Data was sketchy, due to the absence of a system that could measure access, quality or equity of distribution, with information on FTEs and partners but no student level access or impact information. (p. 6).

Many of the issues BPS described stem from the historical perspectives in this chapter: no core designation, limited accountability measures, and no clear vision for the purpose of arts education. This BPS description also mirrors my own observations in my state. A student in the northern part of the state might receive a completely different experience than one in the southern part owing to a lack of coordinated arts curricula or systems in place that allow teachers to unify their instructional objectives. Arts education experiences are variable in terms of rigor and relevance. Importantly, BPS's overview reflects my problem of practice: arts educators are in an isolated position that impacts their sense of identity and access to meaningful collaborative networks.

Autonomous, teacher-governed communities and learning settings can support the conditions that lead to autonomous motivation, thus engaging teachers in transformative and sustainable professional growth (Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020). Additionally, collaborative learning is critical for arts programs and teachers to unify instructional objectives (McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). Statewide arts education

networks can prioritize this shift with redesigned structures to fill the gap that arts teachers are experiencing and strive to support their agency and collaborative cultures.

### **Related Research**

Recent studies have explored similar themes and contexts to identify factors that contribute to arts educators' identity or strategies to support a collaborative professional learning environment. As described throughout this chapter, both issues— isolation and diminished sense of self—remain prevalent in the culture of public schools. This section describes such studies, highlighting connections to my study and noting key differences.

#### **Arts Teachers' Sense of Self**

Elliott and Stokes-Casey (2019) sought to determine how arts teachers' labels impact their perceptions of their professional identity, role, and expertise. Arts educators have struggled with labels and designations for decades (Lehman, 1993; Shaw, 2019). Generally, arts programs are organized separately from non-arts (i.e., "core") programs. Additionally, arts teachers are separate from school-wide initiatives and decision-making because of the emphasis on high-stakes testing and educators' and administrators' perceptions toward arts teachers, prompting Elliott and Stokes-Casey (2019) to advocate for change. Using label theory, they considered labels' impact on behavior and potential to be self-fulfilling prophecies. Arts teachers' being labeled as something other than "teacher" perpetuates behaviors that are increasingly at odds with school-wide decision-making, peer collaboration, and change efforts.

Collecting data through surveys of the Tennessee Arts Education Association, Elliott and Stokes-Casey (2019) asked participants what they are officially labeled, what they would like to be labeled, what they think about their current label, and for any other

information relevant to their label. Responses went through a round of inductive thematic analysis to rank the labels and perceptions from most to least common. Among the 122 respondents, “Specials” or “Specialists” was the most common label, with the least common—but most “egregious,” in the authors’ estimation—including “babysitter” or “extras.” In terms of teacher perceptions, the researchers identified three emerging themes: (a) a feeling of being less than; (b) a sense of being marginalized; and (c) a resignation to or internalization of their labels.

Elliott and Stokes-Casey’s (2019) findings align with historical perspectives on arts education and studies that explore similar themes. Simply, arts educators struggle with their sense of identity due to missing feelings of relatedness and concerns about others’ perceptions (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; Keisling, 2019; McComb et al., 2019). By embedding elements of teacher autonomy to strengthen network participants’ sense of relatedness and the overall collaborative culture, my intervention went further than Elliott and Stokes-Casey’s study, essentially acting on their recommendation for change.

### **Collaborative Contexts and Intrinsically Motivated Professional Learning**

Sandell and Zimmerman (2017) explored how teacher empowerment in the form of teacher voice—both solo and collective—can impact the efficacy of a professional learning community (PLC) and arts teachers’ perceptions of themselves as change agents. During a summer museum-based PLC for arts teachers in the DC area, called SummerVision DC (SVDC), a group of arts teachers engaged in a set of collaborative tasks and museum-based learning activities to prepare for the school year. The study pulled survey data from the evaluation of that program, looking for common themes, and Sandell and Zimmerman drew from research on collaborative in-service programs’ effect



on the arts teacher isolation problem while supporting a sense of agency among program participants. Their program evaluation methodology aligned with existing findings, validating the Voice in an In-Service Education Model (i.e., the Voices Model), which scaffolds teachers' empowerment through conditions that support personal and public voice and their roles as reflective practitioners in the context of in-service PLC programs (Thurber & Zimmerman, 1997, as cited in Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). Participants indicated that, through the development of their solo voice (i.e., their personal voice as teachers) and public voice (i.e., their collective voice as change agents), the SVDC program led to increased interest and engagement in broad pedagogical initiatives, pursuit of museum-based learning activities (the core content for the SVDC program, indicating increased engagement in and commitment to new competencies as a result of the program), and pursuit of their own professional growth. Importantly, the program gave them support systems that they did not have in their own contexts.

The social collaborative elements and themes of empowerment that Sandell and Zimmerman (2017) explored align with my study. Though the context of the work differs significantly, the aims are related. Another key difference is the mechanism through which the researchers explored teacher empowerment and agency. Although I did not use the Voices Model, my study likewise embedded elements of teacher autonomy.

### **Connections to and Differences From my Problem of Practice**

Additional studies cited throughout this chapter have explored issues related to my study (Keisling, 2019; McComb et al., 2019; Schlaack & Steele, 2018). Despite similar themes and problems, my study departed significantly in terms of context and method. Similarly, other works cited throughout this chapter explore teacher leadership,

autonomy, and collaborative cultures, yet not in the context of arts education. Though they align with problems of teacher agency and collaborative learning more broadly, they are not as directly connected to the problems in arts education. The primary differences between past research and this study include the research context, the intervention, and theories that inform the overall framework. Importantly, the context, intervention, and theoretical framework for my study married the main issues that Elliott and Stokes-Casey (2019) and Sandell and Zimmerman (2017) explored (i.e., arts teachers' perceptions of self and teacher empowerment through social learning). Action researchers are not required to explore gaps in research, yet because my work context and the program in which this study took place allowed me to do so, this study could have benefits outside of my immediate context.

### **Summary**

Designing collaborative and empowering support systems for the arts education community is a high-needs area (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017; Schlaack & Steele, 2018). Elliott and Stokes-Casey (2019) explored how labeling impacts arts teachers' self-perceptions, indicating low esteem overall. Sandell and Zimmerman (2017) studied teacher empowerment, agency, and perceptions toward collaborative cultures in their work contexts, finding positive associations between collaborative learning experiences and teachers' satisfaction with work and interest in growth. These studies, in addition to the historical perspectives of arts education, indicate arts teachers' general struggle to find support (Efland, 1983; Shaw, 2019; Whitford, 1923).

The collaborative support systems I had in place—the statewide arts education networks—did not fully support professional identity nor had they strengthened the collaborative culture of arts teachers beyond simply gathering virtually and sharing resources. Therefore, I embedded elements of teacher autonomy in the collaborative sessions to meet the conditions that support autonomous motivation and a positive sense of agency and satisfaction. Conditions that meet the needs of self-determination can support teachers’ perceptions of their professional identity (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Izadinia, 2013; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methods by which I explored improvement strategies for my problem of practice. Arts educators across the state were isolated and struggled to engage in strong collaborative arts education communities. State associations, arts organizations, and the state education agency for which I work offered opportunities for arts educators to meet, connect, and share resources, yet the existing support systems within my purview—statewide arts education networks—did not meet arts educators’ needs in terms of supporting their professional identity and the networks’ collaborative culture. They had limited opportunity for relationship building, reflective dialogue, and exploration of professional interests and goals.

To ameliorate this problem, I incorporated teacher governance within the statewide arts education networks. Elements of teacher leadership and autonomy (e.g., teacher-led professional learning and reflective dialogue among peers) can lead to positive perceptions of work and self while enabling systems to effectively make sustainable change to school climate (Allen, 2018; Daniels, 2015; Margolis, 2008). Importantly, communities of learners can aid a teacher’s sense of identity and agency; reflective and teacher-directed dialogue allows groups to determine approaches and strategies that are effective for their contexts while supporting ownership and autonomy (Shabani, 2016; Zeichner & Liston, 2014). This promising approach includes collaborative and social elements of professional development for arts teachers (Keisling,

2019; McComb et al., 2019; Schlaack & Steele, 2018). Intervening in this way through action research offered new insight for planning and coordinating more effective and empowering participant-led education networks.

### **Research Design**

To determine how teacher autonomy influences professional identity and collaborative culture within the arts education networks, I investigated perceptions of professional identity among those who engaged in collaborative learning opportunities and teacher networks through a basic qualitative research design. I aimed to identify participants' experience and response to a specific phenomenon (i.e., autonomy) within the context of the education networks. I was interested in "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to the experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). The study focused on perceptions: teachers' response to the intervention, including how network session participants designed and implemented their networks and their ensuing sense of agency. Thus, with a focus on participants' perceptions and experiences (i.e., their understanding of and response to the phenomenon), an interpretive basic qualitative approach was the most direct way to answer my research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills, 2018). Data sources, therefore, included semi-structured interviews, observations, and open- and closed-response surveys.

### **Intervention**

I previously acted as the facilitator of the statewide arts education networking sessions. For this study, the networks shifted to a participant-developed and led structure. I invited a group of arts educators who had already participated in the networks to design

a new approach through a series of seminar and planning sessions, during which they identified key aims, tasks, and activities for the sessions and discussed supports that they felt the network needed. Two of the sessions then abided by the teacher-developed and teacher-led structure; I no longer served as a facilitator but a participant and observer.

Participants embedded elements of teacher autonomy and leadership into the structure of the sessions, guided by the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Cosenza, 2015). The elements included broad aims, attendee needs, teacher-led professional learning formats and needs, considerations for and structures conducive to mentorship, collaborative planning, and advocacy work. Chapter 4 elaborates on the conversations participants had about teacher leader domains. To see the impact of the teacher-led elements, I conducted pre-intervention interviews and surveys, observations of the teacher-led phases (i.e., seminar, planning meetings, and teacher-led sessions), and then follow-up interviews and surveys.

### **Research Questions**

When inviting participants to adapt their roles toward teacher leadership (Cosenza, 2015), I emphasized autonomous and collaborative components of professional learning, collaborative planning, mentoring, and shared desired outcomes of the sessions. Investigating the collaborative culture of the networks wherein participants explored the model domains of teacher leadership enabled me to determine teacher autonomy's impact on collaborative cultures and teachers' perceptions of self as a result of the experience. This study, therefore, explored the following research questions:

1. How can fostering teacher autonomy influence the collaborative culture of arts educator networks?

2. How do teacher-directed arts educator networks influence perceptions of professional identity?

Exploring these questions enabled me to identify teacher leadership's impact on the arts educators' perceptions of the networks' collaborative culture and their own professional identity so I can structure education networks and broad systems change efforts more effectively with critical behavioral elements in mind. Both questions target outcomes of collaborative culture, teacher autonomy, and positive professional identity.

### **Sampling Plan and Participants**

I used a purposeful sample of visual and performing arts teachers who had attended past networking sessions. Inviting teachers with prior involvement enabled me to collect pre-intervention interview and survey data in addition to post-intervention follow-up data to better assess the impact of the teacher-led elements. I also invited participants who were veteran teachers (i.e., with 3 or more years of experience) and thus familiar with the role and the perceptions of arts educators in the state, as well as the arts education community. These teachers had the background knowledge, skills, and experience to make informed decisions about the networking sessions' structure, whereas novices might not have been as prepared for a leadership role. This type of purposeful sample allowed me to collect the information and construct the understanding I needed to resolve my problem of practice.

I intentionally invited both visual and performing arts teachers from different regions of the state, varying grade-level foci, and a range of teaching experience. Maximum variation is appropriate for studying a statewide network, conducive to a range of perspectives and, therefore, a range of responses to the experience (Creswell & Miller,

2000; Patton, 2015). Maximum variation can also surface common patterns, and clear themes across a varied sample can enhance a study's validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills, 2018). However, in my study, this variation existed in the limited context of the sample. In other words, the variable qualities were limited to the state region in which the arts educators taught, the grade-level focus for the teachers, their teaching experience, and their education background.

The sample included nine arts educators. These participants took surveys and participated in interviews in addition to leading the larger monthly sessions. The cohorts for the education networks were open to all arts disciplines in the past. Therefore, I sought an equal number of visual arts teachers and performing arts teachers. Due to attrition in the form of two participants' withdrawal before the intervention, the final group included five performing arts teachers and four visual arts teachers. This size and discipline representation were manageable and appropriate considering the size of the networks, frequency of the sessions, and degree to which the group collaborated and made decisions about sessions. This size also allowed for representation from three of four regions of the state and even representation of grade levels, as described in Chapter 4, with two or more teachers for elementary and secondary levels.

To recruit a sample of nine arts educators, I invited all teachers who participated in the 2021–2022 networking sessions to participate in the teacher-led phases of this study by extending a written invitation (Appendix C) during a networking session. Initially, 11 teachers volunteered, but two changed jobs prior to the teacher-led phase of the study and, therefore, opted out of the remainder of the study. The remaining nine educators participated through all phases of the intervention and data collection.



## **Data Collection**

I collected data through semi-structured interviews, observations, and open- and closed-response surveys. Prior to embedding the teacher-led elements, I collected pre-intervention interview and survey data from the initial 11 participants. Observations took place during the seminar, planning meetings, and teacher-led networking sessions, consistent with the principles of action research (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Participants then participated in follow-up interviews and surveys at the end of the intervention.

## **Context**

The study took place in a northeastern state in the United States, consisting of primarily rural and suburban school districts. The student population has ranged between 75,000 and 80,000 students in the last few years and approximately 250–300 visual arts teachers (including media arts) and 300–450 performing arts teachers (including dance, music, and drama) currently work in public, private, and choice schools across the state. All these teachers are invited to engage in the monthly networking sessions.

Virtual convenings are the only realistic way to coordinate monthly statewide networking sessions, especially during a pandemic. The setting of the networks has always been virtual and remained unaltered throughout the study. Some people might respond to a more intimate in-person setting during interviews and collaborative work, but participant response to different platforms was beyond the scope of my investigation.

At the time of this study, my role in the state was to offer guidance and protocol for districts to consider within their locally-governed organization. In other words, I provided support to specialists in the field (e.g., coaches, teachers, principals, superintendents) in implementing best practices in content-related initiatives and

advocating for school-based visual and performing arts teachers. The arts education networks were part of this support.

### **Observations**

Because my intervention intentionally incorporated teacher-led collaborative reflection, a demonstrably beneficial practice (Bennett & Broman, 2019; Cheung et al., 2018; Gutiérrez et al., 2019), I collected observational data throughout the teacher-led networking sessions. Doing so offered “a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 137). My questions investigated teacher perceptions in the context of collaborative learning settings. Observations, therefore, gave me a sense of the actual components of an effective collaborative culture in action. Additionally, these data informed the interviews, as I asked about specific scenarios that occurred during the seminar, planning meetings, and networking sessions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I remained a participant observer throughout the teacher-led phases. Though the intervention sessions were teacher-led, they were housed in my organization. My role, however, was primarily logistical, such as answering or addressing questions on statewide expectations. I also documented when and how I participated in my field notes, which I organized by (a) the setting, (b) participant profiles, (c) interactions, (d) conversations, (e) subtle factors such as unplanned activities or conversations, and (f) behaviors (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I elaborate on my participation in Chapter 4.

Contexts that prioritize autonomy, motivation, and relatedness are more supportive learning environments (Niemi & Ryan, 2009; Vansteenkiste et al. 2004). With the teacher-designed and teacher-led elements in place, the observational data

helped me determine how self-governing networking sessions impacted the arts educators' learning environment.

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

Interviews can be valuable when a researcher is trying to answer questions related to participants' perceptions of or response to an experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One of my research questions focused on arts educators' perceptions of their professional identity after a shift in their role within state education networks. To gain a sense of their unique perspective while focusing on the autonomous elements of their role in the networks, I conducted semi-structured interviews to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 111). Because I also sought to explore how elements of autonomy informed the collaborative culture of the networks, I wanted to focus on the “deep, lived meaning that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 113). Interviews allowed me to understand the response to these experiences and how they might support the networks as a source of empowerment for arts educators.

Semi-structured interviews allowed teachers to communicate their individual perspectives and experiences in an open-ended format while illuminating specific events, strategies, or conversations observed during the networking sessions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Though the interviews were open-ended, the questions (Appendix A) sought to gain as much of an understanding of perceptions as possible, aligned with Patton's (2015) categories of good questions as applied to my research questions (e.g., behaviors observed in the sessions, interviewees' opinions, and interviewees' professional or

educational background). The questions also reflect my broader focus on autonomy and teacher leadership, namely the qualities of self-determination as well as the seven model domains outlined by the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Cosenza, 2015):

Domain I: Fostering a Collaborative Culture to Support Educator Development and Student Learning.

Domain II: Accessing and Using Research to Improve Practice and Student Learning.

Domain III: Promoting Professional Learning for Continuous Improvement.

Domain IV: Facilitating Improvements in Instruction and Student Learning.

Domain V: Promoting the Use of Assessments and Data for School and District Improvement.

Domain VI: Improving Outreach and Collaboration with Families and Community.

Domain VII: Advocating for Student Learning and the Profession. (p. 82)

This framework helped me identify components of teacher autonomy that impact the networks and teachers' professional identities. Specifically, my interview questions investigated teachers' overall perceptions of their abilities for each domain; the level to which they felt that they had voice, control, and value in the networks; and the impact their new networking session structure had on the culture of the networks. By capturing participants' responses to these experiences, interviews illuminated how I can transform the networks into a source of empowerment for other arts educators.

Interviews were virtual and synchronous over Zoom. I took notes during the interviews, rather than recording, so participants would feel comfortable being candid

and honest. I typed directly into a Word document with the prepared questions in Appendix A. I also logged additional questions and topics that arose in the Word document. I kept one de-identified document for each participant. Interviews were scheduled at a mutually convenient time and ran between 30 and 45 minutes. Initial interviews took place in the first 2 weeks of the study, prior to the teacher-led phases. Follow-up interviews took place after two participant-led sessions. The flexibility in the interview schedule eliminated burden on participants' schedules and maximized participation. I started scheduling follow-up interviews to take place as soon as the second participant-led session was complete to ensure I could interview all participants.

### **Surveys**

Short surveys via Google Forms supplemented observations and interviews (Appendix B). They included open-response questions to gauge participant perception and understanding of the following factors: (a) the supportive environment of the networks, (b) the roles and structures—if any—that participants felt empowered them and their agency, and (c) how their roles in and the environment of the networks influenced their engagement and satisfaction. The surveys were primarily a triangulation approach, intended to substantiate overall findings and interpretations from observational and interview data. Additionally, because the surveys were anonymous, simply inviting participants to describe their experiences and self-perceptions, this data collection method had the potential to yield insight that observations and interviews could not.

### **Data Analysis**

As I indicated in Chapter 1, to engage in thematic inductive analysis, I organized each data set throughout the collection process and looked for thematic trends among the

sets. Emerging themes offered a sense of the core elements to include in future work related to the arts education networks, teacher-led initiatives, social learning contexts, and systems change efforts. The overarching processes for analyzing data followed Mills's (2018) three key phases of qualitative data analysis:

(1) becoming familiar with the data and identifying potential themes (i.e., reading/memoing); (2) examining the data in depth to provide detailed descriptions of the setting, participants, and activity (i.e., describing); and (3) categorizing and coding pieces of data and grouping them into themes (i.e., classifying). (p. 177)

In this manner, I treated all my data holistically. The semi-structured interviews yielded participants' evolving reflections on their autonomy and efficacy as teacher leaders. Observational data allowed me to understand the experiences within the networking sessions and provide an overall sense of the networks' efficacy. Surveys added to the other data sets by substantiating interview responses and observations while offering me additional data to identify emerging themes.

### **Identifying Themes**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) cautioned, "Without ongoing analysis, [a study's] data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in sheer volume" (p. 197). Therefore, the analysis phase of my study coincided with the data collection phase. As potential themes began to emerge from the data, I coded observation notes, interview notes, and survey questions with notes of emerging themes. I organized interview and open-response survey data in tables by theme. Table 3.1 offers a general timeline for the various phases of this work.

Table 3.1 *Arts Education Networks Action Research Timeline*

Timeline	Tasks
Weeks 1–2	Pre-intervention interviews and surveys. Ongoing analysis.
Weeks 2–6	Participant leadership seminars during which participants prepared new teacher-led approaches to the network convenings.
Weeks 6–10	Arts Ed. Networks began. Observational data collected during two participant-led networking sessions. Ongoing analysis.
Weeks 10–14	Follow-up interviews and surveys. All data sets analyzed and organized by themes.

Criteria for the themes aligned with Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) criteria for categories, themes, and findings:

1. Be exhaustive (enough categories to encompass all relevant data).
2. Be mutually exclusive (a relevant unit of data can be placed in only one category).
3. Be as sensitive to the data as possible.
4. Be conceptually congruent (all categories are at the same level of abstraction). (p. 213)

The process included open and analytical coding. As themes had not yet emerged in the initial phases of data collection, open coding allowed me to think broadly about patterns across the incoming data. I logged these early codes in the observational data notes and interview documents. As data become more complete and clear patterns emerged across sets, I went through an analytical coding process whereby I revisited the initial codes from early phases of data collection and aligned them to any additional data and criteria for themes. I then created and trimmed an extensive list of codes to reduce redundancy before organizing the codes by broader themes based on connections participants made with the codes and their perceptions of the experience. Viewing the coded data

holistically enabled me to identify the themes that informed my overall findings by research question, as discussed in Chapter 4.

### **Validity and Reliability Considerations**

Denzin and Lincoln (2011, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) proposed several measures to support validity and reliability: multiple methods, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to confirm emerging findings. My research design incorporated multiple methods of collecting data from multiple participants, and the multiple theories I explored in the previous chapters enabled me to substantiate my findings. Triangulation thus validated my work (Creswell & Miller, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as I established consistent themes among my various data sets. Research on how SDT and social-cognitive theory influence teachers' sense of agency and perceptions of self is substantial (Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Vansteenkiste et al. 2004). Both theories play a critical role in teacher motivation, learner agency, and professional growth (Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020), so applying the core concepts of these theories in the design of this study led to themes that align with existing findings, lending further support to my research.

I embedded additional considerations for validity and reliability throughout the collection and analysis processes. Interviews encompassed respondent validation: participant responses confirmed emerging themes (Creswell & Miller, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My sampling strategy's focus on variation among participants in terms of discipline, state region, grade level, and teaching experience allowed me to see common themes across a diverse group, even within the context-dependent scope of an action



research study. Moreover, I believe I effectively offered thorough, “rich, thick descriptions” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259) to potentially support transferability.

### **Summary**

As discussed throughout this chapter, I aimed to gain an understanding of the participants’ experience leading the education networks in an autonomy-supportive environment. Through interviews, observations, and surveys, I explored the impact the environment had on arts educators’ perceptions of self and the collaborative culture of their networks. Through this exploration and analysis of the data, I found conditions of the environment that inform several overarching themes connected to participants’ overall sense of agency and perceptions of the network. I discuss these findings in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

This investigation focused on ameliorating limited opportunities for arts educators to engage in meaningful systems of support that can inform their professional identity. Visual and performing arts educators often operate in silos, isolated from other disciplines—even other arts disciplines—and with minimal pathways to explore leadership skills and high-impact change efforts (McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). Leadership opportunity, active involvement in change, and opportunities to build and sustain professional relationships are critical for any educator’s sense of agency, professional identity, and overall well-being (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Izadinia, 2013). Through this study, I aimed to determine what conditions I can put in place in the arts education networks to create pathways for arts educators to become leaders, agents of change, and collaborators. Essentially, I relinquished control of the state support system that I had been coordinating and facilitating for 2 years to my participants and examined how the arts educators engaged in this experience; what conditions of this experience, the environment, and the peer interactions influenced their sense of self and the networks; and what feelings and perceptions they had as leaders.

This study pulled from the tenets of SDT so I could determine how, in my context, teacher autonomy and leadership impacted participants’ sense of self and the collaborative culture of their education networks. As the participants planned and

facilitated networking sessions, I collected data with the aim of answering the following research questions:

1. How can fostering elements of teacher autonomy influence the collaborative culture of arts educator networks?
2. How do teacher-directed arts educator networks influence perceptions of professional identity?

This chapter shares my findings, which can inform my work to promote statewide education networks as collaborative and empowering environments for educators. In this chapter, I revisit my methods for data collection, participants' characteristics, and the intervention. I also discuss the themes that emerged during data collection and analysis. I present observational, survey, and interview data in narrative form and by theme. Finally, I share how these findings answer my research questions, directing my future work related to supporting education networks and teacher empowerment.

### **Methods and Participants**

As discussed in Chapter 3, this basic qualitative study incorporated data from observations, open- and closed-response surveys, and interviews. The process included an intervention that embedded elements of autonomy via teacher leadership in the arts education networks. Pre-intervention and follow-up surveys and interviews captured how the intervention informed participant perceptions of the networks. I collected observational data during the intervention, which included the teacher leader seminar, planning meetings, and teacher-led networking sessions (Table 3.1).

I invited any visual and performing arts educator who had participated in the arts education networks and had 3 or more years of teaching experience to serve as leaders of

arts education network sessions, and 11 teachers volunteered (Table 4.1). After the pre-intervention interviews and surveys, two participants dropped out of the study and the program due to job changes. Although neither requested that I omit their data, I disposed of their pre-intervention interviews; however, I could not isolate their survey responses, which were anonymous. As I shared in Chapter 3, the remaining nine participants represent a range of grade levels, years of experience, and arts disciplines. Regional representation was important for this study with a statewide scope, and the sample comprised three of the four main regions. In terms of geography and population, the missing region is the smallest, and most of its students attend schools in the Central region. Overall, therefore, the sample met my expectation for maximum variation.

Table 4.1 *Participants*

Pseudonym	Discipline	Grade level	Region	Years of experience
Allison	performing arts	ES	Central	8
Bailey	performing arts	HS	Northeast	21
Cassie	visual arts	HS	Central	12
Denise	visual arts	ES/MS	Southern	12
Eric	performing arts	ES	Southern	31
Faye	visual arts	MS	Central	15
Greg	performing arts	MS/HS	Northeast	16
Holly	visual arts	ES	Central	15
Ira	performing arts	ES	Southern	19
Jennifer*	performing arts	MS	Northeast	10
Kara*	visual arts	HS	Central	12

\*Dropped due to job changes but contributed pre-intervention survey data that could not be isolated.

In addition to illustrating the diversity of my sample, Table 4.1 also introduces the pseudonyms I selected to maintain participants' anonymity and which will punctuate the observational data shared as a narrative in this chapter. Likewise, I omitted the state, schools' names, and any other identifiers from the findings. The two participants who dropped out of the study, denoted with asterisks, do not appear in the presentation of observational data, although, as I explained, their survey responses informed my findings.

### **Intervention**

Prior to the study, I facilitated the network sessions. To strengthen the networks, I restructured them as a tool for supporting perceptions of professional identity and collaborative cultures, namely by giving my participants autonomy over the process, supports, aims, and content. In other words, I invited participants to plan two to three networking sessions, the structure, content, and objectives of which were up to them. The intervention, therefore, consisted of teacher leader seminar sessions, planning sessions for participants, and teacher-led networking sessions over a span of 9 weeks (Table 3.1).

### **Findings**

This section presents findings in three parts. Observational data appear as a narrative of two major phases of the intervention: (a) teacher leader seminar and session planning meetings and (b) teacher-led network sessions. Closed-response survey data appear in tables and are also integrated into discussion of themes. Follow-up interview and open-response survey data illustrate themes that emerged across data sets. The presentation by themes also includes a discussion per theme in which key pre-intervention interview and open-response survey data illustrate how the overall teacher-

led experience impacted the sessions. This section, therefore, also addresses how themes emerged from the data.

### **Themes and Conditions of the Networks**

Ongoing analysis via open coding surfaced several conditions of the network during the teacher-led planning phases and teacher-led sessions. As observations and interviews occurred, I noted recurring interactions, conversation topics, actions, and participant interest areas as conditions of the teacher-led portion. I compared these initial open codes with the pre-intervention survey and interview data to determine if any conditions existed prior to the intervention. For example, “sharing resources” and “arts-specific professional development” were commonalities in pre- and follow-up data, indicating that these items were already conditions of the network sessions and would have no major influence on any change in perceptions of self and the culture of the networks after the intervention.

The conditions that emerged during the teacher-led planning and teacher-led network sessions include:

- **Voice:** Moments or statements relating to perceptions that participants’ opinions were valued.
- **Contributions:** Moments or statements relating to contributions participants made to the planning or networking sessions.
- **Sharing perspectives:** Moments or statements related to opportunities to share perspectives of best practices, the networks’ structure, or content.

- **Decision-making and control:** Behaviors, moments, or statements relating to participant decisions about the direction of the planning, session facilitation, and overall process (e.g., the sequencing of topics, timing, etc.).
- **Leadership:** Moments or statements related to participants' leadership and its impact on participants' perceptions of experience or leadership qualities (e.g., advocacy, fostering participation and engagement, etc.)
- **Collaborative problem-solving:** Behaviors, moments, and statements related to collaborative efforts to prepare content for sessions, solve problems, and engage in relevant reflective dialogue.
- **Reflective dialogue:** Interactions and conversations during which participants actively reflected on needs of the program, their roles within the program, and other relevant areas.
- **High-impact setting:** Moments or statements when participants acknowledged the context of the program (i.e., state-level networks, range of educators, potentially large scale) as informing conversations or relationships.
- **Commitment:** Behaviors, moments, or statements related to participants' demonstrated commitment to their responsibilities with the sessions and beyond.
- **Continuous improvement:** Moments or statements that indicated participant interest in continuing to strengthen the networks by trying new ideas.

In my observation and participants' own words, these conditions were key to the teacher-led approach to the networks and served as codes throughout further analysis of interviews and observations. Consistent with thematic analysis, I organized recurrent conditions into four main themes based on overlapping areas of the conditions and the

broad outcomes of the teacher-led environment: (a) validation, (b) self-confidence, (c) authentic social connections, and (d) agency. I also checked these themes—or outcomes—and conditions for alignment with self-determination and social cognitive theory to ensure that the intervention—and the network environment as a whole—met the conditions for autonomous and social collaborative environments.

Figure 4.1 lists the conditions under their respective theme, although the boundaries between themes are somewhat fluid. Conditions of the teacher-led environment included the setting, context, behaviors, interactions, and more. Such dynamics could directly impact a specific outcome area while supporting other themes. For example, the potentially high impact of the teacher-led arts education networks directly supported a sense of confidence among participants, according to participants and observations. Additionally, however, the high-impact context set the stage for collaborative problem-solving (e.g., planning sessions and determining topics), which informed authentic social connections. In other words, while the high-stakes condition informed participant confidence, it primarily supported an environment conducive to rigorous collaboration, which, in this case, supported authentic social connections.

<p><b>Authentic Social Connections</b> Collaborative problem-solving, reflective dialogue, high-impact setting</p>	<p><b>Validation</b> Voice, contributions, sharing perspectives</p>
<p><b>Self-Confidence</b> Leadership, decision-making and control</p>	<p><b>Agency</b> Commitment, continuous improvement</p>

Figure 4.1 *Themes and Conditions*

**Observational Data**

This section presents observational data as a narrative, structured by major phases of the intervention, to offer a holistic picture of the experience. A total of four teacher



leadership seminar and planning meetings occurred, and I present general observations and key moments across all four sessions in one subsection. Likewise, I present general observations and key moments across both of the teacher-led networking sessions in another subsection. I weave references to conditions of the networks throughout this narrative and discuss themes accordingly.

Despite my aim to foster teacher autonomy during the planning phase, at times, I needed to guide, intervene, or redirect the group to ensure that the scope of the networking sessions did not extend beyond the educators' or organization's capacity. I note such moments throughout the narrative. I also note where I had to answer attendees' state-specific questions. My participation primarily consisted of reminders of the task to kick-off planning sessions, information on the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Cosenza, 2015), key questions to support reflective dialogue during the teacher leader seminar and planning phases, and other logistical considerations. After the early phase of the intervention, my guiding questions or prompts primarily resembled those of a project manager. Due to my positionality, I also had to be mindful of power dynamics and limiting my influence on the choices participants made. I, therefore, focused on maintaining a project manager role. It is worth noting that, while I did not engage in any redirection during the actual teacher-led sessions, but at times, I had to take the lead of answering attendees' questions due to my role. Nevertheless, the narrative focuses primarily on teacher interactions, actions, and the overall experience of the teacher-led phases.

### *Teacher Leader Seminar and Session Planning*

I asked participants to revamp and facilitate at least two networking sessions. Prior to making any decisions about the sessions' structure, all nine participants engaged in a teacher leadership seminar. Two 90-minute meetings enabled participants to learn about the teacher-led processes (e.g., timeline and level of autonomy they could expect), respond to key questions in preparation for leading the networking sessions (e.g., What is missing from the sessions? How do the teacher leader model domains fit into the planning or the sessions? What does the arts education network in our state need? How can the sessions support the field?), and articulate some initial ideas. Then, participants attended two 60-minute small-group meetings to plan for the teacher-led networking sessions. All nine participants attended the whole-group seminar and initial planning sessions. They split in two smaller groups based on topic interest for shorter, more targeted 60-minute planning sessions.

I structured the initial seminar session to guide them toward a leadership mindset, setting the expectation for them to make decisions about the networks and their functionality. I verbalized how I planned to approach my participation in the planning sessions and networking sessions so they understood that I would primarily attend to logistics beyond their scope (e.g., wide communications to the field or coordinating meeting links and registration), kick off the teacher-led phase with some guiding questions, and support other areas they identified. The seminar took place over Zoom and was primarily discussion-based, although I created some presentation materials to communicate the overall process and meeting agenda. The planning sessions also took place over Zoom.

To commence the teacher-led phase, I asked participants to read “The Human Face of Reform” (Evans, 1993) prior to the seminar. This text was chosen to help introduce and frame conversations on challenging traditional perceptions of education leadership. After sharing the seminar agenda, I asked some broad reflective questions to inform the conversation around strengthening the arts education networks: “What does it mean to be an ‘authentic leader’?”; “What are some qualities of a leader who can engender change?”; “What other qualities would you like to see in education leaders?”; and “How can we bring these qualities to the arts education networks?”

Participants focused on naming leadership qualities. Allison, an elementary performing arts teacher, responded first with “credibility,” explaining, “Leaders need to actually have knowledge of the skills they’re asking us to have.” Cassie, a high school visual arts teacher, echoed and expanded on this response, suggesting leaders who can make change can “show their own examples of success” in addition to being “open to people’s faults.” Eric, another elementary performing arts teacher, suggested people with credibility also “recognize that they don’t have all the answers.” Holly and Ira, elementary visual and performing arts teachers, respectively, both emphasized a need for leaders to ensure teachers have “ownership over their own work” and “recognize all people’s efforts.” Faye agreed and indicated a desire for more opportunities for education leaders to “co-lead or at least co-design their professional development.” To conclude this conversation, I asked, “How can we bring these qualities to the arts education networks?” Bailey responded, “Make sure we’re being active and not just talking at people,” and Denise said, “Model these things in our sessions.”

After the initial conversation on leadership qualities, we discussed the Teacher Leadership Model Standards and domains (Cosenza, 2015), which participants referenced throughout their planning of the sessions. We also transitioned to discussing the networks' needs. I asked, "What are the needs of arts educators in our state? What can we do to support them? How can we start to meet these needs in the arts education networks?" Participants developed a set of needs that eventually led to a collective decision of creating topics for each monthly session, which they finalized at the start of the second whole-group planning session. Their initial list of needs was robust:

- an accessible toolbox (i.e., practices for formative assessment, resources, processes for unpacking the standards, templates for lesson plans and unit plans, classroom management tips)
- a website that can serve as a "one-stop shop" for the network
- demonstration of how to write a lesson plan from pre-teaching to standards to exemplars
- knowledge of what to do when a lesson is not working—and how to tell
- connections with students; relationship building
- preparation for classroom management, including learning and non-learning behaviors
- modeling of best practices, including behavior management and procedures and how to determine expectations, curricula, and art room routines
- multiple modes of continuous and ongoing support (e.g., quarterly gatherings, biweekly communications, brief email check-ins, flexible communications)

- knowledge of the state culture (e.g., proficiency-based learning, personalized learning) and re-licensure processes
- knowledge of school culture and local program expectations and beliefs
- logistical knowledge (e.g., procedures for purchase orders or procuring materials)
- approaches to representation, social justice, and anti-racist teaching for non-diverse classrooms (including appropriate pacing, focus, and conversation starters)
- access to different professional communities and relevant stakeholders (for showcases, festivals, etc.)
- advice for increasing community engagement
- co-teaching
- regular thought partners with whom to discuss problems of practice
- a curriculum map (ideally aligned with the arts assessment program) and pacing guides
- advocacy, especially aligned with school- or district-wide initiatives

Several of these initial topics stemmed from the discussion of teacher leader domains, such as promoting professional learning, facilitating improvements, using assessment, community outreach, and advocacy. As this narrative later discusses, these domains informed the content and overall approach participants took when leading the networks.

Greg, a secondary performing arts teacher, noted that covering any item on the list during a 1-hour networking session would involve a significant amount of content, which prompted Allison to suggest prioritizing and creating a “mini scope and sequence” for the sessions. In response, the group indicated a natural inclination toward the planning phase,

but before they made any key decisions, I intervened to focus their conversation on the more pragmatic areas. For example, preparing a co-teaching program or sample statewide curriculum would not have been feasible within their timeline or roles. The group discussed realistic topics to target in 1-hour sessions and narrowed their initial list to the following: (a) classroom management, (b) organization and school logistics (i.e., where arts educators fit), (c) charting professional development (e.g., finding external sources), (d) student-centered teaching, (e) standards-aligned instruction and assessment, and (f) teacher and student well-being.

Allison, Cassie, Eric, and Greg seemed to emerge as leaders, with the other five participants serving as collaborators. Greg suggested, due to the preparation timeline, that the group identify two topics for which they would be most prepared. As the group discussed their collective knowledge, Eric suggested having point people for each topic, with others serving as “experts of their context.” Cassie volunteered to focus on standards-aligned instruction and assessment, with Allison volunteering to lend a performing arts education voice to that topic. Eric and Bailey requested to cover student-centered learning, and Allison asked to join that group to model an analysis protocol. Both Cassie and Allison remained mindful of the participants who were not serving as primary leads by regularly seeking their opinions about which topics to cover. Greg was also mindful of their participation and asked if they could bring any content to the smaller planning meetings to inform the teacher-led sessions. So, although four of the nine participants served as the primary leads in planning and, eventually, facilitating the networking sessions, they ensured all participants had a voice and input in the work.

Before the group broke into separate 60-minute planning sessions, they collectively expressed interest in extending the length of the arts education networking sessions, which had typically lasted for 60 minutes. The group suggested 90-minute sessions would give them all ample time to take a leadership role and communicate their concepts and strategies to attendees. I quickly granted their request, and they broke into their respective planning sessions. Allison, Cassie, Holly, Ira, and Greg attended the planning session for the standards-alignment topic, with Allison and Cassie serving as the primary leads. Their focus was aligning standards to learning targets. Allison, Bailey, Denise, Eric, and Faye attended the planning session for the student-centered topic, with Eric, Bailey, and Allison serving as primary leads. Their focus on student-centered teaching encompassed authentic integration of culturally diverse resources, pieces of music, and artwork. I attended both groups' short meetings primarily as an observer. At times, participants requested advice about their plans for the sessions. In an effort to maintain the teacher-led, autonomy-supportive environment, I responded with guiding questions, rather than direct advice. After these planning meetings, participants led two networking sessions.

### ***Teacher-led Networking Sessions***

The participants led two 90-minute virtual networking sessions for K–12 visual and performing arts educators from across the state. One session had a total of 21 attendees, including the nine participants. The second had a total of 16 attendees, including the nine participants. Allison and Cassie took the lead on the first session by demonstrating how an existing state-level resource on learning targets could inform specific projects, assessments, in a standards-aligned way. Eric, Bailey, and Allison took

the lead on the second session, which focused on student-centered and culturally responsive instruction. They discussed how to transform traditional music lessons with examples that represent diverse groups, while Faye and Denise offered similar examples for visual arts.

Although six participants took the lead on planning these sessions, the other three contributed resources, ideas, and suggested activities. In other words, all participants had a voice in the content and format of the sessions, but not all participants took a leadership role during planning. However, the three participants who served in more of a supporting role during planning appeared more eager to share their thinking during the actual networking sessions. The interview responses reflected this outcome, as these same participants indicated a sense of empowerment and comfort in the sessions due to the collaborative leadership and having an audience with whom to share expertise.

These sessions reflected the quality of leadership and collaboration among the participants. The sessions were, for all intents and purposes, entirely participant-led. I only answered the attendee questions that no one else could (e.g., “Where can we find the graduation requirement recommendations?” or “What kind of flexibility is there with using the term *learning target*?”). The degree to which the participants fostered a positive professional learning environment through meaningful collaborative activities among attendees is important. As participants took on a teacher leader role, they also took ownership of applying teacher leader domains to their sessions—fostering a collaborative culture, advocating for student learning, and promoting the use of assessment for instructional improvement. The group’s autonomy was evident when leading the sessions, yet the fostering thereof was most evident during the seminar and planning



phases; participants engaged in a meaningful cross-disciplinary collaboration to invest in the arts education networks, which ultimately informed how they applied the teacher leader domains to their practice.

### **Closed-response Survey Data**

Comparing closed-response data from the pre-intervention and follow-up survey demonstrates how the intervention informed participants’ perceptions and the culture of the networks (i.e., how perceptions differed during the teacher-led phases). As I noted, two participants who completed the initial survey dropped out of the study, but I was unable to isolate and remove their responses. Because I used the closed-response answers primarily to find overall trends and changes and for triangulation with other data sources, the attrition did not concern me.

Table 4.2 *Supportive Environment*

Response	Pre-intervention		Follow-up	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Neutral	2	18.2		
Agree	6	54.5	1	11.1
Strongly Agree	3	27.3	8	88.9

Table 4.2 and Table 4.3 display the response frequency for two statements on the pre-intervention and follow-up surveys that targeted the culture of the networks in terms of participants’ perceptions of support and level of engagement. Both tables show an overall increase in agreement and thus suggest the teacher-led phase fostered a more positive and productive collaborative environment. The open-response and interview data capture how participants elaborated on this shift by noting factors that contributed to the supportive and engaging environment, such as peer collaboration, high-stakes work, and sharing actual perspectives of work.

Table 4.3 *Engaging*

Response	Pre-intervention		Follow-up	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Neutral	4	36.4		
Agree	5	45.5	4	44.4
Strongly Agree	2	18.2	5	55.6

Table 4.4 and Table 4.5 reflect the participants’ perceptions of involvement or voice in the teacher-led phase of the study and, like the prior tables, suggest an overall positive shift.

Table 4.4 *A Voice in the Content Discussed*

Response	Pre-intervention		Follow-up	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	4	36.4		
Disagree	5	45.5		
Neutral	2	18.2		
Agree			4	44.4
Strongly Agree			5	55.6

This increase indicates that the teacher-led phase offered an environment in which participants felt heard when planning content and activities. In the open-response survey, they elaborated on how this process gave them more of a voice by providing a sense of control and decision-making power in their work and professional learning.

Table 4.5 *A Voice in the Types of Activities Conducted*

Response	Pre-intervention		Follow-up	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	1	9.1		
Disagree	5	45.5		
Neutral	4	36.4		
Agree	1	9.1	4	44.4
Strongly Agree			5	55.6

In conjunction with other closed-response data, the increase related to content and activities suggests having a voice impacted participants’ sense of support, agency, motivation, and commitment—concepts that the remaining prompts addressed. For example, Table 4.6 demonstrates an increase in commitment as participants indicated they perceived the teacher-led networks as informing their professional growth.

Table 4.6 *Will Help Me Grow as an Educator*

Response	Pre-intervention		Follow-up	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	3	27.3		
Disagree				
Neutral	6	54.5		
Agree	2	18.2	5	55.6
Strongly Agree			4	44.4

Similarly, Table 4.7 shows an increased sense of motivation. As participant responses suggest perceptions of the networks helping them grow, they also suggest the networks make them more eager to pursue similar learning opportunities. In other words, the teacher-led elements of the networks informed an overall sense of motivation and pursuit of similar autonomy-supportive opportunities.

Table 4.7 *Motivated to Pursue More Professional Learning Opportunities*

Response	Pre-intervention		Follow-up	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Disagree	1	9.1		
Neutral	8	72.7	3	33.3
Agree	2	18.2	2	22.2
Strongly Agree			4	44.4

Overall, participants’ perceptions of support (Table 4.2), engagement (Table 4.3), and having a voice (Tables 4.4 and 4.5) increased as the network environment became autonomy-supportive. Table 4.6 also indicates the autonomy-supportive environment

could serve as a source of professional growth for participants, and Table 4.7 charts an increase in their motivation to pursue professional learning. With a similar focus on improving their practice as a result of the autonomy-supportive networks, Table 4.8 indicates the intervention’s impact on teachers’ sense of identity as professional learners and leaders, manifest in their motivation to adapt their instruction.

Table 4.8 *Motivated to Make Changes to My Practice*

Response	Pre-intervention		Follow-up	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly Disagree	1	9.1		
Disagree	1	9.1		
Neutral	7	63.6	3	33.3
Agree	2	18.2	2	22.2
Strongly Agree			4	44.4

These data show an overall increase in the networks’ collaborative culture and participants’ sense of agency as the planning and facilitating sessions became teacher-led.

### **Open-response Survey and Interviews**

This section presents open-response data from the follow-up survey alongside follow-up interview data arranged by theme: (a) validation, (b) self-confidence, (c) authentic social connections, and (d) agency. Quotations from both sources supplement the discussion of how each theme manifested. As I discussed in Chapter 3, collecting pre-intervention interview and open-response survey data enabled me to capture the intervention’s impact in these follow-up responses. I detected some commonalities in the pre-intervention and follow-up data, but several key differences informed the conditions that support the themes. One commonality was the opportunity to engage with other arts educators. In pre-intervention responses, participants noted they seldom get such opportunities in their local context. These social connections are critical for them and for

arts educators especially (Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017). However, participants noted the social connections throughout the teacher-led intervention as being more authentic due to a range of conditions, as I will explain.

Another commonality was access to arts-specific professional learning. Participants praised the existing networking sessions for facilitating learning designed for their role. Their follow-up responses reiterated such access, yet they elaborated on the sessions' validating nature in the context of an autonomy-supportive environment. These commonalities in the pre-intervention data were pertinent when identifying conditions and themes that stem from the teacher-led planning and facilitation phase of this study. The subsequent sections, therefore, discuss the follow-up data in depth.

### ***Validation***

As I mentioned earlier, several observable conditions supported participants' sense of validation: having a voice, contributing to the work, and sharing perspectives on specific elements. This theme emerged as these conditions recurred throughout data collection and as participants directly associated the conditions with a sense of validation or affirmation. Validation is critical for teacher well-being, especially in situations that challenge teachers' confidence, optimism, and overall professional identity (Robinson, 2014). Lack of validation is an especially common issue among visual and performing arts teachers (Keisling, 2019; McComb et al., 2019), as I discussed in Chapter 1.

Fostering autonomy through teacher-led networking sessions validated participants: in the responses in Table 4.9, they clearly connect their feelings or perceptions with the observable conditions. For example, one participant noted that arts educators "typically don't have much input or voice in PD" but in this experience, their

opinion “was not only valid, but necessary.” Another reported having “actually contributed something to people,” adding, “and that makes me feel like my job matters.” Participants referenced their opinions being heard, having a clear voice, and making contributions to the sessions. They described all such experiences as affirming, legitimizing, or validating.

Table 4.9 *Validation*

Source	Representative quotations
Surveys	<p>We’re often the last group to do certain things. With the sessions, it feels like all of a sudden someone remembered we exist. It was affirming.</p> <p>I felt validated, like much more like I was part of a team doing the work, rather than like someone was talking at me telling me what I should do in my classroom or with PD.</p> <p>I don’t think I’ve ever had arts PD through my school district, and most of the PD I’ve done outside my district has been people talking at me. This was active and involved like I had a voice and it got heard.</p> <p>Elementary PD is particularly obnoxious, because it’s designed for classroom teachers and does not address the unique circumstances of specials teachers. We got to address that for our audience, knowing that’s a big need they have.</p> <p>Even extending the time and everything felt like we were being helpful and heard. It made me feel like my opinion mattered.</p>
Interviews	<p>I felt like my opinion was not only valid, but necessary. Typically, we don’t have much input or voice in PD. It truly felt like these sessions couldn’t function without us and my opinion was needed, and I also needed everyone else’s.</p> <p>There was a sense of all of us learning as we go, and the discussions we had were genuinely working towards strategies that we would want to use in our practice.</p> <p>Music teachers just don’t get to share their opinion so it’s pretty much a 180 from past PD. We all have unique skills and expertise and we all got to validate that for each other. We don’t get that kind of affirmation from other areas in our jobs.</p> <p>It made me feel like I’m an actual teacher and not just the extra person or glorified babysitter where kids come into my class so teachers can have their planning. I felt legitimized when everyone at the table listened to what I had to say about topics and timing of things, even when people disagreed. It was just like, having that platform was legitimizing.</p> <p>I actually contributed something to people, and that makes me feel like my job matters. I feel like I contributed more to the teacher leads than to the actual sessions but it was the same kind of feeling of being needed for what I know.</p>

## *Self-Confidence*

Visual and performing arts teachers often experience low self-confidence, either due to skillset, workplace culture, or lack of support (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; Thorn & Brasche, 2020). Opportunities to develop collaborative leadership skills can enhance teachers' sense of self (Carpenter 2017; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2019). Table 4.10 demonstrates how the leadership opportunity in this study operated accordingly.

Table 4.10 *Self-Confidence*

Source	Representative quotations
Surveys	Honestly, I don't really feel like I've ever had much control over how PD or anything has functioned up until participating in this. It made me feel more like a professional with expertise that can make a difference.
	We got to make most of the choices which made it sort of empowering. I felt like I was a part of making many decisions about the sessions and how they work and felt confident in doing it.
	I was mostly invested in the conversations we had about potential participant needs for the sessions and what was within our control to help meet their needs.
	I felt a part of every decision. I think some people definitely had a leadership hat on, which was helpful. Because we're peers, it didn't seem to matter who was acting as the leader in any given moment because we're all in the same position.
	It was important to me to decide how these sessions run. It was especially meaningful because it offered some control over sessions the entire state had access to.
	We talked a lot about advocating for arts education by being models for student-centered learning and classrooms. I think this was helpful because people like doing things that are hands on, and this is something they can walk away with and something strategic they can try in the classroom. I'm glad we got to lead this conversation and this learning with peers. It was empowering for us and I think the teachers.
Interviews	I felt like I was respected, and that my input was helpful in making things happen. The discussions we've had have been rich and engaging. I can't emphasize that enough. Having control and even some kind of power here, and also the level of respect we got from each other and from you for letting us take the lead, was confidence-boosting.
	I do not view myself as a leader but being entrusted with responsibility was pretty energizing and probably good for my self-esteem, to be honest. I started to like the idea of presenting because we did it in a way that didn't feel too much like presenting but like collaborations. I felt like I was helping others see how important they and their work is and I want to do that more.
	This experience made me think that arts educators can be a lot more impactful than most people think. We sort of abandoned our disciplines for these sessions which I think

Source	Representative quotations
	<p>means our work can go way beyond music and art. We can open these sessions up to other disciplines that might be working with similar ideas or practices.</p> <p>Again, this felt personalized to the group and to art and music teachers as a whole and making the decisions made me feel good about what we were doing and kind of important for a change. I think any teacher could benefit from this but we're usually on our own and it's hard to find things like this that we have control over.</p> <p>I did not want to really take the lead on presenting things but the culture of the group was positive so I felt pretty comfortable. Maybe more than that, I felt excited and sort of excited to be on the facilitating or even leading side of things so I feel more confident to jump in more on answering questions.</p>

My participants were likely motivated by an existing degree of self-confidence and leadership interest. However, even participants who explicitly stated that they did not prefer to be nor saw themselves as leaders reported a boost in confidence. One participant stated, "I do not view myself as a leader but being entrusted with responsibility was pretty energizing and probably good for my self-esteem, to be honest." Another shared a new belief: "arts educators can be a lot more impactful than most people think. We sort of abandoned our disciplines for these sessions which I think means our work can go way beyond music and art." Admitting, "a lot of teachers are a little timid when working with other teachers, especially when we feel so siloed as art teachers," they later added, "I think this shows that we don't have to be timid and that we do actually have expertise of best practices that can help teachers even in music, and I bet other contents, too."

The participants also indicated that choosing content and activities (i.e., having control and making decisions) increased their confidence. One participant felt "like a professional with expertise that can make a difference." Another stated, "Having control and even some kind of power here, and also the level of respect we got from each other and from you for letting us take the lead, was confidence-boosting," while a third associated "making the decisions" with feeling "good about what we were doing."



Overall, the level of control and decision-making power, in addition to serving as leaders, supported feelings of self-confidence among participants.

***Authentic Social Connections***

Collaborative experiences are critical to arts educators’ perceptions of themselves as leaders and professionals (Sandell & Zimmerman, 2019; Schlaack & Steele, 2018).

The arts education networks have long served as an opportunity for arts educators to connect with each other, yet participants acknowledged that the intervention’s high-impact, reflective, and collaborative environment strengthened their relationships or connections with peers (Table 4.11). Many participants alluded to this experience as a “true collaboration.”

Table 4.11 *Authentic Social Connections*

Source	Representative quotations
Surveys	It felt like a true collaboration and I think we all helped each other and attendees. We made the time longer but it would be nice if they were more often or even some summer seminars or institutes. Something that can really bring us together! I think this is a great start.
	We all seemed prepared and organized. It was good to have a session leader to restate ideas well and answer clarifying questions. No one rushed to any conclusions about what others were thinking or doing. Everyone was supportive.
	Taking the lead on this was a real challenge but, as a group, we managed it well, I think. We came up with some ideas that would not have been possible without each other. It was a rigorous process but enjoyable with the group.
	The group focus helped the sessions function. I’ve actually never really seen teachers interact in such a passionate way. Not sure if I made big decisions that impacted this but I participated with others and kept things going.
	It was interesting to see everyone be so respectful in this. Everyone wanted to contribute. We never really made clear expectations for hand raising or who should talk when, but the group was really focused and happy to hear each other’s thoughts.
Interviews	We all collaborated; if people did not have background in things like mentoring, we were able to work together and fill any gaps we might have to support the work.
	Everyone was open to ideas and appreciative together, listened well. We didn’t all agree but the culture was such that we felt appreciated. I think the culture was how it was because we were given a job and we all wanted to do the job. Having, like, a real

Source	Representative quotations
	<p>challenge and product that we had to provide to people helped build our connections. We felt it was important and it was a job we really needed each other for.</p>
	<p>This felt like a tighter bond than other collaboration activities in, like, school PD or something. We're usually given tasks with answers and, here, we had to create something together. Like performing with a group, even students. If you gave students an assignment to create a piece of music together, it can be a nice space for them to truly collaborate. This had a similar kind of pressure or high stakes feel to it.</p>
	<p>We are all able to see each other's perspective and respect each other's approach to teaching because we all teach in different areas and different students. These sessions give us the opportunity to understand everyone's different situations.</p>
	<p>I actually like the little bit of pressure that came with it and wonder if that made this feel like a real "get to know each other" opportunity. We had an audience of people we didn't know and we rarely get to control this stuff as art teachers. So, there was some fun pressure and we had to rely on each other to do a good job. It's like when you're in an Escape Room with all your friends and we all have to rely on what we know as a group to make it work.</p>
	<p>We are all from similar backgrounds, understanding what it was like to be a teacher in the arts, and reflecting on what we needed. The shared experiences lend themselves to a collaborative, supportive feel. The opportunity to speak from experience and having that seen as a value for others contributed to the supportive feel.</p>
	<p>I felt a high level of engagement because the groups for us were small and my voice was heard. In larger groups this isn't always possible. So, just being an active leader and collaborator made me feel engaged with the group.</p>

Similarly, reflection was embedded in previous networking sessions, but participants recognized that the group problem-solving efforts and regular reflective dialogue garnered a supportive and engaging collaborative environment. This context, in turn, influenced the social connections. One participant stated, "We came up with some ideas that would not have been possible without each other. It was a rigorous process but enjoyable with the group." Another stated,

I think the culture was how it was because we were given a job and we all wanted to do the job. Having, like, a real challenge and product that we had to provide to people helped build our connections. We felt it was important and it was a job we really needed each other for.

These statements, in addition to the descriptions in the observational data narrative, indicate the high-impact setting, opportunities to collaboratively solve problems, and meaningful and reflective dialogue strengthened social connections among participants.

**Agency**

As the observational data narrative illustrated, participants were eager to commit to the arts education networks. This commitment primarily manifested in their decisions during the planning and delivery (e.g., extending the time and supporting others). Such commitment indicates some intrinsic motivation, yet as one participant suggested, the autonomy and leadership focus directly supported a commitment to the networks in terms of time and applying expertise to the sessions.

Table 4.12 *Agency*

Source	Representative quotations
Surveys	<p>I think we need something more long-term to be a workshop. I guess I'm thinking more about "next steps" for my goals.</p> <p>I think we need more programs outside of the networks. We definitely had more teacher voice than we've had. It was great to have some sort of leadership role in something. Art teachers don't get that much! It'd be nice to continue this but digging deeper.</p> <p>I think they could've gone longer, so we could dive deeper into things. . . . This is something that I feel really excited and strongly about, so if others do, I know we all want to keep improving it.</p> <p>I think we all appreciated the sentiment of the networking sessions these last few years and we wanted to make them more accessible to teachers. We also wanted to entice them to attend regularly even with our covid constraints. I think we had some good plans to do that. I think we can turn it into a mentoring thing or some workshop for lesson writing so there are some products to take. Or what if teachers could be teacher leader coaches and a lot more people can lead the sessions. Leading was engaging and makes me want to do more of this.</p>
Interviews	<p>Everything was a choice. That gives people so much more buy-in, and leads to better outcomes. They were engaging meetings so we were all willing to commit a lot of thought into it. I also feel like I was sort of intrinsically motivated to accomplish something because I got an engaging experience out of it. I would love to do more and have more time to prepare bigger PDs or something.</p> <p>When serving in a leadership role for professional learning, I do feel more responsible for making learning relevant and inspiring. I want to make the experience beneficial for others and respect peoples' time by using it well. It benefits me, too. I was motivated to</p>

Source	Representative quotations
	put some time into this because I got to see something happen that I think needs to happen. Really, it makes me want to push some of the ideas we discussed farther.
	We didn't have to separate art and music teachers and I could see this working for other teachers, too, especially if we're focusing on things like student-centered learning. Like I said, we could do that and push a network forward all around a certain topic like arts integration or something.
	I guess I have some vested interest in these things but I think if we ever want some cohesive programs for arts students, we need to continue these in an engaging way.
	I think we all feel there can be a big group of educators serving in this committee or even on some larger scale. If we, or others, can have some of these for new teachers, it could be really helpful. I think I want to see how these can be refined that way.

Participants' conversations as well as interview and survey responses referenced the networks' future (Table 4.12), illustrating how teacher leadership and autonomy can promote continuous improvement (Page & Eadie, 2019). Such a focus was not evident in their pre-intervention responses, whereas the change in context left them eager to continue with the sessions and, as importantly, refine them to be more meaningful. They also noted that the level of engagement made them want to invest in these sessions and the refinement thereof.

Teacher agency is critical when adapting to new contexts, such as the pandemic (Ehren et al., 2021). The conditions of this study's autonomy-focused and teacher-led intervention supported a sense of self-direction, via a focus on continuous improvement, and an overall sense of commitment to the networking sessions. The survey and interview responses in conjunction with observational data suggest an increase in agency.

### **Analysis Based on Research Questions**

In this study, I sought to engender a positive sense of professional identity among arts educators by establishing autonomy-supportive conditions in the arts education networks, which in turn could strengthen the networks' collaborative culture. I found that

fostering autonomy leads to authentic social connections and an overall sense of validation. Additionally, I learned that teacher-directed networks inform teacher self-confidence and agency. This section explains how these findings answer my research questions and synthesizes the answers into a framework for supporting autonomy.

### **Autonomy and the Networks' Collaborative Culture**

My findings suggest fostering elements of autonomy can lead to authentic social connections and an overall sense of validation among arts educators. Because of their role, arts teachers often find themselves alienated from school- or district-wide initiatives and feeling like they operate in silos (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; Keisling, 2019). They have limited opportunities to collaborate with peers in similar contexts (Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017), yet social learning opportunities are critical for educators' sense of self and for overall professional learning or change efforts (Bennett & Broman, 2019; Shabani, 2016).

The teacher-led phases of this study informed the collaborative culture of the education networks in two ways. First, the opportunities to solve problems collaboratively and engage in reflective dialogue in a high-impact setting supported more authentic social connections than networking sessions in the traditional format. Participants noted that engaging in a project in which a group had to solve a problem and create a product for a statewide audience helped make meaning of their social connections. I observed this outcome, too, as all participants were able to—either individually or as a group—determine how to contribute to the field in a meaningful way. Importantly, participants focused on each other's gaps in knowledge and how they used each other to fill those gaps to maximize the efficacy of the networking sessions and the

planning process. Noticeably, regular teacher-directed reflection contributed to the groups' problem-solving efforts and overall sense of the networks' support.

The collaborative setting also informed another major theme of this study: validation. Participants' validation transcended the social connections, but the context was noticeably affirming and legitimizing. The peer-to-peer approach offered low-impact opportunities to share perspectives. Additionally, and as participants pointed out, having a voice in how the sessions functioned helped them feel validated. The leadership opportunity notwithstanding, participants' authentic social connections clearly sustained their feelings of validation. All participants indicated being able to contribute was a key condition that supported their sense of validation, with many participants suggesting or explicitly stating that their contributions made them feel like their job mattered and their opinion was necessary.

In sum, the autonomy-supportive environment informed the collaborative culture of the arts education networks by providing conditions conducive to authentic social connections and a sense of validation. Shared opportunities to solve problems and engage in reflective dialogue in a high-impact setting laid the foundation for participants to build authentic connections with each other. These meaningful connections in the autonomy-supportive environment sustained opportunities for participants to have a voice, make contributions, and share their perspective, thus validating participants' opinions and role.

### **Participant Perceptions of Professional Identity**

Participants' improved perceptions of their own agency suggest teacher-directed arts educator networks support teachers' confidence and empower them to invest in both their professional networks and selves as leaders. As discussed in Chapter 1, Izadinia

(2013) described professional identity as teachers' "perceptions of their cognitive knowledge, sense of agency, self-awareness, voice, confidence[,] and relationship[s]" (p. 708). Participants of the teacher-led networks directly referenced an increase in confidence and agency due to the autonomy-supportive environment and opportunity to lead a meaningful initiative, which suggests that the conditions of the intervention can positively contribute to teachers' professional identity.

The teacher leadership opportunity in an autonomy-supportive environment directly impacted participants' perceptions of self by providing conditions that inform self-confidence and agency, including the chance to make meaningful decisions and have control over the networks. All participants referenced the level of control and decision-making power as a confidence-booster. This level of confidence carried over into reflections on the networks. As participants considered their impact on the planning phases and session facilitation, they all intentionally reflected on potential strategies to improve the networks, offering specific steps to weigh and potential new aims, including mentoring, advocating for arts educators as leaders of best practices, and more. In a self-directed manner, participants demonstrated a vested interest in improving their education networks, suggesting that the autonomy-supportive environment and leadership roles reinforced their agency.

The level of confidence and the conditions that supported an increase in confidence (e.g., leadership opportunities, decision-making, and control) fed into conditions that supported a sense of agency. The opportunities to lead and make meaningful decisions created additional opportunities for participants to commit to and determine improvement strategies for the arts education networks—in a way that was

autonomous and self-directed. Overall, the self-confidence that participants noted also created a path for increased agency. All major themes for this study feed into each other in a similar way; each theme creates a pathway for another. As the next section elucidates, these themes and the conditions of the autonomy-supportive environment from which they stem can serve as a framework to strengthen education networks and, ultimately, teachers' professional identities.

### **Outcomes of Autonomy-Supportive Education Networks**

Autonomy-supportive environments offer educators and learners opportunities to have control, make decisions, apply and expand upon their expertise, and connect meaningfully with the work they do and those with whom they work (Ebersold et al., 2019; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020). Reforming the arts education networks was necessary to meet the conditions for an autonomy-supportive environment. In the past, they had neglected arts educators' need for autonomy and, therefore, were limited in how they impacted educators' sense of self and their collaborative learning opportunities.

As the environment became teacher-led and autonomy-supportive, the arts education networks became a source of authentic social connections, validation, self-confidence, and agency. Participants noted and I observed several key conditions that contributed to these four main areas of growth. Via teacher-governed, autonomy-supported environments, these conditions can come to fruition and, thus, support pathways to agency.

Collaborative problem-solving and reflection in a high-impact setting directly informed the degree to which participants perceived the environment as supportive, and those conditions, in turn, informed participants' connections with each other. Those



connections subsequently created safe opportunities for participants to contribute, have a voice, and share perspectives, all conditions that participants noted as providing a sense of affirmation or validation of themselves, their opinions, and their work. Simply, the authentic social connections made participants feel validated. This sense of validation created a pathway to self-confidence, with the conditions of leadership and decision-making providing means by which participants could travel down that path. The level of self-esteem that stemmed from these conditions was self-affirming, allowing participants to use their newfound confidence as a source of validation in addition to peer support and connections, which then strengthened the sense of support, yielding increased affirmation, yielding increased self-confidence. This cyclical relationship allowed participants to become self-directed in their commitment to their aims for the networks and strategies to improve the network setting, suggesting an increased sense of agency.

When the conditions are in place (i.e., when the network environment is autonomy-supportive), the outcomes strengthen the network itself. Figure 4.2 demonstrates this relationship among the themes. Teachers engage in authentic social connections, which supports a sense of validation. This validation, in turn, informs their self-confidence, which ultimately informs their sense of agency.

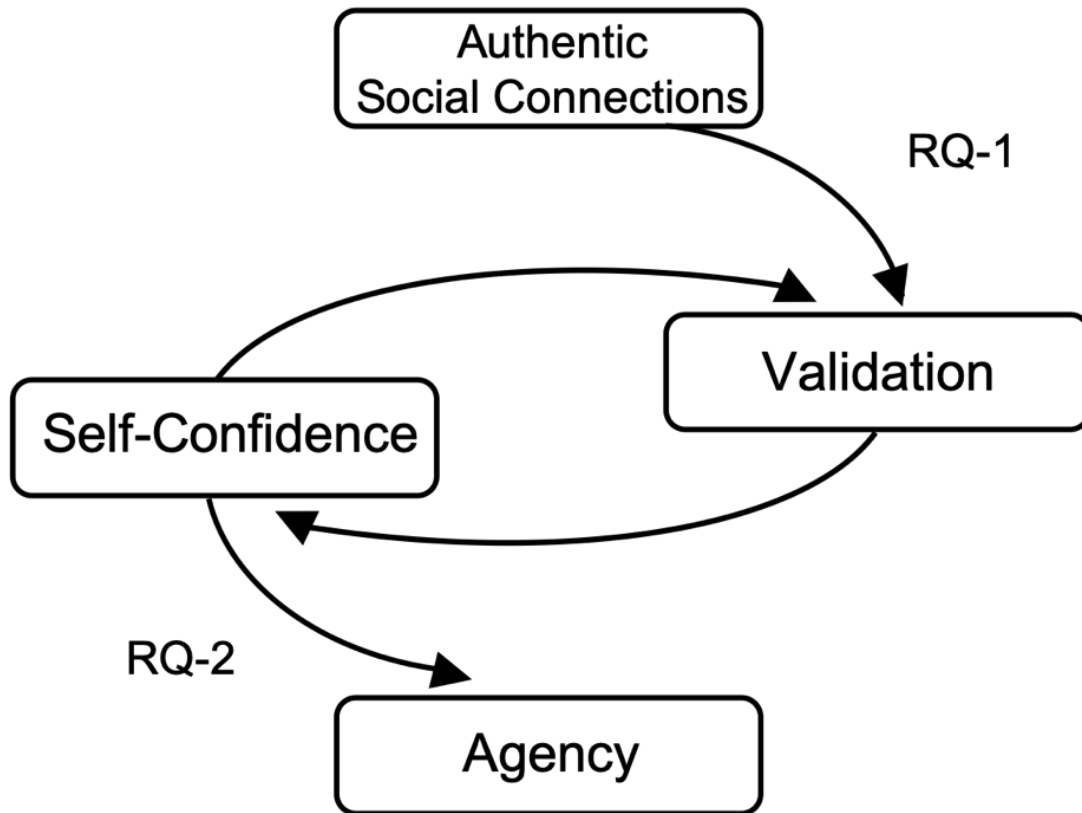


Figure 4.2 *Outcomes of Autonomy-Supportive Education Networks*

As participants became empowered to lead in an autonomy-supportive environment, the experience ultimately led to an increased sense of agency, which stemmed from self-confidence, validation, and authentic social connections. These findings align with tenets of SDT and collaborative learning environments. Even in the complex and potentially high-impact setting of the teacher-led phases, the elements of autonomy supported an overall more positive experience, sense of belonging and affirmation, and increased pursuit of learning, aligning with other research-based outcomes of autonomy-supportive environments (Grant et al., 2020; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004). The authentic social connections fueled the other key outcomes of the teacher-led, autonomy-supportive environment, aligning with common outcomes of collaborative

approaches to leadership opportunities and change efforts (Carpenter, 2017; Schlaack & Steele, 2018).

### **Summary**

Drawing from survey, interview, and observation data, this chapter presented the outcome of my efforts to strengthen my statewide arts education networks. Nine visual and performing arts educators from across the state participated in the leadership opportunity that served as the intervention: a teacher leader seminar, planning sessions, and two teacher-led networking sessions. Seeking to determine how the experience impacted educators' perceptions of professional identity and the collaborative culture of the networks, I identified four themes: (a) authentic social connections, (b) validation, (c) self-confidence, and (d) agency.

When participants became teacher leaders, they took ownership of applying teacher leader domains to their sessions, intentionally fostering a collaborative culture, advocating for student learning, and promoting the use of assessment for instructional improvement. The outcomes of the group's autonomy were most evident during the seminar and planning phases, when participants engaged in a meaningful cross-disciplinary collaboration to invest in the arts education networks that ultimately informed how they applied the teacher leader domains to their practice. Autonomy was the key element. The teacher leader domains did not necessarily scale autonomy, although they informed some session planning and offered some guidance for facilitation.

Although action research is not intended to be generalizable, that my findings align with the key outcomes of other studies on self-determination and autonomy-supportive environments is encouraging. More importantly, these findings provide a

comprehensive set of conditions that I can embed in state-level education networks to serve as a framework for fostering leadership qualities and autonomy among teachers. I discuss these and other implications in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLICATIONS

Through this action research study, I sought to determine how to strengthen a statewide system of support for visual and performing arts teachers. Specifically, I aimed to construct an autonomy-supportive virtual networking space for educators across the state to collaborate and foster leadership skills. Arts educators tend to feel isolated from school, district, or state initiatives and even lack systems of support within the arts domain (Elliott & Stokes-Casey, 2019; McComb et al., 2019). This isolation and lack of support systems can adversely affect self-perceptions of professional identity for arts teachers (Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017).

To remedy the effects of isolation and lack of meaningful collaborative support systems, I restructured the statewide arts education networks to promote positive perceptions of professional identity and statewide collaboration. I gave participants autonomy over the networking sessions to help me determine the impact of teacher-led collaboration. I explored this intervention with the following research questions:

1. How can fostering elements of teacher autonomy influence the collaborative culture of arts educator networks?
2. How do teacher-directed arts educator networks influence perceptions of professional identity?

Through a basic qualitative design consisting of interviews, observations, and surveys, I found that, when teachers plan and facilitate the statewide arts education networks, they

become a space that promotes four major themes: authentic social connections, a sense of validation, self-confidence, and agency among teacher leaders. Several conditions of the environment and processes by which participants planned and facilitated the sessions informed each of these themes. In terms of autonomy's influence on the networks' collaborative culture, the findings suggest more authentic social connections result when participants engage in collaborative problem-solving and reflective dialogue in a high-impact setting.

The culture of the networking planning meetings and sessions contributed to an overall sense of validation due to participants' consistent opportunities to share perspectives, have a voice in the work, and make meaningful contributions. In terms of the influence teacher-directed networks had on perceptions of professional identity, the findings suggest the opportunity to lead promoted participants' self-confidence and agency. Participants noted leadership, decision-making, and control as key contributors to their confidence. The data also suggest a commitment to the work of the group and focus on continuous improvement further strengthened the networks. Participants' agency manifested in seizing the opportunity to grow and using their collaboration and leadership skills to advance their support system.

In this chapter, I discuss the implications of these findings. First, I align my insights with tenets of my theoretical framework as well as findings in other studies on teacher-led groups. Based on these conclusions, I provide a set of recommendations for my fellow professionals as well as for leaders of local and state education agencies. I also share the direct implications for my current work and how I plan to embed the conditions of the teacher-led arts education networking environment into additional collaborative

working groups. Lastly, I reflect on the overall process for this study, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

### **Teacher-Led Networks: An Engine for Change**

My participants' perceptions and overall findings align with positive outcomes from similar studies and demonstrate the impact of having collaborative support systems and autonomy. Regardless of discipline and grade, studies suggest collaborative professional development and opportunities to have control and make meaningful decisions about learning can support agency and a positive sense of self (Allen, 2018; Izadinia, 2013). Additionally, conditions that foster self-determination can support an overall sense of satisfaction, confidence, and agency (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020). Autonomy-supportive environments have also led to a more positive experience for learners that increases pursuit of learning and improvement (Grant et al., 2020). These same tenets of collaborative learning and autonomy-supportive environments transfer to arts education contexts. As discussed in Chapter 2, social learning experiences that include co-planning, collaborative reflection, and constructive learning support the collaborative culture of arts educator professional learning environments (Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017; Schlaack & Steele, 2018).

My intervention consisted of restructuring the arts education networking sessions to be teacher-led, thus informing participants' self-perceptions and the networks' collaborative culture. In the context of this collaboration among participants, this intervention supported authentic social connections, a sense of validation, self-confidence, and agency. With these findings, and findings of similar studies, the key conclusion is the benefit of teacher leadership. Specifically, working groups that foster

leadership among teachers can strengthen the collaborative dynamic of the group. My participants noted several conditions that informed their collaboration and, ultimately, their connections with each other and sense of validation. These conditions included collaborative problem-solving and reflective dialogue in a high-impact setting, having a voice in the work, making meaningful contributions, and sharing perspectives.

Additionally, teacher-led working groups can promote a sense of agency among members of the group. My participants noted an increase in self-confidence and agency due to the opportunities to lead, make important decisions, and control the direction of the statewide networks. They also demonstrated a commitment to the networks and consistently indicated motivation to continuously improve not only their approach as leaders, but the function of the networking sessions in general.

In other words, the findings indicate that the autonomy-supportive environment fostered an agentic, confident, and highly collaborative state-level working group that was able to coordinate and facilitate their own education networks. As I elaborate in the next section, studies suggest such teacher-led working groups can serve as engines for change. Therefore, I believe the teacher-led state education networks can also serve in this capacity and become a catalyst for local or statewide systems change.

### **Teacher-Centered Systems**

Empowering and enabling teachers to be leaders of their systems and networks is an increasingly popular research area and strategy for rolling out new initiatives. In previous chapters, I discussed teacher leader model domains and their role in fostering autonomy in my intervention. At the school level, these model domains have served teachers in teacher leader positions—those with specific titles like mentor or coach



(Frost, 2012). Recent studies have expanded upon these qualities of a teacher leader, focusing on processes that teacher-led networks or working groups can follow to become effective change agents on local or state efforts.

Taylor et al. (2019) investigated the impact of activities and interactions on teacher leadership development and sustainability of new instructional initiatives. Their study suggests collaborative—or distributed—leadership is critical for sustainable change. For example, they found that working across disciplines, districts, and grades enables teacher leader working groups to develop a deeper understanding of leadership tools and strategies, their relevance, and how to apply them to sustainable local efforts around instruction. Collaborative teacher leadership becomes more sustainable as the working groups that these leaders comprise provide opportunities for ongoing problem-solving, reflection, and more. Additionally, they support advocacy of best practices, even beyond pedagogical content knowledge. Through a series of case studies of teacher leader groups, Bradley-Levine (2018) found that engaging in critical teacher leader models can spread the practices that support social justice at the school level. Simply, teacher leader working groups are becoming a clear pathway to engender change.

The collaborative leadership focus aligns with my participants' experiences. Working together across regions, grades, and arts disciplines expanded their knowledge of other contexts and tools. Having to discern commonalities among their roles, purpose, interest, aims on a broad level, and approach to collaboration reinforced the collaborative elements of the experience, which furthered their development as leaders. Moreover, these processes supported perceptions of teacher leadership as a collaboration, which, according to Taylor et al. (2019) and Bradley-Levine (2018), can sustain local change

efforts. Other studies I discuss in this section suggest collaborative teacher-led working groups can change the system on a broader scale.

As I discuss in the recommendations section of this chapter, my broad focus based on my findings is to begin redefining what educational change can look like by promoting teacher-centered leadership structures (e.g., statewide teacher-led networks or working groups). The context of my action research includes a system in which decision-making and improvement efforts are top-down: leaders at state or local education agencies decide what a change effort should look like and direct others to implement it. In a similar context, Constantinou and Ainscow (2020) studied a sustained teacher-led collaboration for school-based change. Their participants were empowered with the autonomy to lead localized action research studies on a specific area for school improvement. The collaborative process focused on problem-solving, qualities of teacher leadership, and continuous improvement, which led to democratic processes for the school improvement efforts and, ultimately, supported implementation of and participation in the change process. The researchers thus endorsed a shift in the politics of education toward action-oriented and practitioner-led change efforts.

Considering the alignment of Constantinou and Ainscow's (2020) findings and my own, I hope to move teacher-led networks or similar working groups into positions where they can catalyze local or state change efforts. As Taylor et al. (2019) indicated, leadership is most effective (i.e., sustainable) when it is distributed and teacher-centered. Positioning teacher leader groups at the center of a systems change effort can lead to sustainability at the local level and potentially at the state level.

Currently, the Kansas State Department of Education is undergoing a major ground-up school redesign project that utilizes a teacher-led design thinking process to realize a set of community visions for the education system (Liang et al., 2021). This state-supported process emphasizes local and teacher leadership in action-oriented, redesign working groups led by those who will be determining how to implement the state’s vision. This model is the antithesis of the typical top-down approach in my current context; teacher leaders are actively taking steps to determine how to transform the system rather than being told how to transform the system. In the next section, I describe how local and state leaders can apply the conditions I found to statewide teacher-led networks or working groups, empowering those groups to be catalysts for change through action research. I then describe my implementation plan to model this recommended process with a state-level network of teacher leaders that I am currently facilitating.

### **Recommendations**

As I learned in this study, teacher-led working groups can engender a sense of agency among members of statewide arts education networks. Teacher agency is critical for educational change. In *Between the State and Schoolhouse: Understanding the Failure of Common Core*, Loveless (2021) mapped the historical context for persistent yet ineffective federal to state to local educational change pathways. Interestingly, several of the key factors that engendered such top-down efforts to educational reform (e.g., NDEA, NCLB) are the same points I describe in Chapter 2 as pushing the arts disciplines—and arts teachers—into isolation (i.e., separate from “core” disciplines).

Of course, the historical context contributing to curricular control and teachers’ sense of self is not a coincidence. The top-down approach means educational reform

priorities are determined by only one level of the system, neglecting the expertise of the implementers while stripping their ownership over their work (Loveless, 2021; Zeichner & Liston, 2014). Limited opportunities to expand upon and apply expertise as well as limited autonomy in work and learning environments can hinder motivation and agency (Allen, 2018; Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020). In the case of visual and performing arts teachers, they are pushed further to the side and generally operate in isolation, impacting their sense of professional identity and their role in schoolwide initiatives (Elliot & Stokes-Casey, 2019; McComb et al., 2019; Sandell & Zimmerman, 2017).

In addition to diminishing educators' sense of self, a top-down approach is particularly harmful in education settings because, except for antiquated assessment and accountability systems, the outputs of federal and state initiatives cannot truly be observed (Loveless, 2021). There is, therefore, a critical need to bridge the gap between policy and practice for the sake of teacher well-being, as I examined in this study, as well as for sustainable systems of support for developing and implementing instructional initiatives. Local and state leaders and professionals like me can establish teacher-led networks to support teacher agency and bridge policy and practice. However, for teacher-led networks to serve as the bridge, they need conditions in place to support agency and collaboration. Thus, the conditions that supported my participants' social connections, sense of validation, confidence, and agency are integral to this recommendation.

With additional structure, the teacher-led format of the statewide arts education networks can impact state education agencies and their relationship with districts and schools by creating a direct pathway from policy to practice. My research focused on participants' experience and feelings. Through this investigation, I found that enabling

and empowering arts educators to be leaders supported their collaboration and agency. This group of teacher leaders focused on a range of inter- and transdisciplinary pedagogical practices they felt could support their colleagues across the state. Local and state leaders can establish similarly autonomy-supportive networks to create a system for guiding local education agencies and schools.

My participants focused on general concepts supported by the state, yet state agencies could mirror the Kansas approach by applying design thinking to determine how to implement the state’s vision for learners (Liang et al., 2021). Similarly, local teacher-centered working groups can engage in collaborative action research to develop strategies for implementing new initiatives (Constantinou & Ainscow, 2020; Frost, 2012).

Processes like design thinking and collaborative action research can support teacher-led networks to determine innovative practices aligned to statewide visions or initiatives. An environment that strengthens the arts education networks and participants’ leadership—my primary focus for this study—is critical. As I describe in the next section, I plan to apply the conditions I found to support agency and collaboration among the network, then expand the network’s agency by embedding action research as a process for teacher leaders to determine how to sustain their systems of support for local or state initiatives.

### **Implementation Plan**

As mentioned in previous chapters, my role has expanded to focus on supporting a state agency with facilitating a statewide network of educators whose role is to determine how to create sustainable systems of support for statewide initiatives. In other words, my work focuses more directly on facilitating the kinds of education networks I investigated for this study but with a focus on actions that can support systems change,

rather than only a focus on facilitating the networking sessions—although such sessions are key for convening the working group. Therefore, I plan to apply the conditions that impacted my participants’ collaboration and agency to the network I currently support, focused on sustaining inter- and transdisciplinary personalized learning across the state. I plan to extend the work into an action planning phase during which members of the network develop strategies for sustaining state systems of support for personalized learning, thereby ensuring sustainability of the teacher-led network and the pedagogical practices they are promoting. I envision four major phases for the collaborative working group, as outlined in Figure 5.1.

<b>Phase 1</b> Constructing the environment	Support members’ social connections, sense of validation, and agency by creating space for meaningful decision-making, collaborative problem-solving, and control in a high-impact setting.
<b>Phase 2</b> Developing action plans	Expand on the network’s newfound agency by determining high-needs areas for implementers of state initiatives. Develop a plan to investigate or test applicable strategies.
<b>Phase 3</b> Implementing action plans	Apply and assess the strategies. Refine the strategies and collaboratively determine systems of support for educators to learn and apply them.
<b>Phase 4</b> Supporting new strategies	Coordinate and facilitate systems of support for educators to learn and apply strategies for implementing state initiatives.

Figure 5.1 *Key Phases for Teacher-Led Education Networks*

Generally, these phases will guide the group toward determining strategies for developing and sustaining support systems that guide implementers (i.e., teachers) toward applying statewide initiatives to practice. During the first phase, I will directly apply my learning to create an autonomy-supportive environment. The key conditions participants noted as supporting each theme will inform my role as facilitator and my relationship with the group during subsequent phases. As in my intervention, the group will operate

with increasing autonomy, and I will essentially become a co-facilitator by the end of Phase 1. Based on the progress and successful structure of the Kansas redesign teams (Liang et al., 2021), I also plan to embed additional goal-setting steps in this first phase to support the group in determining a direction for their subsequent action plans.

Phase 2 will begin to expand upon the network's agency. Collaboratively, the teacher leaders can determine areas of need for implementing a state initiative. Leaders will develop and implement a plan to research and test their strategies to determine if they meet the needs of educators implementing the initiative. Lastly, the group can use what they find to inform their approach as a network for providing systems of support to the field. Essentially, this process will begin to focus on a new problem of practice regarding the function of teacher-led education networks like the one I investigated. My aim for this study was to determine how to strengthen the networks and support a positive sense of self. Participants appreciated the increased sense of agency and collaborative dynamic in the autonomy-supportive space. Now, I am eager to determine what actions these kinds of highly collaborative and agentic teacher-led networks can take to develop, facilitate, and sustain systems of support for state initiatives.

### **Reflection on the Action Research Process and Methods**

Overall, this process gave me a sense of how to begin thinking about coordinating these kinds of statewide education networks. It also provided me with opportunities to rethink the role of participants in the action research process. In this case, my participants essentially served as co-researchers during analysis. I relied heavily on their language and connections to determine conditions and themes. The co-researcher dynamic can go further, as in the phases of my implementation plan. Measures members of the networks

use to test strategies and processes by which they determine the efficacy of those strategies can be data sources to help me and the teacher leaders understand if the teacher-led network phases are functioning as we hope.

The introduction phase of my study, during which participants reviewed leadership qualities, was important, but I wish I had extended it. My implementation plan, therefore, prioritizes providing structure to build the group's capacity as a network, which could strengthen the network and improve participants' overall perceptions. For example, the networks were intended as a state support system for arts educators, facilitating virtual meetings and sharing of resources, but they could benefit from a coherent vision aligned with specific state initiatives, rather than general practices supported by the state agency. In retrospect, I could have offered more structure to the leadership development and to building the collaborative culture of the network. The participants developed a direction for the sessions, but not necessarily a purpose or vision at the onset of their experience. Further, extending the early phases of the intervention would have facilitated a gradual release of responsibility, whereas the transition from me as facilitator to teachers as facilitators was somewhat abrupt. The success of my intervention notwithstanding, a slower release could have allowed more reserved participants to identify their best leadership qualities. In this study, I served primarily as an observer. However, to support more structure for building the capacity of the group—an ongoing endeavor—I could have served as a co-facilitator and participant in addition to an observer.

As but one iteration of action research, this study can narrow a focus for future areas of action research, as I discuss in the next section. This process was a critical



investigation that can set the stage for more targeted studies of autonomy-supportive education networks and how they might function as statewide systems of support.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

My findings will have a direct impact on my work moving forward but are limited to a specific context. The problem of practice was the lack of strong support systems for arts educators to expand on their professional identity and participate in collaborative working groups. The findings are, therefore, limited to the arts educators in my state, despite my sample's maximum variation. Additionally, the teachers volunteered to lead the networks and participate in the study. This willingness likely came with some level of agency. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated and noted agentic qualities as key to their experience in leading the networks.

There are a range of opportunities to expand this research. One would be to conduct a similar investigation with a larger sample size comprised of educators of different disciplines. I intend explore this area as I coordinate embedding my findings into the teacher leader network with which I am currently working. Additionally, participants noted several conditions that informed each theme or perceptions they had about the experience. In an extension of this study, one could investigate each condition to determine how and to what degree that condition impacts the perception. For example, the setting for this work was a state-level education network for a statewide audience of arts educators. Participants, who generally felt isolated from school or district initiatives, perceived this work as high-impact, but what do other teachers perceive as high-impact work? What perceptions and feelings are associated with perceived impact? In terms of the boost in self-confidence participants credited to leadership opportunities, decision-

making, and control, I wonder how different kinds of decisions can influence different levels of confidence. What kinds of decisions do teacher leaders have to make to experience an increase in self-confidence? Investigating the impact of each condition could illuminate the degree to which any given condition supports or does not support sense of self and the collaborative culture of the group.

As my implementation plan indicates, I am especially interested in extending the function of the teacher-led networks to bridging policy and practice. In addition to the impact autonomy has on teachers' sense of self and the collaborative culture of the network, I am interested in investigating the actions the teacher-led groups can take to support the field and improve the system.

### **Summary**

Educators often feel a lack of ownership over their work. Arts educators especially find themselves siloed and separate from innovation efforts (Elliot & Stokes-Casey, 2019; McComb et al., 2019). This phenomenon was especially evident during the pandemic. I noticed the visual and performing arts teachers across the state in need of stronger systems of support. The established systems did not ameliorate major issues arts educators experience: a lack of collaborative opportunities and a sense of being non-essential. Such conditions trace back to federal education priorities starting in the mid-20th century, which effectively sidelined disciplines other than the “core.” Therefore, I sought to restructure the support system I had in place, enabling arts educators to expand their professional identity through teacher leadership and strengthening the collaborative culture of their networks. I thus granted participants autonomy over the planning, function, content, and facilitation of the monthly networking sessions.

Through a basic qualitative design consisting of surveys, interviews, and observations, I identified several conditions of the teacher-led network as informing participants' social connections, sense of validation, self-confidence, and agency. When these conditions are in place, the teacher-led networks or working groups can support teachers' agency. Additionally, when these statewide networks or groups are teacher-led, the collaborative dynamic in terms of social connections and supporting a sense of validation is stronger. Similar teacher-led networks or working groups have engaged in collaborative action research or design processes to support or begin to support local or statewide sustainable change in traditionally top-down systems (Constantinou & Ainscow, 2020; Liang et al., 2021). Therefore, with conditions in place to support an agentic, collaborative network of teacher leaders, the network can serve as a catalyst for developing sustainable systems of support for new initiatives. As I carry these findings into my work, I plan to extend the phases of the teacher-led structure to focus more on developing new systems of support. In doing so, I hope to support new ways of thinking about education leadership, teacher agency, and approaches for supporting implementation of statewide initiatives.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The interviews will be open-ended but use these questions as a starting point. I will note any additional questions asked in-the-moment. Interviews will take place twice, once before the intervention and in a mid-semester follow-up session for each participant. The questions target the same content, but phrasing differs to fit the specific phase of the study. I will type initial and follow-up responses directly into the Word document I use to pose the questions, saving one document per participant under a confidential label (e.g., Participant 1).

#### **Pre-intervention**

1. What kind of role do you prefer to take in professional learning?
2. Generally speaking, how does your role, decisions you make, or serving in a leadership role influence your level of engagement in professional learning, if at all?
3. What kind of environment do you feel the Arts Education Networks provide?
4. How do you think arts educators would respond to more teacher-led sessions?
5. Describe the level of control you felt you had over the content, activities, or discussions during sessions that you've attended. Was it too much or too little? What would you do differently?
6. Please describe anything else about the sessions that you feel is important.

#### **Follow-up**

7. What kind of role did you take on to prepare and lead the sessions?
8. How did your role, decisions you made, or leading an activity influence your level of engagement in the networks, if at all?
9. What kind of environment do you feel the Arts Education Networks provide?
10. How do you think arts educators are responding to teacher-led sessions?
11. Describe the level of control you felt you had over the content, activities, or discussions during sessions that you've attended. Was it too much or too little? What would you do differently?
12. Please describe anything else about the sessions that you feel is important.

## APPENDIX B

### SURVEYS

Survey questions seek to capture (a) the supportive environment of the networks, (b) the roles and structures that participants felt empowered them and their agency (if any), and (c) how their roles in and the environment of the networks influenced their engagement and satisfaction. Surveys of each participant will take place twice, once before the intervention and again after the third month of the networks. The surveys are identical except for Question 4, which differs in accordance with the phase of the study.

Pre-Intervention: <https://forms.gle/g2FzuLJL1cvikuf78>

Follow-up: <https://forms.gle/ZowYYZEAQC1Na2MPA>

## APPENDIX C

### INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Dear Arts Education Networks Participants,

This year, I will be collecting data to investigate the impact autonomy has on arts educators' sense of professional identity and the collaborative culture of arts education networks. This project will take place during 2022's Arts Education Networking Sessions. Teachers who choose to participate will participate in a seminar to prepare topics, activities, and material to lead the sessions. They will then lead the sessions. Data will be collected in the form of open- and closed-response questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, and observations. I will keep all participants updated about all data collection and analysis throughout this process.

I am committed to maintaining a professional and positive relationship with all teachers with whom I work. Participation in this research is strictly voluntary, and a teacher's decision to participate or not participate will have no influence over the perceptions I have or work I do throughout the networking sessions or other future projects.

The data collected will be used to prepare a dissertation for an Ed.D. degree. While the data collected can inform my own approach to the structure of the Arts Education Networks, this research is for my own academic pursuits and professional growth. It will not be shared internally or used to inform any internal projects other than my own work with the networks. Related, teacher privacy and confidentiality will remain a priority throughout data collection and reporting. All names and personal information, including the school, district, and state in which the study will take place, will be omitted from the final work and in any speaking or writing related to the study. No personal information will be shared with anyone.

This project will inform my practice as an education professional, allowing me to develop strategies to engage all teachers in professional learning and growth. Participation is voluntary and participants can opt-out at any point without penalty. Teachers are welcome to participate in the summer seminar and lead the networks regardless of their participation in this study. While those involved in the networks will receive their attendance certificates for participating, additional certificates cannot be provided for additional time participating in data collection for this study as this data collection process is affiliated with my academic program and not my employer.

Sincerely,

Kyle Anderson

I have read the information contained in the letter about this research, which describes what I will do if I decide to participate. I understand that my decision to participate or not participate will have no influence on the work in the Arts Education Networks or the perceptions of the researcher. I understand that measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality in data collection. I understand that I can opt-out at any point and request my responses not be used in the final report.