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### **Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: Student Success on the High Plains of Western Kansas**

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

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The Graduate School

BEYOND THE HUNDREDTH MERIDIAN:  
STUDENT SUCCESS ON THE HIGH  
PLAINS OF WESTERN KANSAS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Matthew Alan Clay

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Teacher Education  
Educational Studies

August 2020

This Dissertation by: Matthew Alan Clay

Entitled: *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: Student Success on the High Plains of Western Kansas*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in School of Teacher Education, Program of Educational Studies

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

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## ABSTRACT

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In 2017 the Kansas State Department of Education unveiled the new Kansans Can policy. The initiative carried the vision of “Kansas leads the world in the success of each student.” From this idealistic vision, an operational definition of success was created from a listening tour that traveled throughout the state. However, condensing a plurality of people and communities’ perspectives into a single, placeless definition of success provides an opportunity to compare that definition to the ways in which success is perceived in actual rural schools by individual teachers. Utilizing a combination of participant photography and educational connoisseurship and criticism, this study considered what types of success are recognized in two rural Western Kansas communities, as well as what the definition of success and outcomes of the Kansans Can policy conceals about student success. Participants in this study included six teachers from two rural, Western Kansas districts, which consisted of two elementary and four secondary teachers.

From the study, several themes emerged related to the values, actions, and beliefs represented in student success as identified by the participants, including community, persistence, engagement, workmanship, and independence. Although some of the types of success recognized by participants fall within the narrow scope of the definition in the Kansans Can policy, the policy outcomes and definitions ultimately are not able to

identify many of the types of success identified by participants. Ultimately this study highlights how participants recognize success in the unique setting of their rural communities, the potential implications of policy's inability to see these successes, and potential opportunities for policymakers to allow increased rural voice in the creation of educational policy.

Keywords: rural education, student success, educational connoisseurship and criticism, Kansans Can, spatial justice

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stegner (1992) wrote of the High Plains in his biography of John Wesley Powell *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*:

The semi-arid plains between the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian and Rockies, plains which had barred settlement and repelled Spaniard and Anglo-American alike, were no desert, nor even a semi-desert, but a pastoral Canaan. (p. 3)

The High Plains region of Western Kansas and Eastern Colorado has, since the time of the first European pioneers, earned a mixed reputation. It has been described as everything from the Great American Desert to Canaan. It has served, especially in towns such as Dodge City, as the token image of the romantic West, while also being the site of nature's harshness during the Dust Bowl era. The land beyond the hundredth meridian represents a climate and culture unto itself. As a native Kansan, it is within this unique geographical context that I conducted this study. Moreover, as a researcher I wish to assert the fundamental belief that for education, place matters. Therefore, I trace the intersection between a statewide policy and particular communities' enactment of the policy's aims.

#### **Kansans Can**

In 2017, Kansas Commissioner of Education Randy Watson announced a new vision for education in the state of Kansas, seeking to realize the aspiration that, "Kansas leads the world in the success of each student" (Kansas State Department of Education [KSDE], 2018a). This vision would guide the "Kansans Can" school redesign initiative.

A proposed redesign of Kansas schools, focused on the idea of individual student success, provides an opportunity to consider how those policy ideas about success are translated into practice and, in practice, how those ideas impact rural schools.

The Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) created an operational definition of a student's "success" as follows:

A successful Kansas high school graduate has the academic preparation, cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability skills and civic engagement to be successful in postsecondary education, in the attainment of an industry recognized certification or in the workforce, without the need for remediation. (KSDE, 2018a)

In pursuit of realizing this definition, KSDE identified five outcomes to be measured: social-emotional growth measured locally, kindergarten readiness, individual plan of study based on career interest, high school graduation, and postsecondary success (KSDE, 2018a). For purposes of the policy, postsecondary success is reflected in a student's continued enrollment in a postsecondary institution two years after high school graduation or earning an industry recognized certificate. These outcomes, taken as a whole, were intended to replace standardized assessment as the primary focus of school evaluation. As the policy was instituted, and continues to be instituted, districts were to gather data to support their efforts to pursue each of these outcomes. Data that districts collected included local surveys, graduation rate, postsecondary retention data for alumni, and documentation of students utilizing individual plans of study. Students still participate in standardized assessments, although the number of assessments has been reduced. KSDE did list existing standardized assessments as measures to ensure student success beyond high school in its plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

KSDE felt that the overall structures of schools as they existed, including curricula and schedules, were a barrier to pursuing the outcomes identified for Kansans Can. KSDE suggested that Kansans Can would be a “unifying call to action” in the development of the vision of “Kansas leads the word in the success of each student” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p. 6). Although all districts in the state were to pursue the identified outcomes, beginning in 2017 in the first year of the transition to the policy, districts could elect to participate in the Kansans Can Redesign cohorts named after NASA missions (KSDE, 2020). In electing to participate in a cohort, a district committed to redesigning at least one elementary and one secondary school within a specified timeline, typically around a year. Through formally joining a cohort, districts received the support of KSDE personnel, as well as a certain amount of publicity. The Redesign could include modifying course offerings, the nature and scheduling of the school day itself, and incorporating what was perceived as more authentic learning experiences, such as project-based learning. Ultimately, the nature of the Redesign in an individual school was the decision of the school itself, although certain design elements were suggested by KSDE (2020). The cohorts of Redesign schools were intended to serve as proving grounds for strategies that were believed to move schools closer to achieving the vision of Kansans Can or at least the outcomes; however, the strategies themselves had not necessarily been tested on a large scale previously (KSDE, 2018a). It is also worth noting that although the commitment was to only redesign a single elementary and secondary school within the district, for small districts, which only contain a single elementary and secondary school, the Redesign equated to a commitment to redesign the

entire district. The choice to join a cohort required a district to have the support of their local school board, district administration, and a majority of their teachers.

### **Defining Student Success**

In creating a definition of student success, KSDE conducted the Kansas' Children, Kansas' Future Tour in which KSDE staff visited communities throughout the state to survey and interview individuals about what they believed to be a successful student and what skills were necessary for a student to be successful (Watson, 2017). In the survey, 70 percent of the skills mentioned that were needed for students to be successful were classified as non-academic (KSDE, 2018a). KSDE (2018a) categorized only 23 percent of skills needed for students described in the survey to be successful as academic skills. As a result, it was assumed that state assessments failed to measure a majority of the skills necessary for student success. KSDE staff conducted a second listening tour with business owners in Kansas, among whom 81 percent of the skills mentioned were classified as non-academic and only 15 percent as academic. From these tours, KSDE concluded that student achievement does not necessarily equate to student success.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to highlight the fact that, although rural Western Kansas communities were included in the listening tours, the final definition of success enshrined in the policy does not necessarily represent the views and values of those communities, or more fairly all of the views from those communities. Despite listening to thousands of Kansans, ultimately a plethora of views had to be condensed into a single definition. Therefore, it is worth considering the fit between the statewide definition of success and its appearance in particular rural settings. It is not

guaranteed that all voices were weighted equally in deriving a single definition from many inputs, and so a condensed or consolidated definition may not, in its final form, speak for individuals who contributed to its creation. Moreover, it is reasonable to be suspicious of the weight carried by certain voices in the formation of this singular definition: the second listening tour completed by KSDE in crafting the policy focused exclusively on business owners. Whatever else a “successful student” might look like to ordinary Kansans, the privileged position of business in crafting this definition means that students’ usefulness to employers is likely disproportionately prominent. The two counties in which the school districts in this study are located rank near the bottom of the state in number of businesses (Hurd, 2018), raising precisely the broad questions that this study attempts to answer. The issue is whether the final definition is able to adequately reveal the values and needs of Kansans in rural communities, as well as business owners across the state.

### **Background of Study**

All new educational policies arrive with great fanfare, high-flown rhetoric, and bold promises to improve education on a grand scale. Kansans Can is no different. As a policy that is only a few years old, this study seizes on an opportunity to really consider its impacts *as* communities respond to its demands, rather than after the fact. With student success playing a prominent role in the rhetoric surrounding the policy, it is especially important to consider whether policy lives up to the standard of the rhetoric on the ground.

Moreover, as a Western Kansas resident, I am particularly sensitive to the perceived detachment between decisions made in Topeka and their implementation in the

western portion of the state. This attitude is probably best embodied by the sign placed near Highway 50 in southwest Kansas during the 1992 secession attempt which proclaimed, “To Hell with Topeka, Let’s Secede” (McCormick, 1995, p. 248). There is a healthy local skepticism toward statewide policies: people tend to believe that policy changes either will have no effect in rural Western Kansas or will have a detrimental one. Despite buy-in from administrators and educators to statewide policy changes, some apprehension remains within the schools and communities that their values, their understandings of what matters, will not show up in official policy. In this study, I sought to make room for the potential discrepancy to appear by highlighting the kinds of success encountered daily in rural schools, which ultimately helped to identify what the Kansans Can policy conceals.

### **Researcher Background**

As a nearly lifelong rural Kansas resident, I became instantly curious about whether Kansans Can would have the profound impacts on education that it promised. Because I am a teacher and parent in the state, Kansas schools are much more than sites for me to study; they are rather something I hold dear on a very personal level. Education in Kansas is very much my personal story. My wife is also a teacher in Kansas, as is my mother-in-law, and both of my parents work in Kansas public education. The way many farmers watch the Farm Bill and environmental regulations for how it will impact their generational way of life is the same way I view Kansas educational policy.

I moved with my wife, and our one child (at the time), to Western Kansas to her hometown in 2014 after briefly living in Missouri. In so doing, I became yet another non-native of a small Western Kansas town to answer the local question of “Why are you



here?” with “I met a girl...,” which is perhaps the most relatable of answers. In the time that has passed since our move I have found myself becoming intimately connected and attached to our community. As a result, I feel a compelling desire to understand how our community functions and is impacted by decisions at the policy level so that I can try to make sure that it is able to continue long into the future. Furthermore, I feel an urgency to correct what I see as many misinformed narratives about the rural Western Kansas experience.

In policy creation, I believe there is a tendency for policymakers to promise that a policy will benefit rural communities, but little follow up to investigate what the impacts of the policy actually are. This reflects a certain political reality, in which politicians trumpet such policies in order to cash in on urban and suburban voters’ desire to identify themselves with Kansas’s rural heritage. As a rural resident, I often watch politicians grandstand about helping my community, but due to the relatively small voice of rural communities, it feels like there is little opportunity to showcase that we have seen few, if any, impacts. The effects on the ground in the western half of the state are less important than the rhetoric’s effect in the eastern half. I have not seen any reason to suspect anything less than the best of intentions in the creation of Kansans Can. However, the impact it actually has on educational experiences in Western Kansas motivates me to explore whether this is another example of promised improvement through policy that fails to materialize.

My standing in the community is an indispensable asset to this research project. I believe that local trust is necessary for any researcher wishing to enter these communities and get honest and open responses from participants in a study. I have worked on

building this trust over the last few years, as I have been part of the community and its schools.

The 2019-20 school year was my fourth year teaching in the pseudonymous East District, one of the sites of my study. Although there has been some slight shuffling in my course load, I consistently have taught eighth through twelfth grade science courses. I have also served as a junior class sponsor and scholars bowl coach over that period. In addition to my academic year teaching load, I created and volunteered to teach summer geology and ecology courses in which I take students to Rocky Mountain National Park. Prior to teaching in East District, I taught in another district located in the same county as the pseudonymous West District. I chose to leave that district after two years in part due to concerns about school consolidation and the potential loss of teaching positions. My former district is not a part of this study.

Because I am a resident and teacher in one community in which I conduct my research, and because I am employed as a teacher in the other, I need to consider and enumerate the potential conflicts between my roles as a researcher and as a citizen/employee. One possible conflict would involve pressure I might feel to make Kansans Can look good as a policy, or to make my employer look good in the district's attempts to meet its requirements. I believe any potential conflict here was minimal for a few reasons. At the same time that I was trying to understand the impacts of this policy as a researcher, school administrations were asking the same questions, rather than assuming answers. In this sense, my work, even at its most critical, aligned with district interests. Moreover, East District was still weighing whether to voluntarily participate in the Redesign, which allowed this study to provide insight for their administrative

decisions. Therefore, I was under no pressure, implicitly or explicitly, to reach particular conclusions. Administrators were supportive of my project because any findings, of whatever kind, would help them as they navigated the emerging policy implementation terrain.

Another possible source of conflict would involve my preexisting relationships with my participants. Perhaps their contributions would reflect what they thought I wanted to hear, rather than the real truth. But this kind of “social desirability” bias is a danger no matter what the researcher’s relationship to participants (Chung & Monroe, 2003; Fisher, 1993). My standing in the community actually works to defuse this concern. Participants are arguably more likely to speak openly with me than they would with someone they do not know. In these very small communities a small degree of separation of relationships is quite normal. It is not at all uncommon for board of education members or school administration to have very close, even familial, relationships with others involved in the school. Perhaps the greatest risk was that participants would feel obligated to be overly helpful in participating.

Despite the potential conflicts, however minor they are, I felt it was extremely important that I complete this study in my local community. To truly understand, and more importantly appreciate, a rural community requires much more than a handful of trips centered around an individual study. Rather, true understanding and appreciation comes through years of lived experience. Moreover, my intimate connection to the communities allows me the opportunity to make sure they are treated with appropriate respect and that participants fully believe I will treat the community with respect. I personally had great concerns about how Kansans Can would impact my community. For

me, this was not just an academic discussion of how a policy might be operationalized in a particular setting. I needed to understand what this policy means to my wife and I as educators, to my children as young students, and to my community.

### **Positionality**

My decades as a rural Kansan have led me to a positionality that influences how I perceive challenges and opportunities related to rural schools, rural communities, and rural life. Most importantly, my experience has led me to the belief that rural schools and communities are valuable and the characteristics that make these schools and communities unique are worth preserving. That is to say, I believe it should be the goal of rural schools to maintain their ruralness, rather than to move toward an adoption of metropolitan values and beliefs. Additionally, from my time as a rural Kansan, I have perceived a disconnect between state and federal policies and what I observe every day in the lived experience of my community.

Ultimately, my lived daily experience in the two communities for this study had the greatest impact on my positionality and perspective in approaching this study. Every day, both during the study and years before, I drove my hail-dented pickup truck on a dusty, largely empty, state highway that connected the two towns. I have watched all manner of weather through a cracked windshield, been delayed by many pieces of farm equipment, and quite literally watched the deer and the antelope (pronghorn) play. Every minute of experience in those communities, and even the hours traveling in between, has led me to three key beliefs that shape my perspective entering this study. First, what occurs in rural schools and communities matters and is worth preserving. Second, rural communities and schools are constantly changing and responding to social and political

pressures which means their preservation requires a specific effort. Finally, neither of the first two beliefs has any chance of success unless someone is able to give a voice to the lived experience of folks in those schools and communities.

### **Introduction to Methodology**

This study utilized educational connoisseurship and criticism as the methodology (Eisner, 1994c; Uhrmacher, McConnell Moroye, & Flinders, 2017). However, in order to provide readers and policymakers a lens into the experience of these rural schools, as well as to empower participants, this study also utilized participant photography (Allen, 2012; Clark, 1999; Daniels, 2003) as a data collection tool to go along with direct observation. In participant photography, participants take photos over a specified period of time, with a specific theme to guide their photographic choices. For this study, I requested that participants photograph what they considered to be examples of student success. Afterward, I interviewed each participant about their photographs, to allow them to clarify and deepen the reasoning behind each example. From this interview, I then chose a setting with the participant to directly observe them in educational action. I used observations, photographs, and interviews to create an educational criticism.

### **Eisner's Ecology**

In order to make sense of the observations, interviews, and photographs that served as the raw data of this study, I relied, in part, on Eisner's ecology of schooling as an analytical framework. Eisner (1988) suggested the following elements in his ecology of school improvement: the intentional, the structural, the cultural, the pedagogical, and the evaluative. He wrote:

Schools are like ecological systems. Given a critical mass, what one does in one place influences what happens in another. When the mass is not critical, changes

made in one place return are returned to the earlier position by the others, almost as a cybernetic mechanism keeps a rocket on course. (p. 29)

Uhrmacher and Matthews (2005) proposed the addition of administration and school-community relationships to the ecology. Eisner (1988) described this ecology as an “interactive, mutually determined system of tremendous stability, which can adapt to pressures without significant change or even discomfort” (p. 26). Although Kansans Can might not directly impact each of these, the ecology provided a critical lens for considering where actions and beliefs were reflected in the aims of schools and how intentions spilled from one aspect of the ecology into others.

### **Significance of Study**

As an extremely new policy, there is no existing research as to the impacts of Kansans Can on Kansas schools and communities. Of particular interest to me in this new policy was the opportunity to see the impacts for individuals in rural communities in how they did or did not see their values of student success reflected in policy. Additionally, there are extremely few qualitative studies in general, and even fewer educational criticisms in particular, in rural educational settings (Conn, 2014). This study offered an opportunity to not only consider the impacts of a particular policy, but how treatments of rural communities in general can contribute to the relationship between rural schools and educational policy. My goal in this study was thus to provide a representation of the experience of individuals in schools and communities which are quite small and very geographically isolated from policymakers.

### **Purpose**

The specific purpose of this study was to apply a pragmatic lens to the Kansans Can policy. This manifests through identifying the types of student success recognized by

the participants in rural communities and then placing that in comparison to the outcomes and definitions of success in the Kansans Can policy. Ultimately, this served as an avenue to consider whether the voices and values of rural communities are reflected in the Kansans Can policy.

### **Research Questions**

In creating research questions for this study, the goal is to investigate how success is used in terms of policy and how those uses relate to the experience of rural schools. Deciphering an initiative such as Kansans Can requires unpacking the rhetoric to understand not only what is meant by it and how terms are used, but to then consider what it looks like in practice (Gottlieb, 2015). This leads to the first research question.

Q1     What types of success are recognized by educators in rural communities in Western Kansas?

Answering this question about how definitions of success in the Kansans Can policy actually translate into practice raises a second question. Roughly: would Kansans Can's definition be able to include these on-the-ground translations? It is unquestionable that generalizations work by including some particulars and excluding others. Eisner (1994c) speaks to this when he writes, "A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (p. 67). That is to say, whatever these definitions are able to reveal about student success in practice, there will also likely be aspects which they conceal. From a more pragmatic perspective, these definitions will focus practitioners on some aspects of student success, but will prevent them from considering others. Similarly, some aspects of student success generally recognized in rural communities might be recognized under Kansans Can, but others will not be. What kinds of success, important to this rural community, are

unrecognized by Kansans Can? In light of this challenge, I wish to address this second research question:

Q2 What does the definition of success in Kansans Can conceal?

Ultimately, both of these research questions will allow me to consider the lived experience of rural educators within the context of policy. They also offer an opportunity to consider issues of spatial justice in a specific instance of an educational policy. Furthermore, there are potential implications to consider related to both questions in terms of policy creation and research in rural educational settings which are discussed in chapter five.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is centered on considering the meaning and implications of terms that are commonly used within educational policy and practice. In fact, these terms are so commonly used, it is tempting to take their meaning for granted. Although clarification of terms is necessary for any study, it is difficult in this case to do that clarification up front, since one fundamental axiom of this study is that meaning emerges from use. The struggle is that policies are created to be objective and applied across an entire state, but the actual determination of what is and is not success in education is a subjective decision made by educators on the ground. However policies might define “success,” such objective definitions are thin and bloodless. It is in classrooms and student-teacher interactions that “success” is given flesh.

The goal in distinguishing and separating contexts is not to convolute the meaning of “success” for the purpose of the study, but rather to emphasize that its uses within schools, communities, and policy inevitably point to a plurality of meaning, even when the same term is repeated. Each time the term is used, however, it precipitates a singular meaning: someone, or some policy, *means* something in particular by it. What then becomes important for this study are whether and in which ways the various meanings of success within a rural school or community are concealed by the singular definition in policy. Stanley Cavell (1981, 2009) warned against the dangers of assuming words have fixed meanings and that these meanings are universal. The opportunity presented by this

study is not to find a universal meaning of success, but rather to explore how individual participants give success its meaning in their classrooms and schools. As Cavell (1981) wrote in *The Senses of Walden*, "...those who think they are familiar will think they have already heard what the writer is saying" (p. 92-93).

The fundamental issue, and the critical need for this study is that the Kansas Can policy offers a definition of success, and as Cavell indicates, the definitions suggest that the policy and those to whom it applies already know what success looks like. The policy, by its nature, prevents itself from looking for success in any terms other than those it describes. However, what success *means* also emerges in how it is discussed and described by participants. The challenge in this study is then for me to not assume I know what student success is, but rather to make fine-grained distinctions about what participants' use of that term, and the examples they provide, reveals about its meaning. Essentially, my task is to understand what participants "are saying" when they describe their views on student success, and how what they "are saying" relates to the policy to which they are partly responding.

The challenge of translating definitions from policy into practice is that policy definitions are necessarily abstract, and yet they must be applied in particular settings by grounded, contextualized individuals. As such, success does not simply receive its meaning, as Cavell would describe it, from the definition in policy, but is rather manifest in the way individual educators in particular schools and communities use it in response to the real life demands of the policy. Cavell (2009) wrote that "[s]ince we cannot assume that the words we are given have their meaning by nature, we are led to assume they take it from convention; and yet no current idea of 'convention' could do the work that words

do” (p. 31). Patterns of past use, convention, are not fully determinative of a word’s meaning in any given setting. And yet the individual using the word does not possess some godlike power to make the word mean whatever he or she might want. Cavell (1981) lists the following three crucial features of language:

(1) that every mark of language means something in the language, rather than another; that a language is totally, systematically meaningful; (2) that words and their orderings are meant by human beings, that they contain (or conceal) their beliefs, express (or deny) their convictions; and (3) that the saying of something when and as it is said is as significant as the meaning and ordering of the words said. (p. 34)

That is to say that when the terms are used, the user intends to convey meaning and that the task of the listener or the reader is to understand what the user means (Cavell, 2009, p. 209). Cavell’s point, and the value he offers to this study, is that there is an alternative to a dichotomous view of language in which meaning is either universal or completely subjective. From a Cavellian perspective, the policy provides one vantage on the meaning of success; but the way the participants use and see success provides another. If we want to know the meaning of “success,” we have to examine both.

Participants, even if they were free to do so, do not simply create their own alternative definition of success that exists either in contrast or agreement with the definition in policy. Rather, they provide meaning to success by taking in the definition in policy, or definitions from elsewhere, and placing those into action in their classrooms and schools. As a result, to truly understand what success means in rural Western Kansas, it is critical to watch what educators in rural Western Kansas do and listen to what they say.

## Oversight of Education

To consider how a term is defined in a particular educational policy, it is first necessary to consider the process and purpose of educational policy itself. During the cultural upheaval in the United States following the Sputnik era, much attention was turned to the role schools could have in addressing the perceived social and political challenges of the time (Steeves, Bernhardt, Burns, & Lombard, 2009). The narrative arose that public schools needed to provide a perceived competitive advantage over the Soviet Union, and that they were currently falling short (Steeves et al., 2009). To ensure schools met the standards, the government utilized funding as a mechanism to drive improvement.

Similar amounts of pressure on the need of government to ensure the quality of public schools came in response to the *Nation at Risk* report (Hedin, 1984; U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The *Nation at Risk* report provided a narrative in which too much time and too many resources were devoted to non-essential aspects of curricula (Hedin, 1984). The National Commission on Excellence in Education used the bleak picture of the American public school system described in the *Nation at Risk* Report to propose that the American people, and by proxy state and federal governments, needed to have high expectations for students in American schools as communicated by such measures as grades, college admission, and difficult subject matters.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provided a rather dramatic shift in the role of educational oversight by imposing a federal requirement that states adopt standards, assessments, and accountability processes for particular academic subjects (Rhodes,

2012). These changes allowed federal policymakers a vastly increased opportunity to influence and shape what state-level educational oversight looks like. In so doing, accountability measures such as school closures and charter conversions increased across many states (Davidson, 2016). Although the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) returned some oversight authority to the state level, it increased federal involvement in particular areas, such as turnaround efforts with the lowest performing schools (Heise, 2017). The dynamics over the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first have solidified a practice on which centralized authorities, either at the federal or state level, set out abstract definitions of educational success for individual schools and districts to achieve. Funding levels and autonomous decision-making power for schools and districts came to depend on their ability to provide the right kind of evidence to those central authorities of the kind of success governments prescribed. To truly conceive of the impacts of oversight policies, including ESSA, it is necessary to consider how these policies have defined “success” in education.

### **Success in Education**

In considering the concept of “success” in education, there is a temptation to approach the issue from a place of attempting to discover what success *really* is. As I have already suggested by reference to Cavell, this temptation is a red herring. In terms of policy, as in terms of local practices, the question is not in what *really* constitutes success, but how the term success is used in particular places and the value given to various contexts of use. A driving motivation for this study is that, despite the plurality of voices and contexts that contribute to the meaning of educational success in real life, the

incentivizing power of policy tends to silence contextualized uses and to encourage narrow conceptions of success.

There are obvious cultural elements in the perception of success (Nunn, 2014). What is viewed as successful in one culture could be viewed very differently in another. Rural schools and communities have their own cultural elements, not at all unlike their urban counterparts, which must balance a plurality of cultures, values, and resulting notions of success (Stewart, 1996). Rather than focusing on how to subsume a diversity of views under a singular definition of success, a task which is likely impossible, I argue that it is beneficial to examine the definition of success utilized in policy and consider whether that definition works, and for whom.

State and federal officials have spoken of educational success with a variety of rhetorical flourishes, as one can see in Kansans Can's "vision," but when it comes time to translate "success" into policy documents, success has perpetually been defined in terms of achievement tests, graduation rates, and, now in the ESSA era, absenteeism metrics (Gottlieb, 2015, 2020). Whatever else policymakers think it means to be educationally successful, these forms of evidence are what counts. *In use*, student achievement metrics and "student success" have become interchangeable in the last three decades of American educational policy.

The important point here is that in policy geared toward student achievement as represented by assessment data and so on, does not actually have to be explicitly equated to student success. In fact, one could believe, or at least claim to believe, that assessment data and student success are separate concepts. However, in choosing to use one to measure the other, they become interchangeable. As Arne Duncan said, perfectly

illustrating this point, “The data may not tell the whole truth, but it certainly doesn’t lie” (Duncan, 2009, n. p.). While the goal of education, in the vaguest sense, is for students to be successful, a point that is hardly debatable, success of even the vaguest kind can only appear for policy and quantitative research purposes as a correlate of test scores and graduation rates.

Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff (2014a, 2014b), for example, formalized adult success in terms of college attendance, higher salaries, and teenage pregnancy (or lack thereof) in order to work backwards to the kind of educational background that led to these outcomes. However, the only kind of “educational background” they considered was measured in terms of achievement-test performance, and the contributions of individual teachers to student scores. Although these studies were designed for the purpose of teacher evaluation, the key argument that gained a lot of traction was that assessment data can predict success in adulthood or more pointedly that success on an assessment leads inevitably to future success in adulthood. Therefore, if a school is supposed to be committed to the success of each student, as Kansans Can says, all it has to do is what it has been doing for the past 40 years: raise test scores. No matter what kind of success a policymaker imagines for Kansan adults, it is translatable, for education purposes, into test scores.

A plurality of uses and views of success can coexist among statehouses and various schools in various communities; however, when one of those perspectives is given a prominent place in policy, it can hegemonically dominate other meanings. As shown by Carnoy and Loeb (2002), policy works on the outcomes which are actually measured, thus verifying the truism that “if it’s not counted, it doesn’t count.” In their

study, high levels of accountability in states related to assessments alone did correlate to higher test scores, but it showed no relationship to high school progression or completion. By specifying state assessments as the ultimate measure of success, assessment became the de facto singular meaning of success. Kearney, Murakami, Bunch, Viamontes, and Campbell (2018) argued that even factors for rural schools such as teacher quality should be determined by a teacher's ability to contribute to improving assessment, a species of the broader value-added argument.

The trouble in criticizing the limitations of assessment data as a metric of student success is that the metric obviously measures something we care about, something obviously related to common understandings of educational success. That is to say, in Cavell's (2009) terms, that "wrong" does not necessarily mean "false." Rather, criticisms of the practice attack its ability to effectively measure all students' successes, or speak to all sets of values (Ravitch, 2016; Rojas-LeBouef, 2010). In short, there are students and places for whom the measure does not work. Even measures of success that do not rely so heavily on assessment data, if those measures are meant to measure universally, deserve the same level of scrutiny. This study considers how the universalizing tendencies of policies seeking "success" impact rural schools.

It is worth noting that several theorists have offered alternative visions about what might constitute success in education, even if these visions are yet to receive a formal place in policy. Among these are Noddings (2005) call to consider happiness as an aim of education. Noddings addressed the limitations of test scores in writing, "Needless to say, test scores do not enhance the quality of present experience either on the days of their administration or in their weeks preceding them. Do they contribute to future happiness?"



(p. 251-252). Robinson (2017) similarly argued that success in education would consist of engagement in the present in addition to preparation for future challenges. Freire (1970) even argued that success in education should consist of a fundamental restructuring of the power dynamic between teachers and students so that “both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (p. 59). The intention of this study is not to dismiss any of these works or the vision for education which they offer. Ultimately, they offer a critical vision for what success could or should be. However, the purpose of this is not to consider how success in education could or should be defined or considered. Rather, it is my goal to represent what success means to participants within the context of their schools and communities and offer that in comparison to the definition of success in enshrined in policy. That is to say I wish to represent the lived experience of the participant educators as they implement the concept of student success on the ground and consider whether the lens of policy would be able to see what is of value in those educators’ experiences.

### **Educational Policy and Rural Schools**

Rural schools have had a less than ideal relationship with educational policy, to say the least (Freshwater & Scorsone, 2002). The experience of policy falling short of creating an equitable educational experience within a school is not unique to rural schools. However, whereas in other settings policy may fail to address or solve the challenges a school faces, in rural settings policy often *creates* the challenges (Johnson & Howley, 2015). As Johnson and Howley (2015) note:

Primary challenges [for rural schools] include professional development, fiscal inadequacy, and specialized services. Note that these challenges are largely the result of policy infrastructure that fails to account for characteristics of the rural

context. That is, the implications of ill-formed policy initiatives are momentous for rural schools as reform initiatives accumulate across the decades. (p. 226)

The authors suggest that “contemporary education policy emerges from policymakers with metropolitan experiences and neoliberal commitments” (p. 225). The resulting issue they described was not that these policies failed to meet the needs of rural schools, but rather that policy tries to force rural schools to conform to the ideals of the policymakers.

The experience of rural schools under Race to the Top (RTT) provides a good example of these dynamics. The 19 states that received additional funding through RTT were not very rural and had rural areas that did not have especially high needs (Strange, Johnson, Showalter, & Klein, 2012). Though the policy applied to all areas equally, it was really addressed to problems with urban and suburban schools. Johnson and Howley (2015) similarly highlight the outsized impact of the per pupil funding formula on rural schools. Again, it is a policy formula that applies universally, but that has particularly negative effects in rural areas, failing to address the increased cost of the smaller scale of rural schools, as well as the transportation costs of geographic isolation.

This missteps of RTT related to rural schools continued, even as it specifically responded to rural criticism. Additional money in later funding rounds was made available to districts with rural status, as RTT sought to prioritize types of schools that did not receive earlier RTT funds. But of course, the strings attached had massive ideological and structural impacts. Only districts with 2,000 students were eligible for funding, and preference was given to those districts who could demonstrate the availability of private resources to help (Johnson & Howley, 2015). This diverted district capacity toward non-educational tasks like consortium-building and fundraising in order to qualify for the federal money they needed to carry out their educational missions.

There were similar missteps in School Improvement Grants (SIG) and the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) (Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance, 2012).

The policy challenges unique to rural schools did not start with RTT, SIG, and REAP. Jimerson (2005) suggests that NCLB demonstrated “placism” or discrimination based on where one lives. NCLB’s highly-qualified teacher requirements created special challenges for rural schools, where teachers who may have been teaching multiple subjects were forced to take licensure tests or complete additional coursework in order to keep their jobs. Eppley (2009) further suggests that the disconnect between the facts that highly-qualified teacher component of NCLB was generally well received and the intense challenges it created for rural schools was further evidence of the disconnect between policymakers and rural schools. The highly-qualified teacher requirements make sense in urban and suburban areas, where there is a large pool of potential replacement candidates. In rural communities, the teachers you already have are the teachers there are, and so the implementation of highly-qualified teacher requirements simply creates administrative burden without otherwise affecting the quality of classroom instruction. Furthermore, the requirement contributed to a narrative that rural schools were inadequate if they were unable to provide “highly qualified” teachers.

Rural schools suffered further in trying to conform to policy mandates due to their small populations. Jimerson (2005) points out that policy which relies on assessment data was vulnerable to inaccurate results in rural schools as a result of small sample sizes. Dulgerian (2016) highlights the disparate impact of NCLB and the ESSA requirements for districts to disaggregate data for particular subgroups of students, such as English

Language Learners. This has two kinds of negative effects. In schools where the minimum threshold for subgroup reporting is met (subgroup  $n=30$ ), it is *barely* met, and the extremely small sample sizes can yield wildly inaccurate results. Where the minimum threshold is not met, then no disaggregated reporting is required, which can mask the same injustices that disaggregated reporting was meant to fix. Similarly, Blad (2019) suggests the requirement for evidence-based practices in ESSA can cause difficulties for rural schools that need to find strategies that work in their unique setting despite a dearth of evidence on those particular contexts (Pasachoff, 2017). All of these requirements increased administrative burden for schools in general, but especially for rural schools.

### **Administrative Burden**

The necessity to comply with policy changes creates what is known as “administrative burden.” Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015) defined administrative burden as, “an individual’s experience of policy implementation as onerous” (p. 45). Administrative burden can consist of costs associated with complying with regulatory mandates or costs associated with starting a program (Heinrich, 2016), for two examples. NCLB provided some funding resources for schools failing to make adequate yearly progress in order to help pay costs associated with student transfers to other schools, tutoring services, and other positive supports. But the work associated with organizing these supports strained local capacity. That is administrative burden.

Autonomy, as promised in the *Kansans Can Redesign*, does not necessarily reduce administrative burden. Gaber, Tašner, and Zgaga (2011) show an increase in costs associated with administrative burden in an era of increasing teacher autonomy in

Slovenia. Lips and Feinberg (2007) report that administrative burden associated with NCLB compliance equated to an annual cost of \$20 million in the state of Virginia alone.

There are two levels of administrative burden in Kansans Can. The first is the burden associated with complying with outcome measures. This includes burdens associated with adjusting to new outcomes, tracking and reporting new types of data, and training staff to address new outcomes. Of particular note is the required outcome of social and emotional learning (SEL), which, the policy specifies is to be measured locally (KSDE, 2018a). Not only, then, will schools have a burden associated with tracking a new type of data, they must create or purchase a mechanism for assessing such a measure.

The second level of administrative burden is associated with participating as a Redesign district. Districts did not receive any additional funds to participate in the Redesign (KSDE, 2020). Instead, KSDE (2020) claimed that districts who participated in the Redesign would “determine how to use existing resources to develop a new way of delivering instruction with a mandate for the work to be teacher-led and not top-down” (p. 6). As such, districts who participated would have an increased administrative burden associated with freeing teachers to work on the Redesign process while still meeting the needs of their students. The fact that policy implementation has disparate impacts and imposes different burdens across educational contexts requires that we consider space and place when we think about improving education.

### **Space and Place**

Two bodies of literature offer perspectives on the impact of geographic location in education. Although to this point they have remained largely separate, I would like to

suggest there is actually a high degree of overlap in their ideas, with the differences resulting largely from their disciplinary origins. The field of education has witnessed the rise of “place-based education,” which focuses mainly on using place as a pedagogical or curricular resource. Orr (1992), for example, suggests that place is necessary in education for four reasons: “it requires the combination of intellect with experience” (p. 128), it is “relevant to the problems of overspecialization” (p. 129), it involves the opportunity for interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary learning, and it counteracts “much of the pathology of contemporary civilization,” which he sees as “related to the disintegration of the small community” (p. 129). For Orr, much of place dealt with the local environment. He argues that all education is in fact environmental education (Orr, 2011). By either teaching students they are a part of or apart from their local environment, it contributes to or detracts from a creation of a sense of place. Leopold (1993) describes this ability to adopt a stance toward one’s place in their local environment in terms of a “land ethic” in which humans see their role shift “from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (p. 204).

Tuan (1997) suggests that place, or more specifically a sense of place, is a much deeper concept than a physical setting and the physical attributes. Although one can certainly appreciate the physical attributes of a particular setting, a sense of place comprises an emotional bond that extends beyond simple aesthetic appreciation (Stewart, 1996; Tuan, 1997). In advocating for place-based curriculum, Demarest (2015) proposes that sense of place could itself be an educational aim. Demarest defines a sense of place as the ability “to listen and pay attention to one’s place” (p. 8). Stewart (1996) offers an understanding of the sense of place in her work, showing that sense of place is influenced

by perceptions of community, local patterns of speech within a community, and the physical setting of the community itself. Thinking about Eisner's work on schooling's ecology, a sense of place could be thought of as the ability to make sense or attribute meaning to what occurs around oneself in a landscape or community.

Sense of place is of particular interest in rural settings. Abbott-Chapman, Johnston, and Jetson (2014) show that in discussing their children's future opportunities for success, rural parents hoped for their children to return to their home communities, but felt that they must leave their communities for a time to pursue other opportunities. In their study, although the potential future return of their children was viewed favorably, the retention of children in the community post-graduation was not. Relatedly, Reynar's (2008) work suggests a generational decline in sense of place in a rural setting. Although he does not suggest educational policy to be a cause of the decline, he does propose that it could be part of the solution.

The sense of place that we find in the place-based education literature is therefore particularly important to this study. Gruenewald (2003) suggests that "place" in this sense consists of five elements: perceptual, sociological, ideological, political, and ecological. In practice, place in education has been discussed largely in terms of place-based pedagogy or curriculum (Demarest, 2015; Gruenewald, 2005). Demarest (2015) defines place-based education as "local learning" (p. 1). Gruenewald argues that education which is not place-based or place-conscious could be for "anywhere" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 646) or "placeless" (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 317). This is indeed the phenomenon we find in education policy, which is of course meant to be equally applicable across vast jurisdictions. Most educational policy is inherently placeless; what constitutes success in

that policy is also placeless; and educational policy tends to make no official provisions for adapting to local conditions of any kind.

While the literature of place-based education provides the most important sense of “place” for the purposes of this study, the literature of sociology and geography offer a complement to this concept of place for conceptualizing the role of local communities and environment in education in the form of spatial analysis (Mitchell, 2003; Soja, 2010, 2011). Mitchell (2003) argues, in the spirit of Lefebvre, “the city is an oeuvre—a work in which all its citizens participate” (p. 17). That is to say, space is constructed socially. Soja (2011) suggests that space “is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience” (p. 80). Furthermore, he suggests that it offers an important element of analysis to considering larger social and economic issues (Soja, 1980). Where the place-based education literature tends to play up the relationship of the human being with the natural world, Mitchell and Soja remind us that our surroundings and their resonances, the natural and built environments alike, are socially produced, things in which we participate with others. Whereas policy attempts to apply equally everywhere by being explicitly placeless, education always and inevitably occurs in particular places. Policy can neither see nor take account of the particular ways that local practitioners fill this gap. Policy can only hear what it already understands.

Spatial thinking and considerations of place allow an important avenue for considering how, in the Cavellian (Cavell, 2009) sense, words are put into use. It is not simply a matter of if the definition of success in one place matches the definition in another or even if it matches the definition in policy. Rather, the social action of the words being put into use, and gaining their meaning from that use, must occur



*somewhere*. That is to say that placeless words are meaningless. The meaning of words is ambiguous until they are emplaced by the actions of participants. More importantly, placelessness in policy ultimately leads to spatial injustice.

### **Spatial Justice**

Spatial justice is related to the ideas discussed under “administrative burden” and “education policy in rural schools.” Spatial justice refers to the geographic arrangement of justice and injustice (Soja, 2010). Soja (2010) describes spatial justice as “the outcome of countless decisions made about emplacement, where things are put in space” (p. 47). The important issue to consider here is what comprises “emplacement” and how we consider justice geographically. It might be tempting to focus on adverse environmental effects, equating spatial justice with environmental justice. Where the environmental justice template usually focuses on the placement of toxic industrial sites near low-income and high-minority neighborhoods, spatial justice also examines communities’ proximity and access to various amenities, including parks and grocery stores. The economic and environmental injustices experienced by marginalized communities have been well documented (Hollander, 2003; Jones & Conrad, 2009; Sachs, 2005).

I intend to extend this critical analysis to policy implementation to consider how communities might have access in terms of policy creation. A careful consideration of the nature of spatial inequities provides a lens as to the need for a critical view of space. Soja (2010) stated, “The starting point is the recognition that development, however it is defined, never takes place uniformly over space. All social processes have geographically uneven effects” (p. 63). The democratic creation of educational policy is such a social process. In attempting to create a more ideal society, however policymakers imagine it,

educational policy guides whether and in what form education should contribute to that society.

Mitchell (2003) provides an additional perspective for a consideration of justice in the creation of space in what he termed the “right to the city” (p. 20). Although it might seem odd to pull in an urban reference into an entirely rural-centric study, I believe Mitchell’s work is entirely relevant to a perspective of spatial justice related to educational policy. Mitchell argues cities are “places of social interaction and exchange with people who are necessarily different” (p. 18). Although dealing primarily with homeless populations in urban areas, Mitchell provides a useful lens for considering access to public places themselves, as well as access to the shared political jurisdiction. More specifically, his lens can be useful in considering metaphorical cities and not just literal ones. The important point is that schools are themselves public spaces, and as a result, this study deals with two levels of community, or metaphorical cities in reference to Mitchell. First, there are the rural Western Kansas communities themselves and the public schools in those communities. Second, the state of Kansas exists as a political community, in this case specifically with regards to the creation of educational policy that governs the public space of schools in Western Kansas. As public spaces Mitchell’s work then provides an opportunity to not only consider access to schools as public places, but also access to the shared political jurisdiction in the form of educational policy. The important issue is that the creation of educational policy, particularly a statewide policy, is quite obviously an “exchange with people who are necessarily different” and one in which rural schools and communities are involved.

Ultimately, Mitchell (2003) argues that the right to the city “demands the redevelopment of the city in a manner responsive to the needs, desires, and pleasures of its inhabitants, especially its oppressed inhabitants” (p. 21). As such, a just educational policy must be “responsive to the needs, desires, and pleasures” for all to whom it applies. Moreover, a policy cannot simply be just in the language and rhetoric that it uses, but must rather be equitable in its emplaced, operationalized form. It does not matter if an educational policy intended to be just if it is not responsive to the lived experience of educators and students in all classrooms to which it applies.

In considering “geographically uneven effects” we have to accept that rural does not exist only in opposition to metropolitan, but rather that both types of communities exist within the shared fabric of the entire state. Although at one point, rural communities in Western Kansas attempted to secede in response to educational policy, both rural and urban districts have more recently worked together to oppose tax policy that was detrimental to all districts. Despite an adversarial relationship in the past, progress for rural and urban schools can be mutually beneficial. This does not mean that the potential benefits or impacts of a policy will be experienced evenly across the state.

In order to create mutually beneficial policy, there must be room in the policymaker’s imagination for the specific needs of rural communities, in addition to the familiar situations of urban schools. Although a sensationalized view, Thomas, Lowe, Fulkerson, and Smith (2011) argued that during the process of urbanization occurs when “one or handful of cities become dominant over the hinterland, the ascent to their rule comes more economically by manipulating cultural or economic sensibilities than by brute arms” (p. 49). The accumulated cultural and economic clout can lead to what

Fulkerson and Thomas (2014) termed “urbanormativity,” or the belief “the interests of cities are of paramount importance, that urban cultural norms and values are not only dominant but superior as well” (p. 5). I noted earlier how poorly NCLB’s requirement for high-quality teachers fit the specifics of a rural context, and how clearly those requirements had an urban situation squarely in mind instead. That is an example of urbanormativity at work. Urbanormativity does not have to necessarily lead to a marginalization of rural communities. Rather, it is only when the danger of urbanormativity is ignored that the rural voice can be lost, because rural communities do not have the population to force metropolitan areas to listen.

A prevailing narrative that has arisen related to rural schools, perhaps as a result of urbanormativity, is that rural schools are failing. In their meta-ethnographic analysis, Beach, From, Johansson, & Öhrn (2018) challenged the prevailing narrative that rural areas have “educational difficulties and deficiencies due to their backgrounds, family attitudes toward education and sometimes their culture...” (p. 13). Rather, they suggested these differences were rather a result of issues of spatial justice as they believed “injustices and inequalities [are] often concentrated in particular kinds of places, rather than being evenly dispersed” (p. 13). Corbett (2015) suggested these injustices have led to a stigmatization of rural communities which has created a prevailing narrative that rural life is in an inevitable decline. The stigma created by these narratives suggest the need for an approach to research that allows for the incorporation of rural voice and representation of rural lived experience.

To truly examine the injustices rural schools might face and more importantly how those injustices are experienced by rural educators, it is necessary to have an

analytical framework that looks at the action of schooling rather than explicitly the outcomes. As previously mentioned, federal policies crafted to address perceived inequalities in the outcomes of rural schools have tended to create more challenges in those schools. The more impactful opportunity is in using an analytical framework that allows for a consideration of the process and action of schooling itself.

### **Eisner's Ecology**

Eisner (1988, 1994c) proposed the ecology of schooling with the elements of the intentional, structural, pedagogical, curricular, and evaluative. Uhrmacher and Matthews (2005) added the elements of administration and school-community relations. This ecology can serve as an analytical framework for education reform. To Eisner, the intentional dimension dealt specifically with the goals and aims of the school or an individual classroom. He explained that these aims exist in both the intended and the operationalized form as an educator might profess to pursue a particular aim, but in practice pursue another. He also argued that just because an aim is established for a particular educational setting, and even potentially achieved, does not mean it is necessarily of value.

The structural dimension of Eisner's (1994c) ecology is often much slower to change. It deals with how the school day is organized, including subjects and divisions of time. Structural elements also include evaluation systems such as grading. Other policies within the school or classroom, as well as the physical organization of the school or classroom are structural elements worth considering.

Two tightly intertwined dimensions of Eisner's ecology are the curricular and pedagogical. The curricular dimension focuses on what is to be taught. The pedagogical

dimension deals with how curricula are to be taught. Eisner (1994c) makes two points about the pedagogical dimension: “virtually all curricula are mediated by a teacher” and “what students learn in the classroom is never limited to what teachers intend to teach or to curriculum content” (p. 77). To refer to Dewey’s (1997) work on experience, the pedagogical dimension can be thought of the experiences created or sanctioned by the teacher to allow students to access the curriculum.

The final of Eisner’s original dimensions in the ecology is the evaluative. Although evaluation is often associated with or equated to testing, Eisner (1994c) wrote, “Evaluation concerns the making of value judgements about the quality of some object, situation, or process” (p. 80). He warned separately about the dangers of equating evaluation and measurement (Eisner, 1994b). With respect to evaluation, Eisner (1994c) argued, “More than what educators say, more than what they write in curriculum guides, evaluation practices tell both students and teachers what counts” (p. 81).

Conn (2014) demonstrated how Eisner’s ecology can be utilized in analyzing the impacts of a policy. He discussed how the Colorado Growth Model utilized “labels” that were a change in the evaluative dimension. This change caused curricular and pedagogical changes as teachers and administrators attempted to respond to the new policy. Eventually, this led to a disconnect in the intentional dimension where teachers were choosing curriculum to address the aims of improving the label applied by the policy rather than how they felt it was best for them to teach.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately there is a great contrast between educational policy’s idealization of placelessness and the necessity of enacting these policies in practice. Educators and

families in particular communities, schools, and classrooms must respond in specific ways, interpreting the grand vision behind policies like Kansans Can even as they produce the metrics the policy explicitly requires. This juxtaposition is particularly evident in attempting to understand how educators take a concept such as success, which policy implicitly claims to be generally applicable, placeless, and use their own emplaced judgment to achieve educational success in their schools and communities. To see this distinction between the vague placelessness of a policy's definition of success and the specific articulations of success that local educators generate in response, to reveal what policy conceals, we have to look closely at particular contexts. My research questions are aimed at uncovering how policy emplaces itself in a context far from the policymakers' minds. Furthermore, I sought to consider if policy emplaces itself in rural communities in a way that contributes toward a just representation of their "needs, desires, and pleasures."

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

To address my research questions, I utilized educational connoisseurship and criticism (henceforth educational criticism), but I adapted the methodology to incorporate participant photography as a data collection tool in my interviewing process in order to address what I perceive as a particular challenge in my study in that I needed to see and hear what participants meant when they discussed the potentially abstract concept of success. Educational criticism is a methodology in which the researcher seeks to make fine grained distinctions (Uhrmacher et al., 2017). The goal is to create a “reconstruction” of an educational setting, which can reveal not only what exactly takes place in these rural contexts, but also the values and judgments behind them. As a qualitative method, the goal of educational criticism is not to produce generalizable results, but “a prototype that can be used in the education of teachers or for the appraisal of teaching” (Eisner, 1994c, p. 199). Educational criticisms do not claim that all situations are like this, or that this or that method will generally work. Rather, educational criticisms suggest that *some* situations can be like this. Ultimately, this methodology was designed to serve the purpose of the study which was to identify the types of success recognized by participants in the rural communities and place those in comparison to the definitions of success and outcomes in the Kansans Can policy.



### **The Case for Qualitative Research in Rural Education**

Apart from the opportunities for qualitative research for education generally, as described by Eisner (1994c) and others, I believe there are particular benefits for rural settings. Quantitative studies require sample sizes large enough for statistical analysis. In most rural settings, grade levels, classes, and even entire schools may lack large enough populations to constitute an adequate sample. As an example, because most districts in Western Kansas only have one to three administrators, it would take a sample of approximately the entire western third of the state to perform a quantitative analysis on rural administrators. As a result, there would be an extreme flattening effect on dependent variables, as administrators in districts that were growing and declining, succeeding and struggling, would be categorically combined. Moreover, within particular classroom settings populations are often not enough students to constitute a generalizable sample. If I surveyed every student enrolled in a physics course in East and West District at the time I performed this study, I would have had a population (not a sample) of eight students. For the same reason, findings that do emerge from large-scale quantitative studies are not as readily applicable to a particular rural district as they would be to a large urban one. The small populations in rural schools mean that an intervention's effects are less likely to even out than they would be over a larger population. And yet there is an urgent need for research on rural education. That requires utilizing methodologies that are not dependent on the assumptions and needs of statistical analysis.

Qualitative research offers an avenue for combatting the flattening effect that accompanies quantitative studies in rural education. By studying the lived experiences of those involved in rural education, qualitative research can vivify those experiences in

their specificity for the policymakers and researchers located elsewhere. Educational criticism specifically offers an opportunity for those who are intimately familiar with education in rural settings to highlight what is of interest or value in these unique settings.

### **Educational Connoisseurship and Criticism**

Elliot Eisner (1994c), considered connoisseurship to be “the art of appreciation” (p. 63), informed by the connoisseur’s deep familiarity with the subject matter being appreciated. Connoisseurship itself is a private act of perception and appreciation (Eisner 1994c; Uhrmacher et al., 2017). Criticism, in connection, is the making public of the connoisseur’s private experience, translating the internal experience into a form that allows others to see from the connoisseur’s informed point of view. Typically, a work of educational criticism contains sections on description (of the subject matter being explored), interpretation, evaluation, and thematics (Uhrmacher et al., 2017).

My connoisseurship is influenced by both my shared lived experience in rural communities and my positionality in appreciation of the value of rural schools and communities discussed in the first chapter. My shared experience allows me to appreciate the full depth of what even apparently mundane tasks might involve. Perhaps the best example of this is that when I hear someone say, “I have to pick up something at Wal Mart” I picture a trip that will involve at least 100 miles of driving and a few hours, and so do the participants in this study.

Educational criticism is particularly well-suited for rural settings. A challenge in studying rural settings is communicating things that might be quite familiar for those embedded in rural communities to readers of a study who are unfamiliar with such settings. I personally remember having this realization a few years ago when I offered to

pick up pizza before a school music program at the closest pizza restaurant, which was a roundtrip drive that came in right around 50 miles. Criticism presents the opportunity to “make the strange familiar” (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 5). In other words, educational criticism allows others a glimpse into the lived experience of rural settings. This glimpse is absolutely necessary to communicate the ways that “success” is conceived, articulated, and aspired to in those communities. In reflecting back to Cavell, it is not adequate to understand what individual words mean if it is not possible to understand what the speaker (i.e. a rural resident) intends to convey by those words when and where they are used.

In seeking to understand the kinds of success my participants recognize, it is important not to simply ask them directly. Decades of professional development on policy implementation might well lead them to simply parrot the definition as they receive it from policy. Instead, I needed to have a method that allowed participants to show me examples of the successes that are valuable to them, even in the absence of a specific definition. Relying exclusively on observation and interviews might have allowed me to see how and where participants discussed success, but it required a more specific data collection tool to see what types of success they actually recognized.

### **Participant Photography**

Participant photography is a data collection method in which participants are asked to take photographs around a particular theme (Allen, 2012; Clark, 1999; Daniels, 2003). As a methodology, participant photography serves to empower participants by allowing them to become collaborators in the research (Allen, 2012). Participants take photographs throughout their daily lives for a specified period of time and are given a

specific question or theme for selecting the subjects of their photographs. For example, participants might be asked to collect images they feel represent what it means to be a part of a particular demographic group. This open-ended structure circumvents the researcher's own perspective on the matter at hand and allows the participant's interpretation to create artifacts that exemplify the concept being studied.

After the participants collect photographs, the researcher interviews participants to clarify what the image depicts and how it relates to the concept at hand. Photographs themselves serve a role beyond being a simple artifact. Within interviews, photographs become something to discuss, a point of departure (Clark, 1999). This provides an opportunity for the researcher to raise questions beyond the participant's intentions, about things that might feel so familiar to the participant that it is hardly worth mentioning, but from the researcher's perspective might be quite interesting or significant.

Participant photograph offered two critical benefits to this study. First, the idea of student success is fairly abstract, as policy constantly discovers, and yet occurs concretely every day in every school. For some participants, it might be easier to discuss a tangible example of what they perceive to be success, such as a photograph of a student's artwork, rather than discuss the definition of success itself. In doing so, what might have been an unproductive and largely theoretical discussion, became instead a conversation about practices and values within particular schools and communities. Additionally, I believe it is worth at least considering the possibility that as a result of past policies, some participants may not have the language to discuss student success in terms outside of assessment and outcomes. Essentially, as a result of policy rhetoric, the very term "success" has come to invite recitations of "test scores" for some participants, even if that

is not what they recognize as examples of student success in daily life. From this perspective, photographs can both conjure and represent their privately held views. Participant photography allowed participants to not have to be able to define success to identify which images represented success. It takes the discussion of success from “what is success” to “what demonstrates success.”

### **Research Design**

Although I was very familiar with both districts, I worked with each district’s superintendent to select participants they believed represented a diversity of perspectives from their district to complement my own views in this matter and to make sure the study represented a diversity of opinions related to the purposes and nature of schooling. I chose to have six participants to allow for an equal number from each district and to have enough participants from each district to look for patterns. I used maximum variation sampling to “allow the widest possibility for readers of the study to connect to what they are reading” (Seidman, 2006, p. 52). Although it is difficult to truly define what the widest possible range of views about student success looks like in a sample, I had a sample that included both males and females, those who work with elementary students and those who work with secondary students, and individuals the superintendents perceived to have varying views on student success. Superintendents were told they could suggest any kind of person associated with schools to be participants, including teachers, administrators, and/or community members; however, all six participants suggested were teachers in the districts. From East District, I was provided a list of three names, all of which agreed to participate. In West District, I was provided a non-ranked list of five potential participants. I contacted the first three individuals on the list. Two were able to

participate and one was not, so I moved down the list to the next possible participant who was ultimately able to participate in the study.

I made the decision to have a sample of six participants, with three from each district to balance the desire for a depth of understanding about each participant's lived experience and perspective with the opportunity to see a pattern in what types of success are recognized in the rural communities which were a part of this study. Although educational criticism can be utilized with a variety of sample sizes, Uhrmacher et al. (2017) showed in an analysis that half of educational criticisms tend to have between two and eight participants. They also noted, "a large population is not necessarily required in order to discern significant qualities of the situation" (Uhrmacher et al., 2017, p. 28). Ultimately, six total participants was a manageable number that still allowed for accessing each participant and maintaining a relationship on a meaningful level. However, this sample was still large enough to consider patterns present in all six participants as representative of rural schools, as well as to consider where there might be differences in the patterns between the three participants from each district, as one district was a participant in the Kansans Can Redesign, and the other was not.

Of course, these participants do not represent a generalizable sample, and the sample was never intended to generalize broadly. However, apart from differences in intentions, beliefs, and perspectives between participants, the diverse positions of my participants in their school districts allowed me the opportunity to see a wider range of types of success because each participant was able to see students engaged in different types of activities.

Although the goal was to have a diverse sample, all six participants in this study were white. The vast majority of teachers, coaches, administrators, and school board members in both districts are white. Even as there are shifting demographics, both communities themselves are still overwhelming white. Although I do not wish to marginalize the experiences and perspectives of people of color in these communities, to consider how student success is emplaced within schools I was reliant on white teachers.

The six participants were given the direction that for a two-week period they were to collect ten photographs they believed were representations of student success. They were asked to take photos with a personal camera. Both districts had releases on file for students to be photographed, and both districts had active social media presences in which student images, student work, or news about school activities were frequently shared. If participants collected more than ten photographs, I asked them to curate their collection down to their favorite ten. I emailed participants the specific prompt for the photographs, as well as providing a written copy of the directions (Appendix C).

At the conclusion of the two weeks I scheduled an interview with each participant in which they were given an opportunity to clarify or explain each of the photos they took, why they chose that particular image, and how it represented student success. For each participant, the photos and the interviews were coded for values, actions, and beliefs. From the interviews, I worked with each participant to choose a setting to observe which they felt was related to student success. Settings included general education classrooms, pull-out classroom time, and after school enrichment.

Observation served an important role in the study as it allowed me to not just see the moment of success, or the object of success, as represented in a photograph, but the

actual process. Photographs alone ran the risk of creating a categorical view of success, rather than understanding the lived experience of these educators as they interacted with and experienced student success in their work. Additionally, observation provided triangulation by working in partnership photographs and interviews to understand the ways that success can manifest and be recognized in these communities. Also, as educational criticism utilizes thick description, observation allowed me the opportunity to witness events that I then translated into descriptions that constituted, for readers, a window into the lived experience of these rural educators.

In creating descriptions for the educational criticism, my goal was to allow those who are unfamiliar with these rural settings to relate to the experiences of these teachers and administrators. These descriptions served as a basis for interpretation and evaluation. In so doing, as a critic, I wished to portray what the particular setting reveals about the views of student success of individual participants. In interpreting all six participants' experiences, I sought to see whether the types of success they recognize are reflected in policy, and more specifically, whether Kansans Can is capable of revealing or showcasing the particular types of success my on-the-ground work uncovered. The purpose of this study was to identify themes in the participants' views and beliefs related to student success. In identifying these themes, I hoped to create an "anticipatory framework" (Eisner, 1994b, p. 247), which could serve both at the policy level and at the district level to inform decisions related to defining and evaluating student success which will allow for a fuller expression of the plurality of rural values.

The use of participant photography and direct observation of participants is analogous to the using both binoculars and a spotting scope in hunting. A hunter in a



landscape has 360 degrees of possible directions to look. Were they to become focused on a specific spot, even if that spot might have favorable characteristics for wildlife, it would be entirely possible for them to miss the animal of a lifetime that might be only a few hundred yards away in a different spot. To prevent this issue, the hunter uses binoculars with a relatively low magnification, but a wide field of view. The binoculars serve as an excellent tool to decide which places might have wildlife and which just contain vegetation. However, binoculars alone are not an adequate tool to gain an in-depth understanding of the animal they help locate. They can help determine if there is a deer on a distant hill, but not whether that deer is the buck or doe for which a hunter might have a permit. For that, the hunter employs a spotting scope with a powerful magnification and a relatively small field of view. For the purposes of this study, participant photography served as the binoculars to point me toward the areas of interest within the vast educational landscape that is a rural school and community. Direct observation then served as the spotting scope by allowing me to make fine grained distinctions in the settings upon which I chose to focus.

The research proposal for this study was submitted to, and approved by, the Institutional Review Board. During the review process it was determined that although the participant districts did have photograph releases on file for students, those releases served only to allow the district to publish photographs of students. As a result, I did not have permission as a researcher to publish photographs of students, which is the reason for their exclusion from this document.

### **“What’s the Matter with Kansas?”**

Having argued in the previous chapter for the limitations of placeless thinking in education, I would be remiss not to discuss at some length the unique nature of Western Kansas, where this study took place. Kansas in general, and Western Kansas in particular, has had a long and often tumultuous battle over what education is to look like in communities. Although there are certainly similarities between Kansas and other states in the Great Plains, there are unique elements that have dramatic impacts on the culture in general, which has created a unique relationship to educational policy.

Despite appearing to be a reference to recent political action, the phrase “What’s the matter with Kansas?” is over a century old, originating in William Allen White’s 1896 warning of the threat that unchecked capitalism posed to the state’s wellbeing. Apparently not heeding the warning, the impact of laissez faire capitalist policies on the current situation in Kansas can scarcely be ignored. In recent years, Kansas has become known as something of a testing ground for Republican fiscal policy. The strong association of Kansas and the Republican party has been considered by some as Kansans voting against their own interest (Frank, 2005). Frank suggested this relationship is a result of the Republican party’s branding itself as authentically rural. As he wrote, “Whatever the standard for measuring salt-of-the-earthness happens to be at the moment...Kansas is going to rank high” (p. 28). Political rhetoric in Kansas plays up this trope, and that benefits Republican politicians most of all.

Geertz (2009) offers further insight into the phenomenon of conservative dominance in Kansas. He wrote:

The classical problem of legitimacy—how do some men come to be credited with the right to rule over others—is peculiarly acute in a country in which long-term

colonial domination created a political system that was national in scope but not in complexion. For a state to do more than administer privilege and defend itself against its own population, its acts must seem continuous with the selves of those whose state it pretends it is, its citizens- to be, in some stepped-up, amplified sense, their acts. (p. 317)

His argument boils down to Kansans not necessarily needing to agree with the actions of conservative politicians' actions to provide consensus. Rather, all that is necessary is for politicians to be able to brand themselves as being a part of the same authentically rural community as constituents to maintain legitimacy. This need for, and apparent success in, politicians to brand themselves as rural is perhaps best represented by the large number of Kansas political advertisements that show a metropolitan politician driving a pickup truck down a farm road or walking in an agricultural field. It is worth noting that these advertisements seem to depict pickup trucks decidedly cleaner than most one actually sees in rural communities.

Within the state of Kansas in general, the western portion of the state has many of its own unique characteristics. Paul Wellman is quoted as saying, "Someone once said that the Eastern part of Kansas is an extension of Missouri, the southern part an extension of Oklahoma, and the western part an extension of hell" (Averill, n.d.). Although hopefully made in jest, his sentiment is captured at least in part by the fact that unlike the eastern portion of the state, Western Kansas experienced the full wrath of the Dust Bowl era of the Great Depression (Worster, 2012). Even in writing specifically of the Great Depression, Miner (2006) captured the experience well in saying that Western Kansans witnessed "what Nature and outside forces, both of them cyclic and heartless, could do to regional adjustments and endemic optimism" (p. 236). As a matter of perspective, in a recent *Washington Post* analysis that sought to determine which communities in the

continental United States were the most “middle of nowhere,” four of the 10 towns of at least 1,000 people farthest from a metropolitan area were in Western Kansas (Van Dam, 2018). “Rural” means many things, but by any measure, Western Kansas typifies it.

It would not be fair to claim that all of the differences between Western Kansas and the rest of the state are attributable to the experiences of the Dust Bowl, but it is important to recognize that there are significant regional differences between Western Kansas and the remainder of the state nonetheless. These regional differences have translated into dramatic differences of opinion on educational policy, to a level that nearly ripped the state apart.

The 1991 ruling in *Mock v. State of Kansas* redefined how taxation for school funding was to be handled in Kansas. Despite issuing a ruling that used neither the terms “rural” or “western,” District Judge Terry Bullock’s decision ultimately led several counties in southwest Kansas to attempt to secede from the state (McCormick, 1995). At the heart of the issue was whether tax money should fund education locally or be distributed at a per pupil rate state-wide. Prior to the ruling, school districts in Western Kansas received the benefit of being able to tax vast tracts of productive land. However, the judge declared school districts to be divisions of the state government. As a result, all tax revenue would go to the state to be dispersed at a per pupil rate. Districts in Western Kansas that rivaled the size of New England states would be funded at the same per pupil rate as the urban districts in the eastern portion of the state, which meant subsidizing eastern education and receiving less per-pupil money than the western districts were responsible for providing. The secession movement reached the point in 1992 that a

constitutional convention was held for the prospective state of West Kansas, before ultimately falling short (McCormick, 1995).

The lesson here is that the attachment of Western Kansas communities to their schools, and localism more generally, is so strong that the prospect of local schools losing a portion of their funding nearly led Western Kansas to break away from the rest of the state entirely. This is the context in which my study asks who gets to define what student success means in terms of statewide policy, and what student success looks like in particular communities.

### **Research Sites and Participants**

Both East and West District schools, the two pseudonymously-named districts in which I completed this study, experience the level of prominence in their communities typical of Western Kansas schools. Despite being a resident of West District, I am a teacher for East District. However, for the 2018-19 school year, I taught a course for West District as part of an agreement where West District and East District loaned teachers to each other to expand course offerings.

West District has an enrollment of 230 students K-12, with 44 percent of students classified as economically disadvantaged (KSDE, 2017). The district has 84 percent of students who identify as white and 12 percent that identify as Hispanic. East District has an enrollment of 312 students K-12, with 50 percent classified as economically disadvantaged (KSDE, 2017). Students in the district are classified as 73 percent white, with 24 percent of students identified as Hispanic. Both communities are heavily involved in agriculture, however East District also has oil as a prominent economic activity within its boundaries.

By governmental definitions, both districts display high levels of ruralness. West District's county has a population density of 2.1 people per square mile, while East District's is slightly higher at 2.6 people (Kansas Department of Health and Environment, 2019). Both of these classify the counties as 'Frontier' by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (2019), falling short of the minimum 6.0 people per square mile required to be classified as rural. Both of the districts rank in the bottom 20 of Kansas's 104 counties for population, with West District being one of the smallest in the entire state. Both communities have to drive at least an hour to reach a larger community with chain stores. By odd coincidence, both West and East Districts are located in counties in which there is a second district, a bit of a rarity in Western Kansas (KSDE, 2017). During the latter part of the 20th century, most of the counties in Western Kansas consolidated to a single district; but both of these counties, due in large part to local political disagreements at the time, did not. This shines as an example that in rural settings, even overwhelming trends in a region have outliers with unique characteristics. Although West and East District do not compete with each other, both districts have attracted several students from the other district in their county.

West District is on the ancestral lands of the Sioux, Pawnee, Comanche, Arapaho, Kansa, and Osage (Socolofsky & Self, 1972). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, West District is located in a county which was 87.6 percent "White alone, not Hispanic or Latino" as of the 2010 census and 7.8 percent "Hispanic or Latino." For the county, 22.1 percent of people were under the age of 18, while 23.5 percent were over the age of 65. In 4.3 percent of households, a language other than English is spoken at home. Of individuals over 25 years old, 21.6 percent hold a Bachelor's degree or higher.

East District is located on the ancestral lands of the Osage, Kansa, Comanche, Pawnee, and Sioux (Socolofsky & Self, 1972). From the U.S. Census Bureau, 87.6 percent of individuals in the county in which East district is located identified as “White alone, not Hispanic or Latino”, while 10.1 percent identified as “Hispanic or Latino.” The difference between the percentage of students in East district that identify as Hispanic or Latino compared to the county overall indicates that a majority of individuals who identify as Hispanic or Latino in the community are in younger age groups. For the county, 21.8 percent of people were under the age of 18 and 25.9 percent were over the age of 65. Of individuals 25 years old or older, 18.9 percent hold a Bachelor’s degree or higher. Just over ten percent of households speak a language other than English at home.

Over the last few years East District has built a reputation for being progressive. With encouragement from administration, many teachers within the district have utilized project-based learning. Several consultants were involved with the school with students and teachers from the district traveling around the state and country to share what they have done. However, approaching the 2018-19 school year, the district was in a troubling financial situation. At the end of the 2017-18 school year several positions within the district were dissolved after the district’s valuation declined with a drop in the price of oil. After about a year of using reserve funds to maintain operations, the district was forced into some difficult financial decisions. In addition to the loss of faculty positions, East District formed a cooperative relationship with West District to maintain offerings for students in both districts at a lower price.

The slightly smaller West District is identified as a “Gemini I district” as a part of the Kansans Can Redesign (KSDE, 2018b). Gemini I schools agreed to take part in the

community of districts committed to redesigning at least one elementary and one secondary school under Kansans Can, with a launch date no later than spring 2020.

Choosing to participate in the project required the support of school administrators, the board of education, and a majority of the teachers. East District is not identified as an official participant in the Kansans Can Redesign, citing the timeline restrictions that the program imposes without providing access to any additional resources.

I intentionally chose not to utilize students as participants for a few reasons. First, there are ethical considerations involved with minors as participants. The ethical consideration becomes even larger given my own position of authority as a teacher within their school districts. Especially in communities where respect is highly emphasized, it would be unfair for me to expect students to be able to be candid about their perceptions of their experience. Also, for better or worse, students do not ultimately have the final say in how something such as a definition of success is turned into practice. Teachers, administrators, and board of education members are ultimately those able to impact policy and practice. Even if students are allowed to weigh in on practice that occurs in their school, they are only allowed to do so after a teacher or administrator determines their input to be worthwhile

There were three participants from East District. All participants are identified by pseudonyms. Each of the three participants teachers from East District were white, as is the entire faculty in the district. William teaches wood shop and construction at the junior high/high school. He has taught in East District eight years. He grew up in the town and is involved in a number of community organizations. Over the past four years his



construction classes have gained recognition for building Tiny Houses. It is now common for other schools to visit his class for guidance in starting their own Tiny House program.

Emberly also teaches in the junior high/high school in East District. She has taught in the district for ten years, and, like William, also grew up in town. She taught in the elementary school in East District before moving to teaching secondary language arts three years ago due to a late resignation in the district. She has also recently picked up family and consumer science courses when a position was lost in the district due to budget cuts.

Sidney has taught at the elementary school in East District for 12 years. After being a classroom teacher, she has switched to providing Title I reading and mathematics support. The school originally had two Title I support positions, but these were later condensed to the single position that Sidney occupies. As a result, Sidney primarily focuses on providing support for kindergarten through third grade. With twelve years in the district, she is the longest serving teacher in the building.

Another three participants came from West District, and they are also identified by pseudonyms. Again, all three participants were white, as is the overwhelming majority of faculty in the district. Amy is a second-grade teacher who has taught in the district for 11 years. She is the only second-grade teacher in the building. James and Alice both teach language arts at the junior high/high school. Alice has taught six years total, two of which were in West District. She entered education as a business teacher through a Transition to Teach program for individuals who hold college degrees in areas other than education. James has taught in West District for five years. His first three years he taught

tenth through twelfth grade language arts, speech, and drama before transitioning to eighth and ninth grade language arts, while still teaching upper-level speech and drama.

### **Data Collection**

Several forms of data were collected during this study. The study started with the participant photography component. Photos themselves were collected as artifacts, if the participant felt comfortable sharing them, as well as the recordings of interviews with participants elaborating on their photographic choices. I also collected notes from the observations. Notes from observations included details about comments the participant made, interactions between the participants and students, interactions amongst students, and the physical classroom space itself.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

In analyzing the data, it was necessary to refer back to the research questions:

- Q1     What types of success are recognized by educators in rural communities in Western Kansas?
  
- Q2     What does the definition of success in Kansans Can conceal?

Answering the first question required triangulating among data from photographs, interviews, and observations. The second question took the findings of the first and used it as a lens to examine the policy of Kansans Can. As all three primary data sources (photographs, interviews, observation) were qualitative, they needed to be coded. I utilized values coding (Saldaña, 2013).

Values coding reflects “a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 89). This analytical method could be used across all three data sources, which allowed for consistency in analysis, as well as better triangulation. Saldaña (2013) proposed coding for values, attitudes, and

beliefs. I ultimately chose to code for values, actions, and beliefs. He defined an attitude as “the way we think and feel about oneself, another person, thing, or idea” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 89). For the purposes of this study, coding for attitudes was a bit redundant, as I was asking participants to acknowledge things they felt were successful. Rather, what became much more useful for the study was to recognize the various actions displayed in a photograph, described in an interview, or directly observed. These actions were things participants felt represented success. Without such an analysis structure, the data risked being condensed into categorical success/not success segments, or recognized in policy/not recognized in policy, but in reality, these dynamics are far more complicated.

Eisner’s (1988, 1994c) ecology offered an ideal analytical framework to pair with values coding. Beliefs uncovered in coding related to the purpose of education or to desirable outcomes pair well with the intentional dimension of Eisner’s ecology. More obviously, values uncovered in coding provide a parallel to the evaluative dimension, as Eisner (1994c) described this specifically as dealing with value judgements. Finally, I would like to suggest that student and teacher actions uncovered in coding pair with the pedagogical dimension of Eisner’s ecology. In adopting a Deweyan (Dewey, 1997) perspective relative to the role of experiences in education, the actions and experiences in which students participate are the means of learning and thus fair to treat as the pedagogical. These connections between values coding and Eisner’s ecology will be further considered and utilized in the last chapter.

## **Limitations**

The primary limitation is that this study was designed to be applied to a very specific geographical setting. Moreover, the geographical setting for which it was designed is one that is fairly unique. Western Kansas has a cultural and social structure distinct and unique from other regions, even other areas of Kansas. This study was highly spatially specific, but can ultimately serve as a model for study in other settings. Although the breadth of this study could have been expanded by incorporating other Western Kansas communities, or even other communities in the High Plains region of Western Nebraska or Eastern Colorado, such an expansion would have had to come at the expense of the depth to which participants' experiences are represented in the study. A similar expansion to a larger number of participants would have also risked a loss of depth. Although the discrepancies between placeless policies and emplaced implementations uncovered by this study may not be the same everywhere, this study does provide a window to consider that some type of discrepancies between policy and implementation will exist everywhere.

### **Conclusion**

The ultimate goal of this study was to open a window to the experiences of a particular educational setting in rural communities and what types of success are recognized in these settings. In so doing, I had the opportunity to uncover what the Kansans Can policy conceals. More importantly, this study provided the opportunity to do what the Kansans Can policy cannot and showcase the emplacement of success in these communities.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF VIEWS OF STUDENT SUCCESS**

In presenting the findings from the photographs, interviews, and observations I sought to create a representation of the participants' perspectives related to student success. These representations served specifically to address Question 1: what types of success are recognized by educators in rural communities in Western Kansas? The second question, "what does the definition of success in Kansans Can conceal?", was addressed in drawing comparison to the successes I observed. Ultimately my purpose was to provide the reader with a window to the lived experience of the participants, an understanding of the participants' views of success, and the opportunity to consider whether beliefs, values, and types of success recognized by participants are given voice in the Kansans Can policy.

Photographs, interviews, and observations served as data sources to triangulate individual participants perspectives, values, actions, and beliefs about student success. In accepting that there is a plurality of views of student success not only at the state level, but within individual districts, the purpose of the description is not to create an overarching singular definition of success for either district, nor certainly a singular definition to fit rural communities. Rather, the intention of the description is to provide a basis of understanding for the lived experience of participant teachers and their

operationalized views of student success, as well as to furnish objects of comparison with definitions of success under Kansans Can.

Photographs, especially photographs of students, are a sensitive type of data. As a result, although some photographs are included, many which contain students or identifiable information about students are not printed here. However, the photographs themselves provide great insight into individual participant's perspectives. Photographs which could not be printed are described.

### **East District**

East District, although priding itself on being innovative, did not elect to participate in the Kansans Can Redesign. As such, the secondary building (seventh through twelfth grade) operates on a traditional eight period school day with traditional course offerings. The district contains a single secondary building and a single elementary school. The two limestone buildings are directly across the street from each other, with the street in between blocked off by metal gates during the school day. Students constantly move between the two buildings for many reasons, but in particular because a cafeteria is only operated in the secondary building.

As a teacher in the district, when I arrive each day I park my dusty pickup truck behind the secondary building in a little parking lot set aside for teachers. From the parking lot, it is possible to see a few trees, but beyond that are miles of open fields. On a clear day, visibility is limited by the curvature of the earth more than any objects getting in the way. Next to the parking lot is a small water feature pond that is showing its age. If the wind is out of the south, the school building blocks it, but in winter months when it turns to the north it can only be described as brutal. The maintenance department has

been in a multiple year battle to keep the north wind from making the classrooms an unbearable temperature. I, and the other teachers with classrooms along the north wall, have all had to move our classes to whatever space we can find available when the north wind has pushed inside temperatures in to the fifties, or even lower.

The blocked off section of road in between the elementary and secondary building has the ability to create a bit of a wind tunnel between the two buildings. When winter north winds get ripping, the line of elementary students making their way across for lunch seems like a group that would be more appropriately lead by Roald Amundsen than a para-educator. During south wind season, the wind carries bits of plant debris that I have personally confused on a few occasions for fire ash. Fire ash is also a real possibility many days. Hundreds of square miles of dry grass leaves everyone a bit on edge as winds pickup and the humidity drops.

A few hundred yards south of the secondary building is what is technically a state highway, but it would be a stretch to call it highly trafficked. On the other side of that highway is a John Deere dealership. The ‘showroom’ floor, a mostly dusty patch of ground, is full of farm equipment that easily costs as much as a Ferrari, although admittedly they would be much more difficult to park in an urban setting. Between the school building and millions of dollars’ worth of farm equipment is the football stadium. The school and town are obviously proud of what has happened at that stadium. A state champions banner hangs on the grand stand on the north sideline. The grand stand could hold a few hundred people. Not everyone in town could fit into it, but it would not be difficult to find standing room for those that did not. On the south sideline of the football field there is a set of bleachers that looks borrowed from a little league ballpark for any of

the visiting school's fans that might drive a couple hours to watch a football game on a cool, Kansas Friday night.

The downtown in the community still shows many signs of it being constructed during the wild west days of the late nineteenth century, including several blocks where the road is still paved in brick. Interspersed with the frontier era buildings are many that were built during the mid-twentieth century oil boom. As something of an early riser, I often find down town and the school scarcely occupied when I arrive, but the first participant, Emberly, is one of the few that beats me there every morning.

### **Emberly**

Emberly is a veteran teacher who transitioned from elementary to secondary three years ago in response to a desperate staffing need in the district. She is in her mid-thirties and a fair amount shorter than most of her students. She has short, dark hair and speaks with a directness that never leaves one unclear where she might stand on a topic, or even where they might stand with her. Although she is far from uptight, and her pure joy for her work shows through often, she gives off a pragmatic sense that seems to say, "We have too much going on here to beat around the bush." She and I, teaching across the hall from each other, have often used each other as sounding boards in decision making. The thing I have always appreciated the most about Emberly as a teacher is that if I ask her opinion on a particular practice or strategy, I always get a very direct response of her thoughts and why. Any time there is a discussion to be had between the teachers and administration she is usually the first to volunteer to be the go between. It is incredibly obvious that the school and community matter deeply to her, she wants both to be successful, and she is not going to wait around for others to do what needs to be done. As



a matter of example, there was a summer during which she learned the school would have a student for the first time in several years who was openly gay. Although Western Kansas is not known for its progressivism, there was a prominent sign outside of her classroom before the school year even started that said, “all are welcome” with several letters filled with a rainbow print. Knowing Emberly, I seriously doubt she asked permission to place the sign. I am sure that she saw that student needed to be welcomed and took action.

The random assortment of seating types in her classroom, ranging from tables to couches to bean bags, makes abundantly clear that she 1) cares that her students are in comfortable space to learn and 2) has a veteran teacher’s ability to scavenge cast-off supplies for her classroom. The entirety of one wall is lined with a classroom library of books stacked neatly on shelves she salvaged when the school library was cut to half of its previous size. The air in her classroom has just a hint of staleness to it; there are no exterior walls or windows to the outside.

The moment I sat down in her secondary language arts classroom to interview her about the photographs she took, it became abundantly clear that when thinking about “success,” she was focused on things that her students themselves were doing. All ten of her photographs include at least one student. The first photograph she shares shows a group of high school students sitting in a circle in her classroom. In describing it she said:

So, there’s a couple of things when I looked at this. One, there’s lots of different cliques represented in this group. This was 100 percent student driven. It’s seminar, I don’t care what they do. I didn’t say find something to do. There’s not a cellphone in sight. They’re actually playing Apples to Apples. It’s completely self-initiated and the fact that they got through the whole game with the diversity in the group...And the fact that it wasn’t ...it was a non-cellphone time. It wasn’t teacher directed. It wasn’t like I hid their cellphones. They wanted to do something, they had the idea, they went with it.

The second photograph again features students during her seminar period. However, this time the photograph includes some students who are not actually assigned to her classroom for the seminar period. She spoke of the group of students allowing others into their circle and self-initiating interactions with students that are not necessarily in their direct group of friends.

Her third and fifth photographs both showed students reading. Each photograph featured a different student. In the third photograph, she said of the featured student:

This was actually also during seminar. He's never actually finished a book cover to cover, you know, and he's end of the year sophomore. You know, last year he talks (sic) about how when a book was assigned he *maybe* read a couple chapters and just figured it out. I mean, he's smart enough to figure it out outside of reading the book. This was, again, self-initiated, had nothing else to do. Pulled out his book and read the whole thing. He will have finished his second book in the last two months, because he's found the author he likes.

Although this student generally has pretty good grades, the next photograph of a student reading is one that has previously struggled. We were both rather familiar with him as a student that had a bit of a reputation in the school. This student also finished a book for the first time that year. Emberly spoke of the progress the student had made and pointed out that he had not been on the weekly D and F grade list at all in that academic year as a Senior, an achievement that he had never previously accomplished in his high school career.

In between the photographs of students reading, Emberly showed me a photograph of a student holding a toy truck he built as a part of a passion project. The student apparently stopped Emberly in the hallway a day after she had been gone to show her what he had built going into great detail about what each part of the toy represented. He is a student on an Individualized Education Plan who typically relies heavily on para-

educator support to complete work in core academic classes. In discussing the photograph, Emberly said, “I think it’s a success any time he does a project on his own, and can explain things.” She goes on to discuss how the student not only had his own excitement about his project, but ultimately made sure that his partner for the project was at school each day so they could work on it.

In the next photograph, Emberly showed me two students in Art class. Emberly does not teach Art; however, one of the students in the photograph asked her to come out so she could see the student’s artwork in progress. Emberly discussed how the student is very seldom talkative. She said, “I think it’s successful when you can say, ‘Hey come out and see me’.”

Similarly, in the next photograph Emberly discussed how the students in it invited her out to other classrooms to see what they were working on. She shared how the students were trying to learn to use a new type of resin in an Industrial Arts class taught by William, another participant in this study. The students apparently had to do a fair amount of research and experimentation to get the mixture right. “So, they did not go to him to figure it out,” Emberly said while pointing to William in the photograph, “which is what I want all of our kids to be doing.”

In her next photograph, Emberly showed me a student with an award at a Family, Career and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) event. The student is an extremely high-achieving one. In fact, Emberly said of her, “I don’t think you can think of a successful student without putting [her] face there.” However, Emberly emphasized that success, here, lay in the student finding her own passion. “So, her big thing now is that I want her to be self-driven because she wants to be, and not because she feels obligated,”

Emberly said in emphasizing that what she found successful in the photograph is that the student was following her passion.

The following photograph also featured students at an FCCLA event. The students competed in an event where they had to prepare a display board on a topic and convinced Emberly to take them to a regional competition four hours away in the nearest metropolitan area. The students in the photo were both holding ribbons and obviously proud of their accomplishment. Emberly said, “I mean they had never had a ribbon before in their entire life. [She] has never had a ribbon before this.” Emberly emphasized that what she found was successful is not that the students received an award, but that they truly felt like they earned it.

Emberly then showed me a photograph from the other student organization she sponsored, the Kansas Association for Youth (KAYS). KAYS is a service organization sponsored by the Kansas State High School Activities Association with clubs in each high school. The photograph featured the only student to volunteer to attend an event out of a rather large chapter. In describing the student, Emberly said, “He’s very service oriented even though you don’t get to see that in his academics.” She discussed how KAYS allowed her to see the student in a new light and helped him begin to develop into a leadership role.

In her last photograph, Emberly showed two students holding bracelets they made in a Family Studies class. Family and consumer science courses were new for Emberly that year. She discussed the unlikely pairing of students and how they worked together to create the bracelet that represented a developmental aspect of toddlers. She again emphasized the importance of it being a self-initiated group.

Following our discussion, Emberly and I decided that a traditional academic class period would be an appropriate setting for me to be able to see student success in action. The vignette that follows is from my observation of her classroom.

**A day in sophomore language arts class.** “Tell your neighbor what’s happened so far,” Emberly says to a class of 11 sophomores who are spread out between chairs at tables and a couple couches in her classroom. Her class is listening to the audio book *Long Way Down*. As the students turn to update or remind their neighbor of what happened in the book the day before, Emberly prompts a more reluctant student. After the students update each other, Emberly takes a brief moment to discuss figurative language.

The book to which they are listening describes the experiences of an urban teenager growing up in a violence-ridden neighborhood. As they listen, the author describes removing the clip from a pistol to find that it is one bullet short of capacity.

Emberly pauses the audio book and prompts the students, “Predict where the other bullet is.” The students turn toward each other and venture guesses, most of which involve the other bullet being lodged in a different character in the book.

“I don’t know is a cop-out,” Emberly tells the class as a few students try to dodge the question. They listen to a bit more of the book and Emberly pauses it again.

As she switches up the student pairings a bit, Emberly instructs, “Make another prediction.” She quickly follows up with, “Don’t let them cop out” for any students whose partner might attempt to avoid making a prediction. As they continue the story and it builds some students lean forward in their seats and some start to smirk. When they reach the end of the chapter, Emberly pauses the audio to some small groans from the students.

Emberly stands in the middle of the students and tells them, “I’m going to start a jam, I’ll give you the number.” A “jam” is an internet-based vocabulary game where students are randomly put onto teams. During the game, the same word appears on each student’s screen at the same time with multiple choices for its definition. Teams earn more points the more members who choose the correct definition. As each word comes and goes, there are about equal amounts of celebration and groans hinting that about half of the students are getting each word correct, marking their choices on their school-provided computers. The students quickly become competitive with each other on the game.

“We’re taking L’s now...” one student says as her team falls behind in the game. New words appear about every 30 seconds. As each one appears, a few students sound it out. Some cause more confusion than others.

Most students appear pretty puzzled as one sounds out, “De-lit-ear-e-ous.” It is pretty obvious that most of the words are far from the students’ vernacular. The entire vocabulary push is part of a grant program to respond to literacy shortcomings in a group of a few school districts in the region. The students are each making progress on their vocabulary, and it is rather apparent that Emberly is not going to let anyone cop out.

**Emberly interpretation.** When Emberly described the successes she saw in students action, she addressed the evaluative component of Eisner’s ecology (Eisner, 1994c). Before diving deeper into what this means, and how this interacts with other elements of the ecology, it is worth remembering that Eisner (1994b) very distinctly differentiated between evaluation and measurement. Of the two terms, he said:

Although each term is entirely independent-that is, once can evaluate without measuring and one can measure without evaluating (one can, of course, do both)-

the belief that one must measure in order to evaluate is widespread. When this occurs, the fields that are most amenable to measurement are measured and those that are difficult to measure are neglected. (p. 14)

Emberly framed many of her evaluations of success within the context of the relationship to the student. It is worth noting, also, that these relationships extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom. Rather, she described relationships that went back many years. Due to the small nature of the school, she was able to recognize successes that teachers who only know students for a year or two might miss, such as the significance of a student getting report cards without a single D or F in the entire school year for the first time. This required, obviously, essentially having a basic mental transcript for the student's entire high school experience. The actions she recognized as success might be recognized as success in any school, but the long-lived relationships she drew on to recognize those successes are certainly a product of her rural environment.

Emberly displayed two prominent intentions related to her teaching. The first is that she sought to make learning relevant to students individually. This is represented in the wide range of topics in student work she described as successful, particularly in the students' passion projects. The successes she identified included a model truck and an art project. Also, she saw success in the way students problem-solved in a shop class, which was beyond the scope of her own classroom. However, it was a success, she emphasized, because it was meaningful to that student. The audiobook featuring a young author the students listened to in class is also indicative of Emberly's intentions to make learning relevant. Although the book might elicit key themes that her language arts class should discuss, it was far from the classical, literary canon.

The second intention that Emberly displayed was her wish for all students to ultimately be successful. There are two key pieces of data supportive of this intention. The first is that Emberly largely emphasized student success in terms of what was successful relative to each student. Rather than showcasing the work of the student who read the most books in a semester, she emphasized students who finished a book for the first time. Moreover, in her classroom, when students were instructed to discuss with each other, she would not let any of them slide by without giving a response. This displayed a commitment to equity: it appeared more important to Emberly that every student give an answer, rather than emphasizing the couple of students who gave the best answer.

Ultimately, Emberly's intentions not only played out within the context of the relationships she has within the school and community, but the two inform each other. Her intention to see each student be successful, particularly in the area of literacy, arose from her relationships that allowed her to know of previous struggles even long before students entered the classroom. Moreover, students inviting her to see the work in other settings, such as art and shop class, shows that the intention of relevance and individual success fed into reinforcing and building her relationships with students over time.

This interaction between relationships and intentions certainly bled into other areas of Eisner's ecology. As a result of her aim to make learning relevant, Emberly made curricular shifts such as using non-canonical books for the class and pedagogical shifts in using the audiobook format. Also, in terms of evaluation, Emberly indicated that passion projects could only raise a student's overall grade, but not lower it. In allowing passion projects to improve a student's grade, Emberly made a value judgement that the



additional work represented further growth and as such should be rewarded with additional points toward the overall class grade.

It is important to reiterate that the approaches to and understandings of success demonstrated by Emberly's artifacts and interviews are not necessarily reflected at the level of the building as a whole. The structural aspect of the school had not changed in any obvious way in response to these intentions. Emberly still taught a traditional eight-period school day and course offerings found in most schools. She emphasized her intentions and recognitions of success as organically emerging within the context of relationships; they were never a goal produced by any administrative mandate, whether locally or at the policy level. She was free to pursue and recognize these kinds of success as long as she took care of her mandated goals, as well.

### **William**

I interviewed William in his dusty classroom attached to the wood shop. As the wood shop teacher, he was responsible for drafting, cabinetmaking, and carpentry classes. Visible through the window in the door between the classroom and shop and outside of the open garage door was the Tiny House where students were adding finishing touches. Several times during the interview, a student had to interrupt to ask a question about the last couple pieces of plumbing left to attach to the house before they delivered it to the purchaser in Colorado. William and I have worked together on projects for the last several years and served as co-sponsors for a handful of student activities.

William is a few years older than me, in his mid-thirties. He has a well-trimmed dark beard and a neatly kept haircut and is probably just a bit under six foot tall. Every now and then, perhaps when his wife is not looking, he curls the ends of his moustache

up almost as if his face was supposed to serve as a stock image for a wood worker. To the best of my recollection, in several years I have only seen him once not in cowboy boots. I have also never seen him finish a school day not covered in saw dust. He speaks with a folksy authenticity reminiscent of Garth Brooks. There is not a twang or drawl in his voice, as neither is really native to Western Kansas and William certainly is.

His family owns a fair amount of land in the county and he helps his father with cattle daily on the family farm. He has an entrepreneurial spirit beyond his farming and ranching as shown by his rental houses and bed and breakfast he operates in town with his wife and children. Although he is often light-hearted and easy-going, he has a fiery passion for the preservation of his town and school that starts to show through if he feels either is threatened. He has an intense moral compass. When he says he is going to do something, he always follows through and expects others to do the same. Politicians wishing to see what it means to be authentically rural would benefit from following William around for a day, but they would definitely have a hard time keeping up.

The first photo William shows me is of the Tiny House they are finishing (Figure 1). In describing the Tiny House, William said, “It is a tremendous undertaking for a group of 20, 25 students to take on building a house basically in three nine weeks.” In East District, a “nine weeks” is a grading period equal to half of a semester. He discussed the delivery date for the purchaser, who hoped to have the house available for the upcoming tourist season. William continued, “That’s another thing, [the students] are successfully doing a project that is generating income for a business and it’s generating income for the school. I went from having a \$1,500 budget to almost a \$40,000 budget and there weren’t any tax dollars spent.”



*Figure 1.* Tiny House built by students in East District

Several of William's photographs dealt with the Tiny House, which was not surprising: a decent portion of his teaching load dealt specifically with its construction. He showed me a photograph of the staircase they built for the house. He discussed the precision it took to get the angles right on the steps. Ultimately, they used their computer numerically controlled (CNC) router, which was purchased with funds raised from the sale of a previous Tiny House, to cut the staircase. He also showed me a photo of the concrete countertop in the kitchen. He shared his desire to incorporate a concrete pour into the Tiny House construction to better prepare students to enter the construction field, and he mentioned the importance of the students making sure it is poured and troweled smooth. Of the countertops he said, "It will suit the purpose and it looks pretty darn good for a first set of concrete countertops."

The concrete countertops were not the only new component in this Tiny House, the third that his classes have built. He also shared a photograph of the bathroom door. The previous houses had used some sort of sliding door to save space, but this one featured two traditional doors to better match the Victorian, mountain-town feel of its

destination. However, due to the compact size of the Tiny House, installing each required trimming down slabs that cost \$200 each. He said, “They work perfect. The stain and finish on them are great. Part of it is [the students] want to take pride in their work and want it to be right.” Also new this year was a tile installation. While looking at the photograph of tile installed in the bathroom he said:

Tile was another thing we’ve never done. So, I guess the theme you see here is trying new things. Is the tile perfect? No, but it’s very good. There’s no wiggly gaps anywhere. There’s one or two spots where the thinset or whatever adhesive we were using was maybe a little thicker, but they’re mostly in the corners or behind the toilet, places you won’t ever walk... That’s one of the things I will say is most of the time, if it’s not perfect we redo it.

His eye for workmanship shows as he talked about most of the photographs. He spoke of the importance of maintaining a reputation for quality work. “The Tiny House market is small enough that if you get a bad reputation with anyone you have a bad reputation with everybody,” he said. He continued to share a story about an earlier stage in the build:

At the beginning of the school year I had a student put some things in place that were really unsquared. I made him change it, and I said to him, “What would your dad say about that?” He said, “Nobody’s ever going to see it.” I said, “But it’s not right.” I want all of my students to realize, it’s not right whether someone will see it or not. It was actually on the deck, it was the stringers on the deck. Probably enough of it’s covered up that most everybody wouldn’t see it, but what happens when the next guy puts on a deck and it’s a little bit different and the tolerances are a little tighter. He’s cutting it out and cussing you guys. That’s not the type of carpenter I hope comes out of my class. I hope they’re paying attention to every detail. You know, that’s a game too. You can spend hours and hours paying attention to detail and that may not be the market that you’re in. There’s a certain point in time when the money runs out and you’ve got to get the job done, but there’s something to be said for the job looking nice when you’re done.

William also shared photographs of student projects in his other classes. One is of a beautiful wood canoe that was actually his daughter’s project. “That was a learning experience for both us,” he said. While laughing he added, “I think it was a success

because I think it will actually work.” He also spoke of enjoying crafting something that could be practically used as transportation. It was obviously a project that required a lot of problem solving and he seemed genuinely pleased to see it in at least a state of completion.

The next photograph William shared was a coffee table a student built. He discussed how that student through the process of building the table started to become more independent. This student asked a lot of questions at first as she encountered problems. William used the example of joinery as an area where he wants students to be able to be shown a method and then they work independently to adapt that method to other problems, situations, and projects.

William then turned on his phone to show me a series of photographs of wood signs students created on the CNC router. Each sign has the student’s family name and some sort of image or shape that is significant to them. One has the Boy Scouts logo, another has the 4H emblem, and a third has the outline of a steer. He then stopped on one with the student’s name flanked by the outline of deer, turkeys, and coyotes. He said:

[The student] had a deer, because his grandpa is really into hunting and I think he’s getting into it too. I think he is really into spending time with his grandpa more than he is into hunting...Really, I think they put what they were proud of and brought their families into the projects.

The final photograph also related to the CNC router. He showed a fitting that students 3D printed to hold a permanent marker on the CNC router that allowed them to create signs on poster board. Apparently the first attempt resulted in the marker spinning at 18,000 revolutions per minute and quickly emptying its ink across the shop. William talked about how the students researched to solve a problem that he himself did not know how to solve.

As we finished our discussion, it was obvious that the best setting to observe would be one of William's carpentry classes while it worked on the Tiny House. The vignette that follows is from a day I observed William's Tiny House construction classes.

**Installing a subfloor.** "Do you need me to pry up on this end?" I ask. I am standing inside a partially finished Tiny House in which the temporary radiator is struggling to heat the interior to what would be considered a comfortable temperature. The interior at this point consists of metal framing, particle board, and loosely hanging light fixtures that do a moderate, albeit adequate, job of providing enough light to work. William and three students are attempting to slide a piece of particle board subfloor into what will be the bathroom in a tiny house headed for the high mountains later in the summer.

"Please do," William says. A couple absences and another student having to be delegated to another task has left his class just a couple hands short of what is needed for the job. As a result, I am given the opportunity to transition to the role of researcher/amateur carpenter. Two students stand on the edge of the board to provide some leverage as another uses a 2x4 to wedge it into place between the frame of the tiny house trailer and the framing of what will become a bathroom wall. When leverage has nudged the board somewhat in place the students resort to the brute force of kicking it forward. Each kick provides an incremental amount of progress, as well as releasing a plume of dust consisting of some unknown mixture of construction materials.

*Bang...bang...bang.*

The students continue kicking and the subfloor piece continues its incremental march toward its final resting place. As its journey comes to an end the students all relax and smile with the satisfaction of completing the task.

“Well that’s not going to work…” William says. Shocked looks are shared between the students and probably myself. William points to the overhang of the board and explains that particulars of the geometry would leave a sagging bathroom floor.

“I think there’s two things we can do about it,” William starts. “We either weld a metal plate in here or we cut it back and replace a section of the subfloor.” One student volunteers that he likes the welding option.

“I do too,” says William, “but I don’t think we have metal to use for it so I think we are going to have to cut it.”

By this point the class period has come to an end and the group of students is replaced by a larger group that files into the Tiny House to pick up where the previous group left off. William walks them through how to set the depth of the blade on a skill saw to allow them to cut the subfloor without destroying the blade on the metal frame of the trailer underneath. After they get the depth set, he turns to the students.

“Who’s doing it?” he asks.

One student reluctantly steps forward and puts on safety glasses.

“Make sure you tilt the saw forward as you start.” The student listens to William and begins his cut first one direction, before turning and cutting the other. As he follows the chalk line the previous class period left and nears the wall a few sparks fly indicating the blade has scraped the trailer frame.

“Well, there goes that blade,” William jokes. He continues, “Don’t worry about it, that happens sometimes.” After the cut is made to scour the board he sends another student after the “jiggy jiggy tool.”

The student seems to understand what may not be an industry-standard term and disappears out of the Tiny House door to return a couple minutes later. He takes the oscillating tool and works on each end of the board until it eventually separates into two clean halves.

William keeps the two pieces as a stencil, but the students will have to wait for a trip to the hardware store for another sheet of particle board before they can continue. Together the two classes have only made incremental progress from where they started the day, but it is done correctly.

**William interpretation.** Much like Emberly, William framed many of the successes he perceived within the context of the relationships he had both with the students and the students’ families. He also taught within the same structural context of Emberly, that is, with an eight period day in a construction class offered in many schools. Also, it is obvious that William intends for each of his students to be able to enter the carpentry or construction field successfully. He demonstrated this in the additional elements such as a concrete pour or trim work that he worked into the construction of the Tiny House to make sure his students had those skills entering the workforce. However, William applied a very different approach to the evaluative dimension when compared to Emberly. Whereas Emberly defined success largely relative to each individual student, William defined success against a standard of workmanship.



William repeatedly emphasized that if the quality of work on a wood shop project or the Tiny House was not up to a particular standard, he had students redo it. In fact, he described having a student redo a component on the Tiny House not just because it was not up to William's standard, but because it would not be up to the student's father's standards. William also emphasized that, because the students would be selling their Tiny House at the end of the school year, the work had to meet a high standard for them to continue to make future sales and keep the program going. It was very obvious in the way that William discussed successes that student inexperience did not change the quality of work they must ultimately achieve.

When asked to collect examples of success, both William and Emberly provided examples from one of the same students, but emphasized different ways in which the student was successful. Emberly described the success she saw in a very quiet student having the confidence to ask her to visit during art class. William similarly described a growth of confidence in the student, but he also emphasized how she began to solve her own problems. Although they had different evaluative perspectives, they ultimately both recognized success in the same student.

### **Sidney**

Sidney has bright blond hair and thick-framed glasses. Although one of the most experienced teachers in her building, she looks young enough I suspect she would probably get asked for her driver's license if she were to try to enter a bar. She brings the optimism and energy of a brand-new teacher to her classroom, but completely devoid of the naivety of a brand-new teacher. It does not take long talking with her to realize she is fully aware of the daily challenges that exist in education, but she seems to have held

onto an appreciation for how fun it can be to be a teacher, even more than a decade into her career. She comes across as a genuinely happy person and takes the challenges of the day in stride. In her time in the school there has been a fair amount of faculty turnover, but her even-keeled, take things in stride, attitude has persisted through it all.

With the door closed Sidney's classroom can easily be confused for a closet. In fact, the tiny, windowless room tucked in the back corner of the East District Elementary is so nondescript that I had to get directions from a student the first time I visited despite having been in the building several times previously. Sidney is a Title I support teacher providing interventions for elementary students in reading and math. She is among the most experienced teachers in her building, despite being young enough to have her own children attending school in the building with her. Her classroom is packed full of posters, maps, and signs. The cabinets and carts containing her resources seem to be bursting at the seams. I pulled up a chair obviously intended for someone several feet shorter than me to interview her.

The first photograph she shared with me is a picture of a bulletin board with the phrase "Reading Graffiti" at the top (Figure 2). The bulletin board has quotes from books that students chose. In describing it she said:

What was expected here is that they found snippets from books that they could relate to real life and I think that is just a really strong thing to have, to be able to pull those things and relate, and they just put on the board to share with everyone else.



Figure 2. Bulletin board with reading quotes

Her next photograph also dealt with students making a personal connection to their learning, but with much younger students. Again, it showed a bulletin board, this time sectioned into rectangles with a student's name at the top of each rectangle. There are small squares of paper, which Sidney called "Brag Tags," that have a label for a particular skill such as "I Can Tie My Shoes," "I Can Zip a Zipper," or "I Can Count to 20." In referring to the bulletin board, Sidney said, "This just shows all of the skills they know and the growth they've made."

Following the bulletin board pictures, Sidney showed me a photograph of a student working on a math assignment in which they created a picture of a robot.

Discussing the student in the photograph she said:

This one is a pretty student specific success, because this is a pretty distracted, *distracting*, student who just struggles. So, on this particular day he was actually

100 percent engaged for the entire 20 minutes he was in here and the others were not. So, this is a very student specific picture of success; the fact that he was engaged and learning and putting everything together to finish up this robot project they were working on.

Sidney then shared a photograph that has more students working on the same math robot project. She said, “Student success is messy. It’s hands on, it’s engaging, and it’s not always clean cut, nice, and neat.” In clarifying she continued, “It was really hard to come up with student success, because it is so broad and individualized.” Sidney explained how this is particularly true for her students as she only works with students that are already struggling in an academic subject.

The next few photographs came from the makerspace time, which is a voluntary time that students can stay at school to work on projects of their choosing. Sidney oversees the makerspace on Mondays and Tuesdays after school for 45 minutes. In the first photograph, two students are working on programming a Sphero robot. She described the photograph by saying:

This was a coding project that they did and this is actually the very first time that either one of them had coded, and this was during makerspace. So, this was after school during our makerspace club. These are two second grade boys, actually that one’s mine (points to a student in the photo), and they spent the entire 45 minutes coding this Sphero to stay on the line. And so, this shows multiple things: perseverance because it was guess and check. Go back and change...how are we going to change it? Teamwork, because they were together, and the fact that they were second grade boys and did something for 45 minutes straight.

The next makerspace photograph shows the same two students very visibly excited about what they had accomplished. Sidney described how this photograph was at the moment that their coding finally worked. She said, “This was the celebration of 45 minutes of hard work and it actually working and doing what they worked so hard to do.” In the final makerspace photograph, there about a dozen students spread out around the

room working on various projects. Sidney discussed how she saw success in the self-grouping of students across grade levels. She described how often times at makerspace students group very differently than they do during the regular school day.

In sharing additional photographs from her classroom, Sidney showed me a photograph of two students working on math facts. One was draped across a medicine ball and another is sitting on one. As someone who works with students who are struggling, Sidney talked about how she sees it as success when students are able to find strategies that work for them. She said, “Being able to find what works for them and how they focus best is a skill that especially the kids in my room need.”

Sidney then showed me another photograph of a bulletin board in the preschool. The one was divided into sections horizontally, with each section being labeled with emotions such as sad, scared, and happy. Each section has at least two emotions labeling it. Sidney explained how each preschool student has an owl with their name on it that they place in the category they believe represents their current emotional state. During the day students are able to move their owl as their mood changes. Sidney said, “Just identifying the feeling that they’re feeling and putting a word with it is a strong skill to have and we’re finding that a lot of older kids don’t have that skill.”

Finally, Sidney showed me a photograph that showed a graph a student had made. Along the Y axis are numbers ranging from five to 80. Each bar is colored in a different color of colored pencil. The furthest purple bar to the left is labeled 20 and the green bar all the way on the right is labeled 50. Sidney explained that the graph the student made showed their progress on a benchmark math assessment. She saw success in the way it visually represented the student’s growth through the year. After interviewing Sidney, we

decided I should observe her working with some of the pullout students. The vignette that follows is from a day I observed Sidney working with pullout elementary students.

**A song of multiplication.** “I guess my one on one for the next little bit is canceled...” Sidney says as she slumps back into her chair. The kindergarten student she is desperately trying to get caught up just got pulled out for an all class meeting. It does not take long while she catches up on her work on her computer before five third graders come bouncing into the room.

“Alabama...Alaska...Arizona...” the students come in singing. They proceed through all 50 states with Sidney even joining in toward the end. As they finish she asks if they can find the states on a map.

“Nope!” a particular boisterous third grade girl responds. Sidney moves on to handing them their multiplication tables flip chart. These five students, which represent just over a quarter of their class, are struggling with six, seven, and eight multiplication tables. They start with the sixes, singing each multiple to the tune of “Happy Birthday.” After they finish, Sidney checks for particular multiples.

“Alright, six times seven?” The students respond with a singsong 42. “Six times ten?” Again, the students sing their answer: 60. The process repeats for sevens to the tune of “Frère Jacques” and eights to “She’ll Be Coming Around the Mountain.” As the group finishes singing their eights multiplication table, an enthusiastic boy adds, “Now we don’t have to count by eights no more.”

After singing, the students move on to playing a game in two groups. The three girls join together while the two boys pair up. Each group takes turns rolling a pair of dice. The student who rolls then multiplies the numbers shown on the dice and then

colors in a square on a sheet of paper with the product. The first person to get four boxes colored in a row wins. As Sidney explains the game to the students that were absent last time, one girl claps with ever increasing enthusiasm for the game she obviously remembers and about which she is excited. As the students start into their game, murmurs of their songs can be heard under the breath as they try to work out the product for the numbers they just rolled. Sidney intermittently takes away and allows them to use their paper strips with the multiplication tables on them.

The students, who are in Sidney's program because they are struggling, stay incredibly focused on the game. Apart from a brief argument over whether one boy's colored pencil is pink or in fact red, there is no deviation from the task at hand. One girl tries to goad Sidney into giving her an answer, but her partner in the game interrupts, "Yeah, you have to figure it out on your own." Mild panic sets in as Sidney tells them they are out of time before any student manages to get four boxes colored in a row.

One student blurts out in obvious enthusiasm, "Can we finish our game tomorrow?" Sidney points out that they will not meet the next day, because of an alternating schedule. She only meets with the students three days a week for 30 minutes. The students bounce out of the classroom and Sidney sits back, "Man, they were wound up today."

**Sidney interpretation.** Sidney clearly emphasized that her intention was for each student to be successful individually. This was demonstrated in her pointing to a student who was often distracted in math being completely engaged for 20 minutes as well as the graph a student made to show their progress on a particular benchmark assessment. Her position as a Title I teacher does not give her the authority to alter many dimensions of

Eisner's ecology. She has little control of the structural component of her day as she is ultimately reliant on teachers sending students to her room, as shown by the cancelled kindergartener. Moreover, she has little control over the curricular component as she is working with students who are struggling in particular areas in the general education classroom. However, she does have control over the pedagogical. This was shown by the number of songs sung during a half hour session on multiplication facts which would rival the number sung in any music class. Sidney very obviously found a pedagogical approach that was impactful for the small group of students in her classroom.

Sidney's pedagogical approach with her third-grade students learning multiplication facts was apparently successful, as all five students I observed in her classroom were rather competent in the particular set of multiplication tables on which they were working. Beyond that, all five students in that group were quite obviously genuinely happy. What is of particular interest in the success I observed in Sidney's classroom is that, of all of the participants in this study, the nature of Sidney's role probably gave her the least control or opportunity to impact multiple areas of Eisner's ecology. Whereas most rural classroom teachers have the opportunity to influence the curricular, evaluative, and pedagogical dimensions, Sidney could largely only influence the pedagogical in her classroom. She was ultimately reliant on the classroom teacher to determine what was to be taught (curricular) and what success would look like (evaluative).

### **East District Reflection**

Eisner (1988) argued that what occurred in one component of the ecology required a critical mass to influence the others. If no such critical mass is reached, the



change will not take root. Although Emberly, William, and Sidney all displayed similar intentions related to individual student success, none of these intentions had led to larger structural changes within the school day, schedule, school building design, course offerings, or assignment of teachers to classes. That being said, the lack of structural changes did not appear to interfere with how each of these three participants pursued and recognized student success. This suggests the possibility of an elasticity, particularly in the structural aspect of the ecology. The structure of the school day itself did not change. For Emberly and William and the secondary level it was still an eight-period day. However, some elasticity in that structure had allowed Emberly to visit other classrooms at points in the day or to even have students in her own classroom that were not necessarily a part of her class. It is not a far stretch to consider that this elasticity is likely a result of the relationships that exist within the school.

### **West District**

The slightly smaller West District did elect to participate in the Kansans Can Redesign. As it only has a single secondary and elementary building, both participated in the Redesign process. The specifics of what constituted Redesign in West District became apparent in each participant's experience. The two West District buildings are about four blocks apart from each other, but students are often seen moving between them whether it is high school students walking to the elementary to serve as classroom aides or sixth grade students walking to the secondary building for sports practices. In small districts in Kansas, sixth grade students are often used to fill out junior high school sports rosters when there are not enough seventh and eighth grade students in volleyball, basketball, and track.

Much like East District, the school buildings and community for West District are often raked by wind. However, West District has the unique ability to make wind direction identifiable by odor alone. A south wind does not have a smell, but due to a cattle feed yard north of town, a north wind carries the unique odor of hundreds of cattle defecating in unison. Occasionally, with the right weather system and wind out of the west, the 'smell of money' as some locals call it gets wafted eastward in the general direction of Topeka.

Many of the features found in East District are also present in West District. A block from the secondary school in West District there is also a John Deere dealership with vehicles that cost as much as a Bentley, but have the added option of being able to move about on tracks rather tires. The secondary school in West District is also bordered by a football stadium. However, the stadium in West District is considerable smaller and surrounded by a limestone wall. No state champion banners adorn the stadium.

The school building does not have a traditional parking lot, but rather numbered spaces that line the perimeter of the building. The collection of student vehicles shows the working-class nature of the community as most student vehicles are pickup trucks. Several are actually large, heavy-duty trucks with big towing mirrors that stick out wide from the doors and give the vehicle an appearance that loosely resembles a bull moose. When I park at the school, my full size four-wheel drive pickup is typically dwarfed by the trucks students are driving. Although all of the roads in town are paved, a perusal of the parking places provides plenty of evidence that is not really necessary. The aging building has been added on to in the past. It gives the impression that many aspects of it

are less than ideal, but have been adjusted to keep it serving the community for the better part of a century.

The downtown area past the school building in West district has an architectural style that loosely resembles the set of *Blazing Saddles*, occasionally interrupted by a mid-twentieth century building. I have come to know streets of the town incredibly well on my pre-dawn runs around town where I rarely have any company apart from the occasional fox, badger, rabbit, or coyote. My favorite block in the downtown is the one that connects the nineteenth century hotel and the nineteenth century building that used to house the bank. Legend has it that a group of bank robbers once stayed at the hotel and walked that one block down before robbing the bank. A group of vigilantes chased the criminals out of town, shot them, and left their bodies laid out on the street in front of the bank to dissuade anyone who might get similar ideas. That block of road reminds me that our community has always had a bit more of a do-it-ourselves attitude to solving problems.

### **Alice**

I worked with Alice for the first two years of her secondary teaching career when we were both working in a different district. My wife has worked with her for the past six years, as they both accepted positions in West District the same year. My wife and Alice are close person friends and as such we have often traded favors, most of which involved pet-sitting. Alice speaks with a very professional voice, likely a carryover from her years working in business before making a career change to become a teacher. She is always willing to help out on a project or event, but if she does she has extremely high standards and it shows. She carries an energy into everything she does and is frequently busy with a

wide range of activities with the school, community, and her teenage daughter's own activities. She often seems, rightly, as though she does not have time to waist and her shoulder-length hair tends to bounce as she quickly heads down the hallway from one class to another or as she moves between students she is helping.

I met Alice in her classroom over summer break to discuss her photographs of student success. Her classroom is fairly large with a mixture of student desks and some large bean bags on which students can sit. The secondary school was constructed by the Public Works Administration in the 1930's, and it is fairly obvious they did not give much consideration to airflow in the buildings: the heat in her classroom is stifling. She has taught for a total of six years now, with the last two being in West District. She entered education through a Transition to Teach program, originally as a business teacher. She now teaches primarily language arts, but has been asked to cover other subjects to meet the district's needs, including some classes outside of her content area.

The first photograph she showed me was of a senior language arts class. Her class was composed of students who either did not test well enough or elected not to take college composition. This is a group of students that, in Alice's words, "a lot of people wrote off." In describing the photograph, Alice said:

It's just a picture of the senior class, but what that shows with student success is that this year they designed a project that was 100 percent theirs. They wrote a "How to Succeed in High School" guide, things they wish they would have known and they wrote it. Some of them were editors, some of them were content people. They divided up the jobs of it, and then they presented to income freshmen: this year's incoming freshman class.

The guide was created by the entire class together. She discussed how impressed she was with the honesty displayed by students in mistakes they made earlier in the high school

careers. For this class in particular, Alice was impressed with the teamwork as it was a group not necessarily previously known for working together.

The next photograph switched from the oldest students Alice teaches to the youngest: seventh grade. She discussed the passion project the students worked on titled “Justices and Injustices.” The project was a part of her seventh-grade language arts class and was included in the online curriculum that the district adopted for all classes seventh through ninth grade as a part of the Redesign. She described how some students struggled with certain types of injustices the curriculum included, such as police brutality, because they had not experienced it. However, they were able to find topics they found meaningful. In describing the project, she said, “Some of them got super invested in their projects. They were almost in tears when they were presenting them, because they got so passionate about these things.” She continued, “Some of the kids that had struggled all year long really jumped in on that project and 100 percent embraced it, because it was something they felt connected with.”

Alice then showed me a few photographs from community service day. She worked with her homeroom students that day, which was a mixture of ninth through twelfth-grade students. On community service day, the students worked on a variety of projects throughout the community. Alice’s homeroom partnered with a seventh-grade homeroom for the day. As she scrolled through a handful of photographs for that day on her phone she said, “You’ll see it in a lot of the pictures. It’s a seventh-grader and a high school kid working together or a freshman and a high school kid.” She emphasized the cooperation and community between students, not just the connection between the

students and those they were serving outside of the school. She stopped at a photograph of students at the long-term care facility in town and said:

This is at the long-term care. They got outside of their comfort zone and some of the kids were scared to death to go visit with residents, but they all made the effort, and broke out of the mold and did something. Some of them worked outside, maintenance and window cleaning and some of them went inside and visited, talked to the residents, but I think what was big about this is that *they* picked this project. We didn't go assign it to them. The kids were the ones that...the homeroom classes got together. The seventh-grade homeroom came to us and we got together with them and partnered. The kids came up with the projects.

Alice went on to describe how the students had contacted the long-term care facility themselves to see if there was work they could do. On top of that, it was incredibly hot on community service day. Alice described how some students were visibly uncomfortable in the heat, but kept working. Some students visited with the residents at the long-term care facility. Alice explained, "Some of them you could tell were a little uncomfortable, but some of them went over, sat right down, listened to stories, talked about a lot with them. It was really neat." She described how after they worked at the long-term care facility the students went to repaint benches at the baseball field in the park.

Alice continued talking about her homeroom students in the next photograph. During the school year there was a homeroom points competition, which Alice's students won. As a prize, the students got to go about an hour away to a larger town to an escape room. Alice described watching the students work together to solve the escape rooms. Although one group was not able to solve the room, the other was. In describing the way students came together on that day Alice said, "They were able to put aside differences,

because my group had some very distinct personalities and some of them very much conflicted, but they were able to put aside their differences.”

In the next photograph, Alice explained how one of her tenth-grade students organized an open house night for students to showcase their passion projects. Alice explained how the student organized other students to speak at the event to share the project. She also arranged for there to be a free will donation dinner. This led into the next success that Alice shared, which was a crane prize machine that a student built. She described how he researched it and designed pulleys to make it work. The student then had to get a sponsor to donate prizes. Alice described how visitors to the open house lined up to get a chance to play the game. Alice said, “This was a kid who hates English... when we got this passion project he kind of lit up and that was his thing.”

Many of Alice’s homeroom students graduated at the end of the spring semester before I was able to observe the following school year. As a result, we decided to observe an after-school support period in which Alice has volunteered to offer for students needing additional help. The time focuses on providing extra support for primarily seventh and eighth-grade students working on projects in the online curriculum. The vignette that follows is from my observation of that extra support time.

**“Go with what you think.”** The school building is largely empty as I head up the 1930’s era staircase to Alice’s classroom. It is a Wednesday afternoon, and together with another teacher Alice has five junior high students who are working to get caught up on lessons for which they are behind. The school uses a computer-based curriculum that has a combination of projects and typical lessons and quizzes. The online system provides a

number of resources for students, but these students have stayed after school to get some extra guidance. As Alice is helping one student another raises her hand.

“We can review in a minute,” Alice tells her. After finishing with the student she was helping, Alice moves across the room to sit by the student who had raised her hand. She quietly goes through a social studies review with the student before she takes her quiz. Alice teaches Language Arts and Science this year, but students are welcome to bring any subject area to the Wednesday after school program. The program started the year before when Alice and another teacher volunteered in response to a large number of students getting behind on their work.

“You want your claim and counterclaim to be opposites. Are they really opposites right now?” Alice asks the student. As they quietly talk through the review another student celebrates passing their own quiz. The student does not seem overly confident as she says, “I probably won’t pass this.” Despite her trepidation, the student starts her quiz. “I’m scared,” she says as she tries to force herself to commit to one of the answers.

“Just go with what you think,” Alice says. “Just do it. It’s not going to help to stare at it.” When the student reaches the end of her quiz she clicks to submit it.

“Oh, I passed! I passed two in a day!” the student exclaims. The student gathers up her things, wishes the teachers a good afternoon, and leaves over an hour after the school day actually ends.

**Alice interpretation.** Teaching in a district that participated as a Kansans Can Redesign cohort, Alice described changes and interactions in many areas of Eisner’s ecology. This included numerous structural changes, such as the flexible modular scheduling, in which each school day is scheduled in segments lasting 20 minutes with no



single day in a week looking the same. This resulted in classes having varied meeting times and, in some cases, reduced meeting times, which James, another participant in this study, would address. There were also changes to the curricular and pedagogical dimensions, represented by the online learning platform that Alice described using. From a policy standpoint, these changes were made in pursuit of the intention, “Kansas leads the world in the success of each student” (KSDE, 2018a).

As with participants in East District, Alice primarily spoke in terms of relationships in describing examples of student success. However, what was interesting is that Alice did not necessarily use relationships as a lens through which to view success. Rather, she saw success in the fact of the relationships her students developed among themselves and with the community. She particularly described the relationship growth she saw among her homeroom students. This recognition of relationships as success is particularly interesting in considering what I was able to observe at her after school program.

During the after-school support time, Alice was helping students with the online platform. The platform was obviously a rather dramatic curricular and pedagogical shift from traditional classes. However, the curriculum and pedagogical structures of the activities in the platform were set and not necessarily open to the teacher’s modification. The relationship she had with the student, particularly as she was volunteering after her contract day and helping a student outside of her content area, showed in her ability to respond to the individual student’s personality as she was giving advice. This is also indicative of Alice’s intentions to see each individual student be successful: she dedicates a large amount of voluntary time weekly to helping a relatively small number of students.

It is worth noting that in this particular version of what the Kansans Can Redesign can be, it seems logical that Alice emphasizes relationships, since the structural, pedagogical, curricular, and evaluative dimensions have been taken largely out of her hands as a teacher.

### **Amy**

Amy has taught in West District for 12 years. Although we have never worked together, Amy and I have attended church together for the past six years. Her daughter and my eldest son are classmates in the elementary school. Her voice has the same folksy hint as William's, which is hardly a surprise as they grew up going to school together. As Sunday School classmates for over half a decade, I have come to appreciate that everything Amy says is intentional. As you watch her talk you can see that she is thinking about what she says, and if she says it you better believe she means it. She has long, dark hair and a version of humble confidence that could not be further from arrogance. She was nominated for state teacher of the year last year, but someone else in the school would have to tell you, because Amy certainly is not going to volunteer it. When she asks a question, Amy listens with the same intentionality with which she speaks. She is very particular about how she expects things to work, both in the classroom and out. Although she has a veteran teacher's ability to be adaptable, she will not hesitate to let you know if she thinks something should have been differently.

I interviewed Amy in her second-grade classroom where there are lamps all around the room and a wide variety of tables, desks, and other work areas for students. What after school feels like a rather comfortable place has hints of the almost chaotic number of different things students work on at a time during the school day. There is

“Playlist” on the board of activities from the day. As we talked, her kindergarten-aged daughter and a friend practiced a dance routine for the upcoming school talent show. The way Amy responds to her daughter’s semi-frequent interruptions to restart the music so they can practice their dance routine again provides a glimpse into the fact that she is someone who is used to interruptions.

All of the photographs Amy shared with me prominently featured at least one student. In the first photograph, there was a student standing at the whiteboard presenting a project to the rest of his class. The student has a book he created under a document camera which is projected on the board. Amy explained how this student was not one who had been very enthusiastic about writing for most of the school year. She explained that in this particular project, which the student volunteered to do, the student chose to share with his class about dirt bikes. Amy said, “I just thought it was really successful because I got him to write, when typically, that wasn’t something he wanted to do.”

Following that, Amy showed me a photograph with two students standing outside holding an electrical box. Amy explained that the girl in the photograph is in her class and pretty advanced in her academics. As a result, Amy said that she arranged for the student to work on an extra project with another student at times when the rest of the class is working on a topic that she has mastered. The student and the partner had decided to build a model where a black hole swallowed the earth and, in the picture, they were learning about electricity to make their model work.

The next photograph Amy showed had a young girl and her dad. Amy explained how this photograph was a result of another passion project. Of the photograph Amy said:

This was also one of those passion projects. This is a young lady who created, she called it 'Dad's Day'. She had told me she wanted to, "Mrs. [Amy] you need to plan a dad's day. I want my dad to come to school" and I said "No [student's name] you need to plan a dad's day if you want your dad to come to school." So, she did. Everything from the invitations to the agenda. She created a game for them and then they ate lunch here. So, this was actually taken on Dad's Day and we had 100 percent attendance. Every dad from the class came. And it was a really successful event that I didn't plan.

Amy then shared another photograph from a passion project. In this photograph, a student is sitting in a chair in front of the class holding a ventriloquist's puppet. Amy explained how the student had hardly spoken in class prior to this project. Amy said that she had even had trouble getting to know the student herself because of how little he had talked. However, Amy explained how the student came alive during the project. Amy said, "I feel like that's really successful because he just came alive after this project and now I get to really see the true version of him."

In the next photograph Amy shared with me, there is a boy sitting at a desk with a poster board divider and a tablet computer. Amy explained that the student was brainstorming for a project-based learning unit they did in class. In the unit, students researched a habitat type to then create an animal with adaptations that would allow it to survive in that habitat. Amy shared how the student was one that had previously struggled and not been particularly engaged in school work. However, she said, pointing to the picture, "These are all things he found about grasslands and he would not stop talking about grasslands. His animal that he created was actually very impressive."

Amy showed me a photograph of students around a table, most of whom are bundled up in coats. She told me that it was actually a sixth-grade field trip on which she managed to get one of her second-grade students permission to go. In explaining the photograph, she said:

This is a student who typically does not perform that well, but his strength is definitely his interest in science and really dinosaurs and fossils is his main interest. So, I wanted to really dive into that with him and I knew I could get him to write and read as long as it was about dinosaurs. So, I actually found out they were going on this and I told them they couldn't leave without him. I didn't even take this picture, the sixth-grade teacher sent it to me after he had gone on this field trip with them. After that, his performance has been a lot better.

The next photograph contained a twelfth-grade student helping a couple second-grade students in Amy's class. Amy explained how the high school student was actually in her first second grade class when she started teaching in West District. The student now takes part of her day to walk over to the elementary school to work with students. Amy called the high school student helping "a huge success there for her to be able to come back and to help my current second graders."

The following photograph contained a group of students spread around a room sitting on couches with a gentleman standing in front of the room presenting. Amy explained that the gentleman in the photograph is an insurance agent in town and has written a children's book. As part of a Book Tastings project where students were able to learn a bit about different books and, in this case, hear from the author. Amy said:

The reason I found this successful is he's actually a [West District] graduate and he's an author of a book, a children's book. So, my kids got to see that kids like them who graduate from [West District] go on to become authors if they're interested in doing that. So, he's sharing his book with them.

Amy then shared a photograph of a student working with a para-educator drawing a picture of a snowman. Amy explained how the student had pretty severe physical disabilities and as a result was often pulled out of class for therapies and is on a heavily modified curriculum. However, in this case the student was able to work on the same thing as everyone else. Amy said, "I just love that here he is doing exactly what they're

doing and I think it's good for him to see that and I also think it's good for my other kids to see that.”

In the last two photographs Amy returned to students from her original second-grade class who were at the time just a couple months from graduating. In the first, the student in the earlier photograph helping students is featured with the entire second-grade class holding an oversized check for a competitive scholarship that she won. Amy discussed how she enjoyed her students getting to see someone from their town being successful. In the final photograph, Amy herself is pictured along with the entire original second-class dressed for prom. The class invited Amy to be their speaker at prom. Looking at the photograph, Amy said, “All of the seniors that are now going to be graduating, I had them in second grade...So, full circle and getting to watch them succeed has been really cool.” After our conversation Amy and I decided it would be best for me to observe a regular school day in her second-grade class. The following vignette is from a day when I observed her classroom.

**“Be in a place that you can make smart choices.”** “Are you ready for the gallery walk?” Amy asks one of her second graders. The students are working on a project-based learning unit where they are creating fliers for local businesses. Students around her classroom are spread at a variety of desks and tables. Some are at communal tables and a few have individual desks. The room is somewhat dimly lit, with most desks and tables having their own lamp and a few floor lamps spread around the room. The overall ambiance of the room has a vague similarity to a coffee house. Music faintly plays from a speaker at the front of the room.

Students are working on their fliers or waiting for Amy to check them over. The students who are finished are playing a math facts game on a tablet computer. Mixed into the chaos is a student in the corner with tears streaming down his face. He injured his ankle at recess. As Amy makes her way around the room she kneels near the student to ask about his injury. It is apparently a result of jumping off the playground equipment at the encouragement of some peers. They discuss whether or not it was a good choice and Amy offers to get the boy's mother, who works in the building. A para-educator brings the boy an ice pack and he continues with his project. With about 15 minutes left in the school day most students are ready for a gallery walk the next day where their peers will give feedback on their fliers.

Amy tells the students to clean up from their projects. There is a small amount of complaining from a couple of students that wanted to keep working. Instead of personal desks, students have individual caddies they keep their materials in that they can move to where they are working. A girl, who uses a walker to get around the room, is struggling to put her things away and Amy asks who her helper is for that day. After the brief chaos of cleaning up, the students settle in to listen to Amy read a book for the final few minutes.

"Be in a place that you can make smart choices," Amy tells them. Some lay on the floor, while others remain in chairs. Amy starts into reading the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. The kids are completely enthralled with the story and bursts of laughter punctuate action in the story, especially when Dudley falls into the snake enclosure at the zoo. Amy is met with groans when she tells them it is time to stop

the story for the day. The students line up and Amy wishes each of them a good afternoon as they leave the classroom for the day.

**Amy interpretation.** Many examples of success Amy showcased indicated that she, like many other teachers among my participants, places intentional emphasis on the success of each student. This is demonstrated through the repeated examples she gives of findings activities or opportunities that helped previously unengaged students connect with both her as the teacher and their classmates. She has obviously made many structural changes to her physical classroom. Not only has her classroom spilled out into the hallway to include student stations there, but the room itself is much more similar to the inviting atmosphere of a coffee house than the structured rows of desks found in many classrooms.

It is also evident that Amy has taken an iterative approach to evaluation, at least in the project-based learning unit I observed. As she went about the room while students worked she would provide feedback and input for students to correct or improve their projects, rather than simply having the students submit them and then receive a quantitative or categorical grade. Quite literally amongst these changes were areas where students targeted classical curricula including math facts and reading. Although there was certainly an emphasis on students developing the ‘soft skills’ of cooperation and collaboration, as students finished the draft of their projects they quickly transitioned to practicing math facts on a tablet computer.

### **James**

Of the participants, James is the one with whom I had the least experience prior to the study. He is a bear of a man standing over six foot tall and solidly built. However, he



has a purposeful kindness in every interaction. He has a greying beard and an intense curiosity. It would be hard to believe that he had ever come across a book that he did not believe was worth the time to read, and certainly had never met a person whose ideas he would not hear out. He somehow seems equally fascinated by all ideas he comes across, and seems to maintain that same level of curiosity. In one of our interactions he asked me about things I had recently read. I described one of Freire's works that I had recently finished. Within a week of that conversation James had ordered it, waited for it to arrive at his house, read it, and told my wife how much he appreciated the book recommendation. He gives the distinct impression that if he were ever to play an Elizabethan scholar at a Renaissance fair, all he would need would be the period clothing.

I interviewed James in his classroom on the first floor of the art deco style high school in West District. He readily admitted that technology is not his strength as he struggled to find the photographs he took on his phone. He has taught in West District for five years in a variety of language arts, speech, and drama courses. His classroom has long plastic tables arranged more or less in a U shape. A whiteboard toward the back of the room has a weekly schedule for each of his classes. His own desk is in the back of the room in front of a row of built in bookcases, likely put there in 1938, filled with about a dozen copies each of many classic titles.

The first photograph he showed me was from community service day. Like Alice, he participated with his homeroom students on this day, which in his case are eighth-grade students. To describe the photograph, he said:

The reason I kept this photo and put it in is that in the beginning of the year I felt like when I inherited the eighth-grade I had all of these horror stories about how some of the kids in the eighth-grade were such a handful and the previous two teachers had had trouble. Honestly, I feel like this is one of my best classes and

the reason is one of the programs we implemented here which is the homeroom twice a day. I feel like that is probably why I have seen some of these kids grow and mature. Some of these kids got in trouble weekly. I have some of them that didn't get in trouble but a few times all year. I attribute a lot of that to the homeroom, the comradery, the social emotional stuff and just our connection. They just try better because we have some relationship built.

He went on to clarify that this particular eighth-grade class had a bit of reputation, but in both homeroom and his language arts class he felt like he built a relationship with them.

In the next photograph, James showed me teachers in the hallway greeting students before the school day started. He explained that he felt the social interaction and courteous feeling in the school that was an improvement over previous school years. James attributed much of this change to the homeroom program the school added. He said, "I think there's definitely more of a connection between teachers and students and I definitely label that a success over previous years."

The next photograph James showed had a painted toilet and a white sport utility vehicle with the school's name on it in the background. As he laughed, he explained. The colorful toilet was a part of a fundraiser his eighth-grade homeroom students organized. Community members could pay a fee to have one of colorful toilets placed in someone's yard. The recipient of the toilet could then pay to have it removed and placed in a different yard. James shared how when it came time to place the toilets he had more toilets to deliver than he could personally handle driving students around so they could place them. He explained how an administrator in the building jumped in to help take a group of students around. James also explained how he saw success in the students' eagerness to work on the fundraiser project.

James continued to focus on his homeroom students in the next photograph. In the photograph, students are in James's classroom at the beginning of the school day. He

said, “Some days, we just come in here and we just talk and this is a day we were just in here shooting the breeze.” He described how he saw success in the more comfortable and relaxed attitude he observed in students. Moreover, he felt that homeroom had helped develop relationships and was a good way for students to start and end the day.

The next photograph showed a high school student laying on a couch before school. James again emphasized the relaxed atmosphere he had observed in the school.

He said:

She’s not uptight, she’s just like “I’m going to start my day just chilling out”. She was just relaxed, taking it easy before it got hectic and she felt like she could do that, and we have a space for students to do that in that little lounge area right outside Ms. [principal]’s office. You know, she’s kind of at ease and I think that’s more of a success as students feel at ease than they did previously.

In the next photograph James spoke to the changes the school made as a part of the Kansans Can Redesign process. The photograph showed a principal and another teacher in a meeting. In discussing it, he said:

The reason I saw this as success is, I don’t even remember what the problem was, but we had something that came up like eligibility policy or something that was wrong. We made a decision, implemented it, and it failed. We changed it that day, right then. We decided as a team we had to do something else and we pivoted right there. We didn’t let it go on for six months not working. I’ve got to say that in the past I don’t think we would have done that. I think we would have made a decision and rode it out for a semester even though it was terrible, because of how we used to do things.

James then returned to his eighth-grade students with a photograph of them working on their computers. He explained how they were completing a project-based learning unit as a part of the online curriculum used in seventh through ninth-grade classes. He emphasized the 100 percent level of engagement with every student in the photograph visibly working. James stated that he attributes the level of engagement to the online platform more so than his particular teaching on that day.

The next photograph featured a group of teachers sitting at a table as a part of the training for the online curriculum. The teachers were shown working with the mentor provided by the curriculum company to lay out plans for how it would be utilized in their school. In clarifying the success James saw in the photograph he said:

We sat down as a team and worked together and *man* that's way different than the old days. It used to be you were the English teacher and you were off in your own corner, math teacher, science teacher. There's been kind of a collaborative thing that is even starting to spread down to people who are not on the [building leadership] team, which is good. It's starting to get better.

He continued to emphasize the importance of collaboration between teachers in response to community backlash in response to the Redesign changes. Of community backlash he said:

Absolutely, you have to weather the storms together. That's really true. We aren't done with that either. We had some just yesterday. We're not done. At the end of the year we have some parents that are getting ready to be upset because their kids are going to probably end up doing summer school and they're going to be upset about it.

The next photograph showed two high school students hugging. James explained how he saw importance and value in the bonds and relationships between students. He said, "In a small school they're close and I just thought it was a poignant photo. That's success in any school to have your students care about each other." He felt that moments such as these students hugging in the hallway before school serve as examples of these types of relationships.

James swiped on his phone to then show me a photograph from the recent school play. He explained how despite some struggles, he saw success in the school play. While looking at the photograph he explained:

This one was the school play this year, which wasn't a great school play. This was the most disorganized thing I've ever been through or had one like this. I think

some of it was Redesign, some of it was the kids. It was just crazy. Some of it was me, but we couldn't get students to take part in part of the play, we couldn't get enough roles filled to have enough extras so some of the teachers stepped up and said, "Ok, no kids. We'll help." I was flabbergasted. I never had anyone do that before. So that was kind of a collaborative effort to do that.

He continued to emphasize that even a school administrator joined in the play, despite being well outside of his comfort zone. Teachers and the maintenance director also joined to build the sets and props because there were not enough students to do it. James felt that the teachers and administration joining to allow the school play to move forward contributed toward strengthening relationships within the school.

The next photograph showed a teacher in a superhero costume. James explained that the photograph was from a new cosplay class that had been offered that school year. Students that participated in the class earned a speech credit. James explained how there were struggles, which he attributed to both he and the other teacher being stretched thin and having very little weekly time with the students. However, despite the struggles he saw success in the class and said:

The idea that we took and did something as heady as a cosplay class, we took some risks. We tried to do something that was kind of fresh and modern and out there. I saw that as some success. I mean it wasn't all that and a bag of chips the first year. If we do it again it will be much, much better, but we tried it. That was success to me.

He continued to describe the overall success he saw in the redesign process at the school:

I really think that's the innovation part right now. We know what we're doing isn't working the way we want it to. I feel like a lot of things are working better, but I feel like there's still a lot of innovation to follow. We can find things that work better. Just so many things that we're stuck doing that never worked, but we've always done it that way so we just keep doing it. We try to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic sometimes, which I didn't make that up I saw it somewhere. I think education has a bad habit of doing that. We just make things look nice on a sinking ship. I think we're trying to not do that anymore.

After the interview, James and I agreed that homeroom would be the best setting for me to observe. The vignette that follows is from a day I observed an eighth-grade homeroom period.

**“We are in what business?”** It is just a few minutes before the beginning of the school day and James has five Junior High boys waiting in his classroom. They talk quietly about who is capable of running what time in the mile while James works at his desk. At 7:56 AM, Blake Shelton’s “God’s Country” comes over the PA speaker. As Shelton’s voice fades singing about the devil going down to Georgia through the tinny tone of the PA speaker, the Pledge of Allegiance and morning announcements start. The school turned off the bells earlier in the year, so students keep track of what time they need to move between classes. After a quick lunch count some of the students shuffle out of the room while the rest of the eighth-grade students come in for a fifteen-minute breakout session. Today they are getting ready for parent-teacher conferences in a couple weeks.

“Partner up and practice [your presentation], because whose education is it?” James asks.

“Yours!” another teacher blurts out as she passes in the hallway. The kids pair off with pages to serve as guides for their presentations. They share their strengths, weaknesses, and goals. The students awkwardly take turns practicing, which is briefly interrupted by bits of giggling.

“Make sure everyone gets a chance to practice,” James tells them. He continues, “Do you anticipate questions your parents might ask?”

One student responds in a sarcastic tone, “Why am I such a failure?”

James quips back, “You’re not a failure.” The students start to get distracted with side conversations, so James calls them back. “I need the whole group's attention,” he starts, “100 percent engagement, 100 percent of the time.” This is also the goal he has written on the whiteboard. “We aren’t in the education business, we are in what business?” A student responds by shouting the name of the online curriculum they use for their classes. It is impossible to tell if she is being sarcastic with excellent comedic timing, or honestly misunderstood the question. Both options seem like equally likely. James continues unphased, “...the dream business.”

As they finish their pages for parent-teacher conferences, James starts, “I don’t tell you what to think, I tell you how to think.” What follows in the few minutes remaining in the session is a discussion of comments a particular politician made about farmers the day before. There is talk of what the term “elitist” means. James tells the class, “We have some elitists in our state. We have some people that think that what happens west of a certain line doesn’t matter.” The students nod in agreement. As the breakout session comes to an end, the students give James their parent-teacher conference sheets as an exit ticket as they leave the room.

**James interpretation.** Deciphering James’s intentions required little interpretation: he had “100% engagement every student/every class” displayed prominently on his front white board. As with all of the other participants, James’s intentions are aimed at the success of each individual student. In discussing successes, he emphasized the impacts of two areas not mentioned often by other participants.

James at several points placed an emphasis on the hands-on role he saw administrators in the building willing to accept. This included an example of an

administrator driving students around town as part of a fundraiser. He also referenced an administrator taking on a part in the school play when there were not enough students interested in participating in the play to complete the cast. He also emphasized what he felt was a stronger relationship between administrators and teachers in the building than in the past.

James did indicate what he perceived to be structural barriers in the new cosplay class he described. He saw success in that the school attempted adding a new class in something well outside of traditional course topics. However, he expressed frustration they had with getting students to complete work and indicated that he was not sure that any students had enrolled in the class for the next year. Ultimately, he referenced the small amount of weekly contact time he and the other teacher of the class had in the flexible modular schedule.

### **West District Reflection**

Much like East District, all three participants in West District were intensely focused on individual student success. The Redesign process had resulted in structural changes related to successes, particularly those that Alice and James discussed. They both described success they saw in the homeroom time that was added. Moreover, James described a new course offering that came out of the Redesign process where he saw success. However, there were structural changes that created challenges, including the lack of contact time James described with his cosplay class. James also described some community backlash to the Redesign, indicative of struggles related to school-community relations.



### **Summary**

Ultimately, the purpose of the descriptions of the interviews, photographs, and observation of participants was to create a representation of what types of success are recognized by the participants in rural schools. These representations served as a lens to consider what actions participants perceived to be successes as well as what values and beliefs participants held related to student success. In so doing, I intended to show the great successes occurring in these schools and provide a basis for determining what Kansans Can conceals.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **THEMATICS, EVALUATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

The purpose of this study was not to generate a generalizable definition of success that is most representative of rural communities. Even if I were to create such a definition it would have all of the same limitations of objective definitions against which Cavell (2009) warned. Rather, this study originated from a perspective that a plurality of views of student success can exist within a single school and a single community, as individual educators must imagine success in different contexts with different students. As such, the goal was to understand individual participants' perceptions of and beliefs about student success and how they translate success into particular contexts and thus give it meaning. Within the context of the Kansans Can policy, which claims, "Kansas leads the world in the success of each student" (KSDE, 2018b), the goal was to understand what the definition of success used in the policy conceals about student success as emplaced by the participants of this study. In so doing, I wished to show what characteristic types of success recognized in rural communities are given voice in a policy with a singular definition and which are not. Specifically, I sought to consider how the Kansans Can policy definition of success could suppress other types of success and values, particularly those in rural communities.

#### **Types of Success Recognized in Rural Communities**

To delineate what constitutes a type of success I started by considering what particular actions participants determined to be successes as represented in their

photographs. In coding the interviews from the photographs, I sought to create an understanding of the plurality of types of success recognized by these participants and as a result the underlying values and beliefs. I looked for patterns in values, beliefs, and types of success recognized across participants (Saldaña, 2013). These themes also provide a basis for considering what it is that rural schools do in their respective communities.

### **Actions Represented in Types of Success**

Each of the actions below represents a way in which participants took an abstract concept in success and placed it in the daily lived experience of their rural school. That is, these actions are, at the fundamental level, what success looked like to the participants. Whereas policy might treat success as placeless, these actions represent success as emplaced by these educators. As Cavell (2009) would describe, these represent types of success which have gained their meaning through the action of the participant identifying them.

From Eisner's ecology (1988, 1994c) it would be useful to consider these actions within the pedagogical dimension of schooling. Eisner (1994c) argued that "virtually all curricula are mediated by a teacher" (p. 77). As such, he suggested that how curricula are mediated is greatly influential on what is learned. The participants, apart from perhaps James's discussion of a new class he created, did not discuss altering curricula as a path to student success. Rather, they were all quite bound by state standards for at least the majority of curricular content. However, they had greater flexibility in how they approached the curricula. Eisner (1994c) treated the pedagogical dimension quite directly as teaching, so it might seem counterintuitive to consider the successful student actions

participants recognized as indicative of pedagogy. However, Dewey (1997) argued for using the effect of an experience as a criterion to judge if it was educative. As such, if the effect of the experiences, or actions, listed below is that the participants deemed them to be a success for their students, the opportunity becomes to consider the actions as reflective of the participants' views toward pedagogy.

In coding interviews about photographs I marked each description by the verbiage and action the participant described in each photograph. Some descriptions may not have used the particular term under which they were classified, but captured the same sentiment. For example, William described “a lot of frustration with [a] project” which was coded as “struggling,” even though he did not use that particular term. I elected not to use frequency counts for times a particular action appeared, because that would have assigned equal value to each photograph, which was not necessarily reflective of the value or emphasis participants placed on each photograph. Moreover, the purpose of the study was not to decide what types of success are most common in rural schools, but rather to understand the variety of types of success that are recognized.

Ultimately, the goal in identifying the types of success recognized by participants is to form a basis of comparison for the kind of success Kansans Can is able to identify. Kansans Can elaborates a theory of educational success, but the task of revealing its limitations does not require the construction of an alternative theory. The themes that emerge inductively from the data collected from participants, as coded using the process described in chapter three, therefore need not add up to a holistic alternative vision of student success, but merely show the places in which Kansans Can's version is unwarrantedly limited. This pragmatic approach follows Uhrmacher et al. (2017) in

thinking about varying applications of educational criticism to different kinds of problems. Although the authors wrote specifically about how pragmatic educational criticism might be utilized to address racial injustices, their suggestion that “[t]he goal is to test an idea in the real world and to examine its consequences” (p. 77) is the approach I have taken here: *Kansans Can* provides a theory, and the interviews and observations in this study provides a pragmatic test of that theory. The types of success that my data expose then provide a set of comparisons to test the universal definition of success postulated by *Kansans Can*, and, in Uhrmacher et al.’s words, “examine its consequences” for rural communities.

**Struggling.** Struggling was an action related to success that was represented in many participants’ photographs. Many participants identified something as a success, not because of the product of the action, but rather because the action itself was difficult. This emphasis on process relates to Dewey’s (1997) emphasis on the role of experience in education. Dewey further emphasizes the need to attend to the qualities of an experience to determine if it is educative. By recognizing success in struggling, participants showed that their focus was not specifically on outcomes, or even necessarily that students participated in a particular experience, but that the experience itself was difficult. William described how he saw success in the wood canoe one of his students, his daughter, built. In describing the photograph, he did not emphasize the finish or the beauty of the finished product, which is rather apparent, but rather the frustration and difficulty that went into the process.

Similarly, Emberly, in describing a photograph of a student reading, emphasized the struggle the student experienced in building up to being able to sit and read for a

sustained period of time. She spoke to the stamina the student had to develop and the difficulties he experienced in developing that stamina. Sidney also spoke about a student who often struggles in class and the success she saw in a photograph where he was completely engaged for the entire 20-minute session he had with her. In her role as a Title I intervention teacher, Sidney explained that any student with which she works has struggled academically. As such, she used that struggle as a context through which to view student success. She said, “Student success in my room is very different from student success in a different setting or for a different student.” In so doing, she provided a concrete example of the problems of objective definitions and the use of those definitions in creating educational policy (Cavell, 2009; Gottlieb, 2015, 2020).

**Designing and creating.** Many participants saw success in the act of students designing and creating. Alice spoke to this in describing a project designed completely by her twelfth-grade language arts class. This was very akin to the vision of education in fostering creativity proposed by Robinson (2017). Robinson refers to creativity as, “having original ideas that have value” (p. 151). As such, to consider an action as creative, it must be both original and of value. In describing this particular example of the guide her students created for incoming ninth-grade students, Alice very specifically referred to both the originality of the guide as a school project, and the value she believed it would offer incoming ninth-grade students as something created by older students from their community.

Alice also described the success she saw in the open house night organized by one of her students and the crane machine designed by a student that was displayed at that open house night. Amy shared a similar view when she spoke about the “Dad’s Day at

School” that one of her students planned. More specifically, the student’s independence in planning the event reflects Eisner’s (2011) description of creative self-expression in which he says, “Teacher intervention was very limited, with little or no attention paid to historical context” (p. 33). In East District, Sidney discussed the success she saw in the robots a student designed and William discussed the piece students 3D modeled to attach a permanent marker to the CNC machine. In an additional example of an idea that has value, William discussed how students used the attachment to allow the CNC machine to be able to create posters which were used at events at the school and around town.

**Connecting.** In a number of cases participants identified successes not necessarily based on the action or product itself, but in the connection students formed with the activity or amongst themselves through the activity. A prime example is the project William described where students created family name signs on the CNC router with images they found personally meaningful for not only themselves, but their families. This type of connection relates to Eisner’s (1994a) description of forms of representation as a “publically sharable image” (p. 40) of what was meaningful to the students in their experiences with their family. In particular, the example with deer, turkey, and coyotes was a form of representation of the experience that particular student had in learning to hunt with his grandfather. Sidney discussed the success she saw in a bulletin board where elementary students displayed quotes from books they felt related to their lives. Demonstrative of success in the form of students forming connections to each other, Emberly described two students choosing to work together on a project who were not particularly socially connected to each other prior to the project. In Emberly’s words, “This is not a friendship that would happen any other place.”

Both James and Alice, in describing several photographs, discussed the success they saw in connections built amongst students and between themselves and students as a part of the homeroom program in West District. In fact, many other successes they described, such as fundraisers and community service days, were framed within the context of the connections they felt were created as a part of the homeroom program. Amy saw success in similar connections that a reserved student formed with his classmates as a result of his passion project in which he created a ventriloquist dummy. These social interactions are particularly relevant in rural communities as Thomas et al. argued (2011) that the fundamental trait of rural communities is the types of social interactions present, rather than a particular population size.

**Giving back.** An action in which both Amy and William in particular saw success was students contributing back to their schools and communities. William spoke at length about how the construction and sale of Tiny Houses at the school had funded learning opportunities for future classes. Moreover, he described how students who built the first Tiny Houses ultimately funded opportunities and scholarships for students that would take the classes after them. Amy described the success she saw in her former student, who was now in the twelfth grade, coming over to work with students in her second-grade class. She saw not only the success of that student giving back, but also how that student was an example in that success for the younger students. This is precisely the type of civic engagement that Demarest (2015) suggests can be accomplished through place-based curriculum. Although in William's case, the construction of the Tiny House is not specifically place-based, the value he described that it offered the community and future students certainly is.



**Problem solving.** Both Alice and Emberly described seeing success in students' problem solving. Alice spoke about her students solving problems in working on understanding a project-based learning unit related to injustices as part of their online curriculum. She described how students had difficulty connecting with some of the topics and ultimately had to research and problem-solve until they understood the issue well enough to present. She shared how ultimately some students were almost in tears presenting their topics because of how passionate they become over the course of the project.

Emberly shared an experience in which she watched students problem solve trying different mixtures of a new resin when she visited William's class. She discussed how successful she thought it was that the students did multiple trials and research to solve their own problem instead of relying on William for an answer. Emberly described the process of solving their own problems instead of relying on a teacher to solve a problem for them as "what I want all of our kids to be doing." These examples mirror the Deweyan (Dewey, 1997) emphasis on the qualities of experiences discussed under struggling. Again, it was not necessarily that Alice's students had quality presentations or the students Emberly described finding a successful resin mix, but it was the problem-solving process in which the participants saw success.

**Engaging.** Although most participants described success in some activity in which students were engaged, Emberly had a particularly pointed example. She described a student who was successful in all of the typical measures student success. The student was valedictorian, very involved in activities, and incredibly disciplined in her academics. Emberly described how the student engaged in an activity because she found

it enjoyable and personally meaningful. Furthermore, Emberly explained how she saw success in the student choosing an activity just because she enjoyed it instead of participating out of a sense of obligation. This harkens to Noddings (2005) suggestion of happiness as an aim of education. Stated more simply, Noddings provides a lens to consider that this student was successful specifically because she was happy in what she was doing.

**Collaborating.** Although similar to connection in that it deals with relationships between students, collaboration dealt specifically with individuals working together to accomplish a specific task. Sidney and James in particular spoke to success they saw in students working together to accomplish a task. Sidney, in describing a couple photographs, discussed how she saw success in two students working together to problem solve the coding for a robot in an after-school program. Even though neither student had ever coded before, Sidney explained how they collaborated and figured out the issues on their own. She shared a photograph of the intense joy on the students' faces the moment the coding finally worked.

James discussed how not only students collaborated, but also an administrator in their fundraiser placing toilets in community members' yards. He described a level of collaboration that seemed to surprise him as a contrast to previous school years. He spoke to how he saw the entire fundraiser process as a success specifically because of the level of collaboration. These collaborations are reflective of the emphasis Thomas et al. (2011) place on a sense of community in rural areas.

**Tapestry of actions in types of success.** Although the actions represented in types of success were diverse there were themes that emerged. First, participants often

viewed success through the lenses of relationships and growth, as is discussed later in this chapter. Additionally, participants were very attuned to processes and actions themselves and tended not to focus on specific outcomes. Perhaps as a result of the intimacy of rural communities, participants were able to focus on the entirety of students' experiences, with context, rather than focusing exclusively on outcomes.

### **Values Related to Types of Success**

Saldaña (2013) described a value as “the importance we attribute to oneself, another person, thing, or idea” (p. 89). In recognizing an action participants reveal values, just as Eisner (1994c) argues evaluation often reveals the aims of a school. As such, I considered particular examples of student success represented in photographs for what underlying value they could represent. That is to say, something was a success because it represented a development of an attribute or a character trait the participant saw to be of value, or it contributed toward the development of something of value. In so doing, I considered why participants saw a particular action as successful or through what lens they viewed success based on the language participants used in describing photographs. For example, Amy spoke about how a couple of her photographs were able to show her second-grades students examples of success from people within their community. Although the example of success itself was not community-specific, such as a student winning a large scholarship, she defined the success in terms of what she saw it meaning to the community. As with actions, I did not use count frequency as to not unintentionally weigh certain values greater than others.

Values represented in types of success relate to the evaluative dimension of Eisner's ecology (1988, 1994c). Eisner (1994c) suggests that evaluation is “the making of

value judgements” (p. 80). That is to say that if a participant recognizes an action as valuable, there are criteria against which they are comparing that action. As a result, a consideration of what, and perhaps more importantly *how*, participants determined an action to be successful provides a lens to the underlying values for both the participants and by extension their communities.

In some cases, the connection between the action perceived to be successful and the underlying value is pretty direct and apparent. To take the example of the success William saw in the students funding future opportunities in their school and community through the sale of Tiny Houses, it is not difficult to connect the recognition of that action as successful with the values of community and service. However, there are a few values that were represented in the data that are less apparent and well worth considering. Among these were workmanship, independence, persistence, and unity.

**Workmanship.** William spoke in several examples to how he perceived success in terms of the workmanship of what students were building. In the example of the staircase the students built, he described how he saw it as a success because every angle was perfect. However, he discussed the value of perfection in the angles not from a perspective of perfectionism, but in terms of making the experience of guests who would ultimately stay in the Tiny House enjoyable. In his words, if the angles were off a bit and one was to climb the staircase, “You’re toast.” He shared a similar pride in the quality of work students demonstrated in the pour of the concrete countertops. Ultimately, with most photographs of the Tiny House he described them with the eye of a contractor reviewing his work. The value of workmanship is probably no better represented than when he said, “Most of the time, if it’s not perfect, we redo it.” William’s comments

reflect to Eisner's (2011) argument that the arts could teach education that "the way something is formed matters" (p. 197). It was not enough that students build the staircase, but rather that the way it was built was not only practical, but reflective of who the students were as carpenters.

**Independence.** Many of the successes Emberly in particular described were evident of valuing independence. There were several photographs where she explained how she saw success in the fact that the action was student initiative. Perhaps the best example is when she described the model truck a student built as part of a passion project. After describing what each component of the model was supposed to represent, she said, "I think it's a success any time he does a project on his own, and can explain things." In this description, Emberly places a further emphasis on Dewey's (1997) call for considering the qualities of an experience. It was not enough that the student created the truck to be successful, but that he did so as a result of an independent experience.

Emphasizing independence was not limited to Emberly. Sidney described the success she saw in students using the owl chart to identify their own emotions. Amy and Alice both described the success they saw in students planning events on their own. William shared how he saw success in a student gradually asking fewer questions as she went through a woodworking project and started dealing with issues that came up on her own. Independence is a particularly interesting value given Thomas et al.'s (2011) suggestion of the emphasis rural communities place on self-sufficiency.

**Persistence.** Alice had two particular examples of success that were both representative of valuing persistence. In the first she discussed how she watched students work on their justices and injustices project as a part of their online curriculum. She

described how students researched, worked through the steps in the curriculum, and ultimately worked through a lot of difficulties to ultimately present their projects. She also spoke to how her homeroom students kept working to try to solve an escape room. In describing their success, she said, “It was tough, but they were able to do that.” In harkening to Dewey’s (1997) perspective on experience, Alice placed an emphasis on the characteristics of her students as revealed through the experience, rather than explicitly the outcome of the experience itself.

**Unity.** James and Alice both described success they saw in students forming relationships. Both James and Alice discussed the success they saw in the relationships their homeroom students formed. However, Alice also described how her twelfth-grade language arts students came together to create a guide to high school for incoming ninth grade students. She discussed how this group of students, that in her words “a lot of people just kind of wrote off,” admitted and owned up to their previous mistakes. Ultimately, she explained how a group of students, some of whom had gone to school together for thirteen years, who had not previously really worked together, formed relationships to come together to pull off the project.

**Tapestry of values in types of student success.** Part of the values that emerged from participants are highly reflective of Thomas et al.’s (2011) description of rural communities. This includes an emphasis on relationships within the community itself and self-sufficiency. However, it is interesting that William, a lifelong rural resident in East District, placed an emphasis on values more reflective of Eisner’s (2011) description of what the arts had to offer. This could be due at least in part to William’s craftsman ability in carpentry.

### **Beliefs Represented in Types of Success**

Saldaña (2013) described beliefs as “part of a system that includes our values and attitudes, plus our personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals, and other interpretive perceptions of the social world” (p. 89-90). As such, beliefs are values filtered through the lens of experience. As a result, shared values can produce differing or even opposing beliefs. Beliefs are reflective of the intentional dimension of Eisner’s ecology (1988, 1994c). Eisner considered the intentional dimension to be the aims or goals of schooling. In other words, it indicates what participants think the nature or purpose of schooling is or should be. I am by no means claiming that the beliefs below are an exhaustive list of the intentions participants had. It would be rather foolish to assume that participants wished for students to be successful, but did not intend for them to learn particular content. Rather these are beliefs indicative of intentions that are potentially unique to this setting or particularly impactful for the participants’ communities.

There were a number of beliefs that arose from the data. In most cases, participants indicated beliefs during the interview in statements they made expanding upon examples of success represented by photographs. These were statements that were typically offered as general perspectives about what constitutes student success, rather than an interpretation or perspective related to a specific action represented in a photograph. As with values and actions, I did not use count frequency as in some cases participants only stated a belief once, but did so in such a direct manner that it was obviously quite important to them.

**Need to prepare students for careers.** William demonstrated his belief that students should leave his classes prepared for a career in construction. There were several new components he discussed incorporating in the Tiny House build, such as a concrete pour and setting an interior door, because they would all be skills students would need in a construction career. This was probably best represented in how he discussed including cabinet construction and installation as a part of their most recent Tiny House and the detail work students had to do to complete it. He said, “If you are going to go into the industry you will probably end up selling some of your own cabinets and no matter what you do, there’s always going to be a piece of trim.” This belief could be at least partially as a result of the leading role the business community has taken in defining the aims of education (Eisner, 1994a).

**Need to depart from traditional education.** James framed many successes he saw in a belief that there is a need to depart from traditional practices in education. He discussed photographs that showed teachers collaborating or greeting students and discussed how he felt that was a drastic improvement over previous years. He attributed these improvements to participation in the Kansans Can Redesign. Ultimately, he explicitly stated this belief when he said:

We know what we’re doing isn’t working the way we want it to. I feel like a lot of things are working better, but I feel like there’s still a lot of innovation to follow. We can find things that work better. Just so many things that we’re stuck doing that never worked, but we’ve always done it that way so we just keep doing it. We try to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic sometimes.

At the surface level, this belief could seem reflective of Dewey’s (1997) distinction between traditional and progressive education or Freire’s (1970) banking versus problem-posing version of education. However, many of James’s descriptions



specifically, and the arguments in *Kansans Can* (KSDE, 2020) more broadly deal with the need to change the structural element of schooling. Although these changes could, and hopefully will, contribute in moving toward Dewey's progressive and Freiere's problem-posing education, both of these versions of education could exist without the structural changes of course offerings or school day schedules.

**Need to commit to the school as a collective.** In addition to his discussion of the need to depart from traditional education practices, James emphasized the belief of needing to commit to the school as a collective. He described the community backlash West District faced as they opted to participate in the *Kansans Can* redesign. Of the community backlash he said, "You have to weather the storms together." He also explained how the school came together, including teachers taking roles, to make sure the school play was successful. He explained, "We couldn't get students to take part in part of the play. We couldn't get enough roles filled to have extras, so some of the teachers stepped up and said, 'Ok, no kids, we'll help'." This emphasis on community is very representative of Thomas et al.'s (2011) description of rural areas.

### **Lenses for Defining Student Success**

It may be tempting to see the types of success recognized by participants as simply products of good teaching, that is to see these types of success as *not* place-specific, but as highly general. In many ways, this might be fair as educators in almost any situation would find it successful to have students engaged, problem-solving, and creating. However, what is unique to this particular setting is *how* participants were able to recognize success. It became apparent that there were two lenses through which most participants were defining student success: relationships and growth. Although

participants had a wide range of examples of student success, many of the examples and the way participants discussed them ultimately were filtered through at least one of these two lenses. Eisner (1994b) in speaking to the qualities of an environment wrote, “*Which* particular qualities the organism chooses to attend to and *how* he or she decides to respond are not completely influenced by the qualities themselves” (p. 27). That is to say the viewer, in this case the participants, applies his or her own lens of experience and competency to what they are viewing. He further argued, “What we have noted thus far is not only that there is a transactional or reciprocal relationship between the qualities of the environment and the cognitive structures or anticipatory schemata a person possesses, but also that perception itself is constructive” (p. 27). In this study, it is critical to recognize that although the types of success may not be specific to these particular types of communities, *how* the participants were able to recognize success certainly are.

**Relationships as a lens for defining student success.** Although there were participants that saw students forming relationships as an example of success, there was evidence that many participants used relationships as a lens through which they viewed student success. This harkens to Thomas et al’s (2011) recognition of relationships as a defining characteristic of rural communities. One example of a participant using relationships as a lens to define student success is the student Emberly discussed who had read an entire book for the first time in his twelfth-grade year. She pointed out that the student had not had a grade of a D or F in any class that year, which was the first year of his high school career that was the case. Her explanation indicated that she saw this as a success not because any student avoiding having a D or F for an entire school year would be a success, but because it represented a stark improvement for this student. Ultimately,

she was only able to recognize this success because of the multiple year relationship she had with the student, even years in which she did not have him in class.

William described the success he saw in students creating family name signs along with images they found meaningful. In discussing one a student made with deer, turkeys, and coyotes on it he said, “His grandpa is really into hunting and I think he’s getting into it. I think he’s really into spending time with his grandpa more than he is into hunting.” Ultimately, he was able to recognize the success of a student honoring his grandfather through what he created in class, which was only possible through the relationship that William not only had with the student, but with the student’s grandfather. In an additional example of how William used relationships as a lens to determine success, he described asking a student what his dad would think of some work he did on the Tiny House. Ultimately, the example was only possible and powerful because of the relationship William had with the student’s father.

Amy had a handful of photographs related to the successes she saw in her original second grade class, which at the time were finishing their high school careers and about to graduate. Ultimately, she was only able to observe the successes because of the continued relationships she had with the students, even ten years after they left her classroom. This relationship is obviously deeper than Amy passively observing former students, as those students personally invited Amy to their prom. From these three examples, it is apparent that how participants identified success is truly what gave it its meaning, rather than just the type of success itself that was identified.

**Growth as a lens for defining student success.** Several participants also viewed success through the lens of growth. This was particularly evident in Alice and Sidney’s

responses. Alice described how her twelfth-grade language arts students created a guide to high school for incoming ninth-grade students. Beyond the relationships she saw form and the contribution back to the school community, she emphasized the success she saw in the students reflecting upon and accepting their past mistakes and choices from earlier in their high school careers. She described how she felt these students had been “written off” by a lot of people, and despite this she saw success in the personal growth the students underwent. Sidney defined many of her examples of student success in terms of growth. This included an example from a pre-school bulletin board where students placed “brag tags” under their name to display the new skills they had mastered. She also showed a graph a student made to show his progress on a benchmark mathematics assessment over the course of the school year.

### **Types of Success Not Present in Data**

Although I do not wish to neglect the adage that ‘absence of evidence is not evidence of absence,’ it is worth noting two types of success which were not present in the data. First, there was not data indicative of success defined in terms of competition. Although both Emberly and Amy discussed students earning awards, which were in their nature competitive, neither of them described those successes in terms of success arising from the formal competition. Emberly discussed two photographs in which students were holding awards. In the first, she described how she saw success in the student pursuing something that she found personally meaningful, rather than something in which she felt obligated to participate. In the second photograph, and the closest a participant got to defining success in competitive terms, Emberly described the success she saw in a student’s sense of self-worth in feeling like she had earned an award. Amy described a

student who won a competitive scholarship, but spoke of it in terms of how she formed a connection with younger students as a role model. Although competition was a component in these few cases of success, there were not any participants that provided an example of success with an explanation of success based on a student out-competing another in a formal competition. Notably, no participants collected any photographs related to sports or athletics. Although this could be a matter of individual participants, it is worth noting that the photograph collection period was shortly after East District won a state basketball championship.

There were no participants who collected photographs related to traditional grades. Among all six participants, none of them collected a single photograph that defined success as a grade or test score a student achieved. Apart from Sidney's mention of a student tracking their growth on a math achievement test and Emberly mentioning that a student had not been on the D or F list that year, there was no mention of traditional grades or test scores at all.

These two types of success that participants did not include in their examples are however quite prominent in policy. No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Every Student Succeeds Act all place a high value on assessment and competition between students and schools. The lack of their inclusion in participants' examples of success in indicates a disconnect between metrics policies use to determine student success and how teachers consider success in day-to-day experiences (Gottlieb, 2015). That is to say, by placing an emphasis on metrics for success that teachers do not use on the ground, there is the tendency for policy to conceal particular types of student success.

### **What Kansans Can Conceals About Student Success**

Before considering what the definition of success in the Kansans Can policy reveals and conceals about student success, it is essential to revisit the definition itself, as well as consider the definition in terms of the outcomes that the policy says will be used to determine which students and schools were successful. KSDE (2018a) created the following definition:

A successful Kansas high school graduate has the academic preparation, cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability skills and civic engagement to be successful in postsecondary education, in the attainment of an industry recognized certification or in the workforce, without the need for remediation.

KSDE (2018a) also provided five outcomes to be measured: social-emotional growth measured locally, kindergarten readiness, individual plan of study based on career interest, high school graduation, and postsecondary success. Ultimately, I sought to compare the types of success articulated by the study participants' responses, and the values and beliefs they implied, against the values and beliefs represented in the vision, definition, and outcomes of Kansans Can.

### **Kansans Can Outcomes as a Lens for Vignettes**

The vignettes, my observations, and interviews, provided a powerful opportunity to apply the lens of the Kansans Can vision, definition, and outcomes to consider the fit between the policy and the specific educational settings I studied. Although Kansans Can exists as a single overarching policy, I considered the vision, the policy's definition of a successful graduate, and the outcomes to be measured separately. The vision of leading the world in the success of each student is notably vague, however it is quite explicit in that the vision applies to each individual student rather than a particular percentage or

demographic subgroup, or a school building. The definition of a successful graduate provides five criteria to determine a successful graduate: academic preparation, cognitive preparation, technical skills, employability skills, and civic engagement. The outcomes each imply their own measure of success, however well it might be defined.

**William.** As a Career and Technical Education (CTE) course, William's class had numerous examples of students developing technical construction skills. Students demonstrated several construction skills including a fair amount of problem-solving. Moreover, for students interested in construction as a career path, William's class can be a part of an individual plan of study based on career interest. The emphasis William places on workmanship, as demonstrated by the students redoing the subfloor that could potentially sag, could be identified as employability skills. However, William in his interview made clear that his commitment to workmanship was not just because it would lead students to getting more jobs, but because he felt like it was the right thing to do.

**Emberly.** In the tenth-grade language arts class I observed, Emberly attempted to get a group of students engaged with reading for enjoyment while working to increase their vocabulary. The vocabulary game they played at the end of class contributed to cognitive and academic preparation, as well as potentially preparing students for success in a postsecondary environment where there is a larger vocabulary than that with which they are familiar. Moreover, as a required course, the activities contributed to students moving closer to graduation. However, with an emphasis on employability and industry preparation, the emphasis Emberly placed on making reading enjoyable and meaningful would not directly contribute toward Kansans Can outcomes.

**Sidney.** In her work with individual and small groups of students, Sidney's work provides a great example of pursuing the "success of each student." Also, in her focused work on essential academic tasks, she contributed to students developing academic skills. However, in working with elementary students the entirety of the Kansans Can outcomes are distant from her work at best. Kindergarten readiness is an outcome that applies before the third-grade students entered her room. Individual plan of study is applied primarily at the secondary level where students choose different classes. Graduation and postsecondary success are at least nine years in the future for her students. As a result, the only Kansans Can outcome that directly applies to her students that academic year is social-emotional growth.

**Alice.** Much like Sidney, when I observed Alice she was working with students that were struggling academically. Unlike Sidney's students, Alice was working with students who were behind on their work more than those that had a specific skill with which they were struggling. Whereas Sidney was working with students during the regular school day in a pullout time, Alice was volunteering to help students who were there voluntarily after school. Similar to Sidney, when I observed Alice, students were developing academic and cognitive skills. As a result of the online curriculum project-based learning curriculum they were using, the students were also developing some employability skills such as perseverance and problem-solving. As the students were working on required courses, individual plans of study were not applicable to what I observed. Graduation, postsecondary success, and kindergarten readiness are all separated from the students with which Alice was working by at least a few years. As a result, the only Kansans Can outcome applicable to Alice's work in that setting is social-



emotional growth. However, by volunteering after school to work individually with struggling students, Alice exemplified the vision of leading in the success of each student.

**Amy.** Much like Sidney and Alice, Amy's second-grade students fall in the age gap between the kindergarten readiness, graduation rate, postsecondary success, and individual plan of study outcomes. When I observed Amy, there were three criteria described in the Kansans Can definition of a successful graduate that were apparent simultaneously. She had several students working on a mathematics facts game contributing toward academic preparation. Several students were also working on their project-based learning unit creating fliers for local businesses. The problem solving and perseverance required for the project can be classified as employability skills. Moreover, since the progress focused on the local community, the project likely contributed toward increasing civic engagement or at least community awareness.

**James.** The preparation for parent-teacher conferences I observed in James's class would contribute to both social-emotional growth as the students prepared to share their progress with their parents. Additionally, the students were choosing classes that would eventually be on their individual plan of study. I also observed a ninth-grade language arts class in which students were working toward fulfilling graduation requirements and developing academic preparation. Like the students with which Alice was working, these students were utilizing the online project-based learning curriculum which required the development of what could be considered employability skills, such as problem-solving and perseverance.

**Implications of Kansans Can outcomes as a lens.** It is not terribly surprising that some aspects of what occurred during observations are recognized as successful by the specifications of Kansans Can and that a sizable portion did not. It is also not terribly surprising that participants integrated approaches and strategies into the observed settings that helped address the outcomes of the policy. However, the important point is that the placelessness of the definition in the policy cannot, as Cavell (1981) would phrase it, listen to the lived experience of the rural educators described in the vignettes. That is to say that actions which participants might easily identify as being successful, such as a third-grade student who had previously struggled with multiplication facts improving their math skills or a group of reluctant reader tenth-grade students starting to engage with a novel, do not have a place in the policy. They do not have the right form, the kind of objective shape that could be recognized from afar. The objective, placeless definition in the policy cannot see the successes recognized by participants in their schools.

### **Connections Between Kansans Can and Types of Success Recognized by Participants**

It is worth remembering that although West District opted to participate in the Kansans Can Redesign and East District did not, they were both responsible for the same outcomes. As all participants were primary or secondary teachers, the outcome of kindergarten readiness is largely inapplicable. In considering the successes the participants described, then, including students building a Tiny House, planning programs, making dramatic improvements in academic areas, and discovering new areas that were personally meaningful, to be recognized by the policy as successful, they must fall under the criteria of one of the four remaining outcomes. To review, the actions

recognized by the participants as successful included overcoming struggles, giving back to their community, forming relationships, problem-solving, and creating. To weigh them against the outcomes prescribed by the policy, these actions cannot have value directly, but must be translated, however well that turns out to be possible, into a part of an independent plan of study, or a contribution to social-emotional growth, or progress toward high school graduation, and/or a contribution to (predicted) postsecondary success, even for elementary students. Where participants valued personal growth, fulfillment, and one's role in the community as goods in themselves, the Kansans Can outcomes make it abundantly clear: these are only goods to the extent to which they contribute to success in career or industry.

The emphasis on industry is abundantly career when one considers the remaining outcomes. Setting aside high school graduation rate, the remaining outcomes are social-emotional growth, independent plan of study based on career interest, and postsecondary success. Although social-emotional growth might seem to focus on personal fulfillment or character development, KSDE (2018a) included social-emotional growth as an indicator in response to what they perceived to be a soft-skills deficit. KSDE (2020) wrote in a public report:

The soft-skills deficit is problematic because graduates are not prepared to face the most common and difficult challenges in the workplace such as the ability to collaborate and act as conscientious team members. These findings have implications for American competitiveness in the global economy as most states are predicted to not have enough qualified graduates to fill future job needs. (p. 2)

As such, it is obvious that KSDE sees the soft-skills deficit as a concern, and therefore an area upon which to focus, because it is of concern for "American competitiveness," not necessarily because it is beneficial for students' future fulfillment or happiness. Even

personal growth and fulfillment need to be justified in terms of national economic competitiveness.

Similarly, independent plans of study are to be based on career interests rather than individual passions. These surely overlap to some extent, but the only passions that count, where the policy is concerned, are the obviously monetizable ones. As such, students should choose courses by their career plans rather than personal interest, curiosity, or passion, when those conflict. This is particularly concerning given the number of participants who described success in passion projects students completed which are not necessarily tied to any future career interests. Also, this outcome is difficult to apply at the elementary level, where students do not select courses at all. Although one certainly hopes that a student's future career path would overlap with passion and personal interests, the policy weighs career preparation over students' passions; this looks like providing for the needs of industry rather than the needs of students, where those conflict. In a report, KSDE (2020) noted that Commissioner Watson was startled by findings that "found most U.S. states are not on target to produce the number of graduates needed to fill jobs" (p. 3).

Finally, postsecondary success is defined by KSDE (2018a) as enrollment in a postsecondary institution two years after graduation or having earned an industry recognized certificate. Postsecondary success thus has a similar career focus. As a result, students who delayed postsecondary enrollment either for a gap year or to enter the workforce immediately are by definition in the policy unsuccessful. This means that the policy would claim a school had failed to make a student successful if they enter a job directly after high school, including working on a family farm, if they do not have an

industry recognized certificate. More importantly, if a student is gainfully employed after graduation in a job they enjoy, if they do not happen to meet the industry certificate outcome, the school has failed to make them successful as far as Kansans Can is concerned.

Although Kansans Can does recognize some of the types of success described by participants, it also fails to recognize many others. This is because it operates from a set of values that are not reflective of the participants in rural schools. As Mitchell (2003) might phrase, the policy it is not able to respond to the “needs, desires, and pleasures” of rural communities (p. 21). Kansans Can may potentially help more rural students be successful, and potentially some of the types of success that policy recognizes would also be recognized as success in rural communities. However, the problem is that many incredible things happening in rural classrooms across the state have no place in the policy, and thus no value as far as Kansans Can is concerned.

### **Kansans Can in Eisner’s Ecology**

Eisner (1988) suggested the following elements in his ecology of school improvement: the intentional, the structural, the cultural, the pedagogical, and the evaluative. Uhrmacher and Matthews (2005) proposed the addition of administration and school-community relationships to the ecology. A policy that claims to be as far reaching as Kansans Can obviously has impacts and interactions with each of the areas of the ecology.

Both the policy and branding around Kansans Can were launched around the vision of “Kansas leads the world in the success of each student” (KSDE, 2018a). This was presented as a change to what Eisner classified as the intentional dimension in his

ecology. However, it was rather demonstrable that each participant in this study exhibited this intention to some level and in some form. It is possible that every participant adopted this intention in response to the policy or that this non-generalizable sample happened to include six participants with this intention. However, it seems far more likely that the vast majority of educators in any state intend for all students to be successful, regardless of the state level policies in place.

There are thus a few possibilities in considering this vision statement as a new intention of policy. First, it is possible that the new intention is for the state to compete with other states better in the percentage of students that are successful. As such the emphasis would shift to the state's competitiveness, rather than the success of individual students particularly. A second possibility is this intention was announced specifically to provide an opportunity to reframe what success means in school. A third, and perhaps the most likely, possibility is that this vision was not actually a change of intention.

Whether or not the vision actually represented a change of intention, a majority of the changes in Kansans Can took place in the structural. Branding with the term "Redesign" is indicative of this, and KSDE (2020) even claimed it to be "an ambitious initiative to introduce redesign structures" (p. 6). In considering the structural changes of the Kansans Can Redesign, it is worth reflecting on the frustration James expressed related to his cosplay class. Ultimately, he felt one of the struggles with the class was that he and the other teacher did not have enough contact time with the students in the class. This lack of time was caused by the flexible modular schedule the school implemented as a part of the Redesign. Inequitable contact time between classes is not a challenge that the Redesign simply failed to solve. Rather, it is a problem it created. This echoes Johnson

and Howley's (2015) claim that it was not simply that policy failed to solve challenges that rural schools face, but rather that it expressly creates them.

In the Redesign process, KSDE claimed to shift the evaluative from assessment scores to other measures. Assessment scores are not listed among the outcomes in the Kansans Can materials, even if they are still discussed in the state's ESSA plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The question that then arises from Eisner's (1988, 1994c) description of the ecology is "Did the change in the evaluative reach critical mass?" That is to ask, are the changes in outcomes at the policy level indicative of a larger shift in how student success is evaluated in the state?

Ultimately, it is too early in the Kansans Can implementation to definitively say whether the changes are likely to last or be impactful. In fairness, KSDE (2020) has set a goal of having all schools in the state participating in the Redesign by 2026, which is still more than half a decade away. However, there are also early indicators in information provided by KSDE itself. In a recent report, KSDE (2020) provided formative results from the Redesign process. The results were presented in the form of a bulleted list of anecdotes. Although a collection of anecdotes does not equate to data, the types of information KSDE chose to publish provides a hint as to whether the state's vision of what constitutes student success had genuinely progressed beyond assessment scores. KSDE provided eight anecdotes, each from a different school that participated in the Redesign. Two anecdotes dealt with behavior, two dealt with opportunities for career preparedness, and one referred to attendance rates. The remaining three anecdotes dealt specifically with state assessment scores. Although this does not definitively indicate that Kansans Can's attempt to redefine a successful student, or more fairly, how we determine

whether a student is successful has failed, it does indicate that, at least in use, KSDE still considers assessments to be an important measure of success.

### **Spatial Justice and Kansans Can**

Kansans Can misses many types of success which might be present in any school across the state; however, Mitchell (2003) and Soja's (2010) arguments for spatial justice force a question: are the shortcomings of the Kansans Can policy harmful for rural communities specifically? Although in terms of space there are always advantages and disadvantages to a location, Soja (2010) argued, "The difference between inconsequential and consequential forms of spatial injustice is vital to any collective efforts to achieve greater justice and to any workable concept of democracy" (p. 73). Phrased more specifically for this study, it is necessary to determine where the policy and rural perspectives depart in more consequential ways. Similarly, is there evidence, as Mitchell (2003) said, that the policy has responded to the "needs, desires, and pleasures" of rural communities? Ultimately, the issue at hand is whether rural communities had access to have their perspectives, experiences, and values represented in policy?

To delineate inconsequential injustices from consequential ones, it is best to refer to the evaluative dimension of Eisner's ecology (1994c). As Eisner (1994c) explains, "More than what educators say, more than what they write in curriculum guides, evaluation practices tell both students and teachers what counts" (p. 81). He continues to explain, "How those practices are employed, what they address and what they neglect, and the form in which they occur speak forcefully to students about what adults believe is important" (p. 81). To refer back to Cavell's (1981, 2009) argument for how words get their meaning, Eisner is proposing that *how* evaluation is carried out reveals what



decision makers believe is important. As a result, we can contrast what Kansans Can reveals about its evaluative dimension against what participants revealed about their evaluative perspectives to consider whether the policy is just narrow, or unjust.

The outcomes from Kansans Can provide an intense emphasis on evaluation related to career and industry. By contrast, the values elicited by participants suggest criteria for judgement which are moral in nature. Although a value, such as workmanship, could be interpreted as successful because of how it relates to career opportunities, William specifically interpreted it as “the right thing to do.” Similarly, community service can be given value as a way to build a resume to pursue postsecondary education, but Amy, James, Alice, and William all spoke to it in terms of how it could benefit the school and community. Ultimately, in the *action* of evaluation, participants provided repeated evidence that success was perceived largely in terms of moral acts. As such, in the action of identifying success participants showed that policy and rural communities do not simply have different preferences, they are operating from fundamentally different value systems. To address the question posed from Mitchell’s (2003) work, there is no evidence that Kansans Can intended to respond to the desires of rural communities as they canonized in policy a fundamentally different set of values from those represented by the participants.

### **Toward Multipolar Normativity**

To be just, policy must leave space for local articulations of large-scale values such as ‘success.’ Many schools, in urban, suburban, and rural settings, seek to pursue development of a sense of community as a part of their vision or mission statement. Schools in a variety of geographic settings might even all consider community as a

context in which to evaluate success. However, building and maintaining a community at the ground level, that is to say what community fundamentally means, will look different in each of these settings. Community in a variety of settings manifests with different characteristics and through different processes. Specifically, the unique nature, value, and meaning of community in rural settings shows the precise shortcomings of applying universalist definitions of success everywhere.

Ultimately what makes rural life appealing, at least to those of us who choose to remain in these places, is the sense of community. Everything else about rural life is inconvenient. Those of us who live in rural communities drive thousands of miles each year just to carry out simple activities like grocery shopping, medical appointments, or routine government services, but the sense of community makes it worthwhile. This is perhaps best illustrated by a May evening I experienced just a few years ago.

Mother nature often seems to use Western Kansas as her punching bag, and just a few years ago one May evening her wrath took the form of baseball size hail. I remember listening to the horrendous noise as my community got pummeled. Roofs were destroyed, windows and windshields broken, and crops just a month or so from harvest were laid waste. The next day I went to check on our elderly neighbor to make sure she did not need windows boarded up or other patch jobs done to prevent prolonged damaged. She, like my family, had managed to get through without any broken windows. As I walked back home, my neighbor across the street stopped me to see if I needed help with anything. I looked across the street to his house to see that he and his wife had multiple windows smashed. Glass was everywhere and undoubtedly the torrential rain that accompanied the storm had caused water damage in their home. Even amongst his own

devastation, he was willing to set aside his problems to help me. Although I was deeply appreciative of his offer, I was not in the least bit surprised. That is just what you do in small towns.

This sense of community is further reflected in the way participants in this study were able to use their community as a resource to recognize student success whether it was Amy inviting a local author to share with her students or a large portion of the community attending the open house Alice's student created to specifically recognize student success. Even when the community did not directly interact with students, participants used the community as the shared context in which they could evaluate success within the community. William in particular demonstrated this in the way he spoke of what it meant to the school and community that the Tiny House was built to a high standard.

In an era of increasing social upheaval, we tend to struggle societally to imagine a level other than the individual or the collective. It seems the options that exist are to judge actions by if they are beneficial for me as an individual or beneficial for GDP, with no criteria in between. Rural communities add the level of being able to consider what is best for the community. Ultimately, justice in a society either arises from top down control or an appreciation of what one can do to improve the experience of those around them. Although rural communities can certainly have their faults, and in particular it is important to consider the experience of those that might be marginalized within these communities, there is at least the community level at which one can, and often does, consider their actions.

### What Rural Schools Do

In light of what rural communities have to offer society, I believe it is necessary to take a more critical look at what rural schools do. More specifically, how does the role rural schools play in their communities and the aims associated with that role different from urban and suburban schools? Rural schools, like all schools, must put their values into practice. In so doing, I believe what we strive to do in rural schools is raise good folks.

In a rural school, teachers know that former students become the phlebotomist that draws blood when their child is sick, the nurses that care for their elderly parents, the police officers and EMT's that respond when they have an accident, and very possibly the teachers that will replace them in the classroom when they retire. For teachers with school-age children of their own, the students that go through their classrooms will be their own child's basketball teammates, one of them will probably be their child's first kiss, and not all that rarely, their child might just walk down the aisle with one of those students. All schools might generally wish for their students to be good people when they leave, but in rural schools, teachers know they will personally live with the consequences if their students are not.

William made several references to workmanship not because it was important for employment, but because "it's the right thing to do." He also referred to the type of carpenters he hopes come out of his class as though he will be personally tied to the quality of work his former students do in future jobs. Emberly, Alice, and James all spoke to the relationships they saw students form and the success they saw in how students came to view and treat each other. Repeated examples of *how* participants spoke about

success show that in determining whether a student is successful, they are less concerned about the particulars of meeting certain criteria, but rather how students treat those around them. This is further evidenced by the value James, Alice, Amy, and William all placed on students giving back to their school and community.

Although relationships are critical in all schools, the participants of this study showed how relationships in rural schools extend well beyond the relationship between an individual teacher and individual student in a particular classroom. William leveraged relationships he had with students' parents and grandparents in order to identify success. Amy spoke about observing success in students a decade after they left her classroom. Relationships in these rural schools extend out the school doors, down dusty streets, and across rolling pastures and fields. In rural communities, a former student can very easily become a current neighbor. Relationships are the wealth of rural schools and communities. What does it mean, then, that policy cannot see this wealth?

### **Conclusion**

Where Kansans Can's focus on the success of each student is concerned, there can be no question of whether the policy will recognize the types of success described in this study. It is simply necessary to accept that the policy *cannot* recognize them. The policy, which needs to apply equally everywhere, created a version of success that is placeless. The same definition and outcomes are applied statewide. The types of success recognized by the participants in this study were all emplaced in particular settings, at a particular time, in the context of particular students. Participants did not claim these to be categorically always student success. Rather, time and time again they judged an action to be successful for a particular student, at a particular point in time, based on particular

criteria. This phenomenon is not specific to rural schools, but rural schools exemplify an extra element of place-specific success in the way participants often drew on long-enduring relationships with students, parents, and community members to frame what they perceived as success. Perhaps the best example of this was William using a student's father as the standard by which he evaluated the work the student did on the Tiny House. Humans by their nature are not placeless and this is particularly so for rural educators and students.

To revisit Eisner's (1988, 1994c) ecology, given the placeless evaluative and structural dimensions of Kansans Can, there is a need to consider whether the intentions were for the policy to be placeless. Either the policy was crafted without consideration of how it would be emplaced into classrooms, schools, and communities, or else it was created with the intention of producing graduates that were suitably placeless, ready to take positions in equally anonymous "careers" according to the needs of "industry." The policy claimed that it pursues a vision in which "Kansas leads the world in the success of each student" (KSDE, 2018a). However, the perceived shortcomings to which KSDE (2020) claimed to be responding in creating Kansans Can had nothing to do with an absence of student success in the state.

KSDE (2020) provided a lens into the intentions behind Kansans Can in its own documentation. In referencing a report from the Bloomberg Bureau of National Affairs (2018), KSDE (2020) wrote, "With this new understanding of shifting educational priorities and the need to fill the impending gap of well-prepared job candidates for the future of Kansas, the KSDE team worked to create a strategy to engage in the hard work of education redesign" (p. 4). Similarly, they claimed, "Almost all U.S. states are not on

target to produce the number of graduates needed to fill jobs” (p. 3). KSDE (2020) justified the need for “soft-skill” inclusion because it has “implications for American competitiveness in the global economy” (p. 2). The intention that arises is not that schools should be redesigned to allow more students to experience success, but that schools should be redesigned to produce more future workers. Students cannot be placeless, but products can. The most obvious conclusion is that the new vision Kansans Can set forth in its action is that students are now the products schools produce to meet the needs of industry.

The pressing question is: How does an entire state department of education launch an initiative intent on turning a state educational system toward producing more job candidates rather than allowing more students to experience success as perceived by their teachers? It is in that light I would like to point back to the two listening tours KSDE conducted before crafting Kansans Can. The first was with the general public. Although it is educators that ultimately emplace success and make the evaluation of “this is what success looks like right here, right now,” it was business owners who had an entire second listening tour dedicated to hearing their voices prior to the crafting of the policy.

The natural rebuttal to my suggestion is that structural changes in schools that are good for business are not obviously detrimental to student success. Also, just because these types of student success are not recognized in policy does not mean that they cannot continue. Both of these may be true, but they both carry dangerous assumptions.

The notion that structural changes in schools that favor the interests of business could somehow lead to increased student success for “each student” is fundamentally undercut by the way the policy was implemented. Although, schools had the opportunity

to opt in to the Redesign, it would be unfair to claim that all schools had equal opportunity to make that choice. Participating in the Redesign carried an administrative burden beyond that which is required to simply respond to a policy change. Even before the policy went into place, East District, which did not elect to participate in the Redesign, faced financial hardships associated with a decline in the local oil industry. The financial challenges were so extreme that Emberly had to make a dramatic career change and shift from the elementary to secondary school because of a staffing issue. Sidney was now doing the job formerly held by two Title I teachers by herself, and William was funding his own woodshop program through the sale of Tiny Houses. Several teaching positions had been lost in the previous school year. To voluntarily incur the increased administrative burden of participating in the Redesign in the face of budget hardship would have been fiscally reckless. Although much of this financial hardship was associated with changes in local tax valuation, it is worth noting that East district had a higher percentage of students who were economically disadvantaged and a higher percentage of Hispanic students compared to West District which was able to participate in the Redesign (KSDE, 2017). The reality is that the schools who could choose to participate in the Redesign were only those that had the budget room to accept the additional administrative burden. From a spatial justice perspective, and to use Soja (2010) and Mitchell's (2003) language, this increased administrative burden would make it difficult to argue that all districts truly had equal access to participate in the Redesign.

Even if every district had equal opportunity to participate in the Redesign, a focus on increasing the capacity of the state's labor force would still be detrimental to the varieties of individual student success my study reveals as valuable. The concerns



mentioned by KSDE (2020) targeted having enough workers to meet industry's needs. This implies that the state's economy would have to grow enough for every high school graduate to have a job in the state for every student to be successful. Students that find success in areas outside of industry would not be benefited by a policy that pursues the needs of business. The policy conceives of success as though an adult's entire life is dedicated to workforce participation. Emberly's student showcasing her art comes to mind as an example of success centered around personal expression and fulfillment and likely would not translate to any industry-specific aim.

There is also an argument to be made if, in terms of spatial justice, rural residents have equivalent access (Mitchell, 2003) to opportunities to succeed as defined by the post-secondary education outcome. Although, online post-secondary institutions and courses have expanded access through a different media, students in both participant districts would have to travel at least an hour away from to attend a physical campus of a post-secondary institution of any type. Similarly, success in the form of gainful employment is dependent on job availability in communities with shrinking populations. Furthermore, economies that center largely around agriculture and oil are very susceptible to large numbers of jobs being lost if just a single industry is in decline.

The other rebuttal to my criticisms is that these types of success will be able to continue even as the policy goes in place. Again, this might very well be, and if this turns out to be the case, then the type of regional resilience that survived the Dust Bowl should receive credit. However, Campbell (1979) proposed that the more a quantitative measure is used in social decision making, the more it will ultimately corrupt the social process it is intended to measure. In a similar vein, Eisner (1994c) claimed that evaluation has the

ability to reveal a school's true values suggesting that what is measured in the policy is what is truly valued. Although the examples of success may continue, the outcomes and definition in the policy make clear that career-preparedness matters, and the sorts of success in these examples do not. When push comes to shove, and under the unrelenting austerity measures of the past 15 years, especially in Kansas, it always comes to shove, teacher attention to anything other than the state's vision of success will be curtailed. Whether it is Alice's student showing the crank machine he made, Amy's student coming out of shell to show his ventriloquism, or William's student honoring his grandfather through the sign he made, if a type of success is not given a place in policy, or if policy is not crafted broadly enough to permit it, it is apparent that the policy, and those that crafted it, do not truly value it.

These examples of success, and the dozens of others described by participants, were successful because the participants were able to recognize them as such in the place and time in which they occurred, and for the students involved. This emplaced success is something the placeless, objective definition seemingly required by policy simply is not able to see.

In describing the success John Wesley Powell had in studying the people who lived beyond the hundredth meridian, Stegner (1992) referenced Powell's ability to "approach a strange culture and a strange people without prejudice, suspicion, condescension, or fear" (p. 131). This should ultimately be goal for anyone wishing to study rural education, and in particular in the High Plains region. The struggle, whether for purposes of policy or research, is to resist the urge to assume that one knows what success, education, or even rural life itself mean without watching and listening to how

students, educators, and community members embrace the terms. Moreover, the level to which relationships were embedded in so many responses from participants indicates that anyone truly wishing to understand rural schools and communities must embrace themselves within those schools and communities. Finally, the meaning which participants gave to success in how they used and discussed it provides strong evidence that rural education research needs to rely more heavily on methodologies that give voice to participants. If researchers or policymakers truly hope to understand rural schools, abstract metrics are of only the most minimal use. Instead, they must listen.

It would be unfair to criticize the shortcomings of Kansans Can without offering suggestions for how it can be improved. Fortunately, KSDE has an infrastructure in place that I believe offers an opportunity to provide more community voice. As part of the Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA) process, schools are visited by an outside visitation team of educators who review the goals and relevant data the school has collected toward those goals. The structure of what types of data and particular goals in pursuit of the outcomes of Kansans Can are already fairly open to individual schools' decisions. The adjustment that would allow for the policy to be able to more readily respond to the values of individual communities is to allow schools to add their own additional outcomes which they believe to be of value in their community. Rather than having to shoehorn a goal such as civic engagement into pre-existing outcome such as social-emotional learning, which was aimed specifically at employability, a district can elect to give it a formal place in their policy. More importantly, goals determined at the local level can be documented and evaluated using a process that is appropriate for that individual setting. A goal such as civic engagement, or even some of the loftier potential

theoretical aims of education such as Noddings's (2005) happiness, Robinson's (2017) creativity, or Freire's (1970) shifting power dynamic do not have to be able to be applied objectively across the entire state to receive a formal place in a school's goals, they only need to be able to be observed in that individual school. The pre-existing visiting teams of educators observing this process provide a reasonable mechanism for accountability. More importantly, this structure would allow a mechanism for rural schools to give a formal place to what they do best, and what they already intend to do: raise good folks.

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## APPENDIX A

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR  
PARTICIPANT PHOTOGRAPHY



- Describe why you chose this photo as a representation of student success.
- Are there scenes or items you wish you could have photographed as examples, but were unable to in the two week period?
- Do you feel like you would have chosen different scenes or items to photograph at a different point in your career?
- Are there examples of student success or types of student success that you feel are underrepresented in the typical school operation?
- From the scenes and images you photographed, and others you were not able to photograph, what do you think would be a useful setting for me to observe your values related to student success?

APPENDIX B  
CONSENT FORM



**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH**

Title: Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: Student Success on the High Plains of Western Kansas

Researcher: Matthew Clay, Doctoral Student in Curriculum Studies

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Research Adviser: Derek Gottlieb, PhD School of Teacher Education UNC

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This study is being completed to better understand the impact of the definition of success in the Kansans Can policy. My research topic is to how the definition is put into practice and what values within a school and community it is able to reveal and which it conceals. This study will help to better influence policy, in particular for rural communities.

As a participant in the study you will be collect a series of photographs for a two week period. After this period you will be interviewed and the observed within an educational setting. There will be an additional follow up interview. The interviews could take up to two hours. Interview responses will be kept together in my locked desk, and only a pseudonym will be used to identify you.

There are no risks to participant. You might feel uncomfortable responding candidly to questions asked because they deal with the school in which you are employed, but participation is completely voluntary and will not affect their standing in your school. The questions asked in the interview should not be emotionally sensitive, but will ask you to reflect on your experiences in the course(s). Audio recordings of interviews will be destroyed after three years.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX C  
PARTICIPANT INSTRUCTION PAGE

BEYOND THE HUNDREDTH MERIDIAN:  
STUDENT SUCCESS ON THE HIGH PLAINS OF WESTERN KANSAS  
*Participant Information*

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study!

Over the next two weeks please take ten photos that you believe represent student success. At the end of these two weeks we will schedule an interview where we will discuss why you chose each one. My research interest is to understand what student success means to you as a rural educator. Please email the photos at [mclayscience@gmail.com](mailto:mclayscience@gmail.com) or [matt.clay@usd303.org](mailto:matt.clay@usd303.org) after you are finished. If you take more than ten photos, please narrow the collection down when the two weeks are finished to the ten you feel best represent student success. Feel free to email me or contact me at 316-706-5426 if you have any questions.

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Please return this portion, as well as a signed consent form

Participant name:

Pseudonym you would like used for the study:

Phone number:

Photography start date:

Potential interview date/times more than 2 weeks after the start:

APPENDIX D  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



*Institutional Review Board*

DATE: March 11, 2019

TO: Matthew Clay  
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1373471-2] Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: Student Success on the High Plains of Western Kansas

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: March 11, 2019

EXPIRATION DATE: March 11, 2023

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Morse at 970-351-1910 or [nicole.morse@unco.edu](mailto:nicole.morse@unco.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.