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The Transformative Mindset of Middle School Principals on Culture and the Impact of Student Achievement

Christina Gfell
cowens3@mail.umassglobal.edu

The Transformative Mindset of Middle School Principals on Culture and the Impact of

Student Achievement

A Dissertation by

Christina Gfell

University of Massachusetts Global

A Private Nonprofit Affiliate of the University of Massachusetts

Irvine, California

School of Education

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Committee in charge:

Patrick Ainsworth, EdD, Committee Chair

Stephanie A. Herrera, EdD

George Giokaris, EdD

University of Massachusetts Global

A Nonprofit Affiliate of the University of Massachusetts

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

The dissertation of Christina Gfell is approved.

_____, Dissertation Chair

Patrick Ainsworth, EdD

_____, Committee Member

Stephanie Herrera, EdD

_____, Committee Member

George Giokaris, EdD

_____, Associate Dean

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ABSTRACT

The Transformative Mindset of Middle School Principals on Culture and the Impact of

Student Achievement

by Christina Gfell

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore and describe how exemplary middle school principals perceived practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework were embedded in their organization to inspire achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand organizational supports and barriers exemplary middle school principals perceived affected infinite mindset development.

Methodology: This phenomenological study explored experiences of exemplary leaders and their perceptions of how the five practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework were embedded in their organization. The target population for this study was exemplary middle school principals in Harris County, Texas. Purposive sampling based on criteria and recommendations from an expert panel was used to select eight exemplary leaders participating in this study. Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews and collection of artifacts. Interview questions were designed around the five infinite mindset practices: just cause, building trusting teams, worthy rival, existential flexibility, and courage to lead.

Findings: Examination of qualitative data from eight middle school principals participating in this study indicated exemplary leaders perceived embedding practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework supported achievement of extraordinary results. Findings from this study included 19 themes, seven key findings, and one unexpected finding.

Conclusions: Based on findings in this study, seven conclusions were drawn to demonstrate how exemplary middle school principals embedded Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset practices. Each research variable was included in these conclusions. Perceived supports and barriers that impacted embedding of infinite mindset practices in an organization were also included in the conclusions. Exemplary middle school principals focused on the mission and vision for student achievement in their organization and collaboration with district administrators and staff members.

Recommendations for Action: The researcher provides six recommendations for further research. It is important to explore the experiences of middle school principals in areas outside of Harris County, Texas. Further research could include other types of schools such as elementary and high schools, and combine the eight dissertations from the current study's thematic team to identify patterns and trends.

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PREFACE

Following discussions and considerations regarding the opportunity to study Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework, four faculty researchers and eight doctoral students discovered a common interest in exploring how exemplary leaders perceived the practice of the five infinite mindset practices of advancing a just cause, building trusting teams, studying your worthy rival, preparing for existential flexibility, and demonstrating the courage to lead were embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. Additionally, the researchers were also tasked with exploring the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceived affected the development of the infinite mindset in their organization. This interest resulted in a thematic study conducted by a research team of eight doctoral students.

The eight peer researchers and four faculty advisors ultimately chose a phenomenological design (Patton, 2015) that would be most appropriate for this study of the infinite mindset constructs and their perceived impact and how they established a culture of extraordinary results. The structure was resolved to be generally suitable as a nonexperimental, descriptive approach to best accumulate the lived experiences of the leaders. Each researcher interviewed 12 leaders to describe how the five practices of the infinite mindset were embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results in their organizations. The team cocreated the purpose statement, research questions, definitions, interview questions, and study procedures to ensure thematic consistency. The thematic team agreed data collection would involve interviews and artifacts, increasing the validity of the thematic research study.

The term *peer researchers* refers to the other researchers who conducted this thematic study. These peer researchers were: (a) Jeff Heilig, Elementary Principals in South Los Angeles County, California; (b) Kevin Giang, Student Affairs Leaders at University and College Institutions in Los Angeles County, California; (c) Amna Osman, Elementary Principals in Monterey County, California; (d) Lindsey Gatfield, Elementary Title 1 Principals in Orange County, California; (e) Marc Patterson, K–12 Superintendents in Los Angeles County, California; (f) Renée Gates, Alternative High School Principals in Orange County, California and Riverside County, California; (g) Christina Gfell, Comprehensive Middle School Principals in Harris County, Texas; and (h) Ricardo Espinosa, Community College Professors in the North Bay Area, California.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become
more, you are a leader.

—Simon Sinek, "The Infinite Game"

Education in the United States has focused on student achievement, which refers
to student performance in the intellectual areas taught in K–12 schools, colleges, and
universities. In other words, academic achievement is the degree to which a student has
achieved a particular goal in the current year (Schwinger et al., 2014). The concern about
U.S. students' academic achievement was emphasized on August 26, 1981, with the
inception of the National Commission of Excellence in Education (D. P. Gardner et al.,
1983). This commission led to the *Nation at Risk* report in 1983, which focused on
student achievement. According to this report, U.S. students were failing academically in
the national and international workforce.

Standards, pedagogy, and educational practices evolve and develop over time to
achieve high student performance levels. Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of
2001 (NCLB, 2002), schools have been held accountable by standards and testing.
Education at the national level has transformed as instruction leaders, teachers, and
stakeholders have worked to develop standards to close the gaps in student achievement.
NCLB prompted states to hold schools accountable for how kids learn and achieve. The
goal of NCLB was to drastically alter education, and to "ensure that all children have a
fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a
minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state
academic assessments" (NCLB, 2002, para. 1). These changes made NCLB

controversial; however, the changes also forced schools to focus on underprivileged and disadvantaged kids.

Principals are a crucial link in K–12 educational organizations and have a critical role in providing high-quality education for all students (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015). The federal law governing K–12 education in the United States is known as the ESSA. The old education law known as NCLB was superseded by the ESSA, which was signed into law in 2015. The ESSA (2015) set expectations for transparency for parents and communities while giving states more latitude in the area of education. Every state is required by the ESSA to evaluate student performance in reading, math, and science. The methods used to evaluate students vary by state. Every school in every state is required to tell parents of its expectations and performance. The goal of NCLB was to implement high-quality teachers and instructional leaders for high student achievement. The development and goals of the NCLB Act of 2001 and the ESSA were intended to create more effective instructional leaders and higher-quality teachers. Canole and Young (2013) stated, "Today's leaders must engage in the practice of continuous school improvement and support that leverages the highest levels of student learning and the most impactful teacher instructional practice" (p. 7).

A middle school principal's role involves creating a learning environment that focuses on student-centered learning, collaboration, and visibility. Thus, a principal directly affects the degree of accomplishment achieved by students in the organization (Terziu et al., 2016) and is critical in attaining student academic achievement (Hallinger, 2005). Several leadership practices have led to high levels of engagement, school culture, and student achievement. Bruggencate et al. (2012) found school leadership practices had both a direct and indirect impact on student achievement.

Principals are a critical factor in increasing teacher engagement levels by creating a culture that is focused on trust and collaboration (Eldor & Shoshani, 2016; Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2015). Marzano (2003) found the importance of building relationships for the purpose of leading change had an increase in student achievement. The relationship between effective teaching and effective leadership is reinforced when principals create a culture of high achievement. Among the numerous definitions of school culture, Deal and Peterson (1999) concluded *school culture* refers to the deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of the school's history, which are understood by members of the school community. A positive school culture may have a significant influence on the academic and social success of students in schools (Hahn, 2017). The mindset of a principal influences the culture of staff development and professional growth that takes place in the organization (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009).

Background

Leadership has evolved significantly over the past century. As the world has become industrialized, the need for leadership has risen. According to Sadler (2003), "Leadership is a process involving relationships between individuals and cannot be understood by focusing solely on the leader" (p. 13). Several significant leadership theories have been developed, adapted, and enhanced throughout history. The idea of leadership began with an exploration of specific individuals considered to be heroic, such as Caesar, Napoleon, Nelson, and Mao Zedong (J. V. Bennett & Murakami, 2016). Historically, leadership has been viewed as one person (i.e., the leader) leading others in a certain direction, fostering the idea that leaders are born to lead (Malakyan, 2014). As society developed, several theories of leadership emerged in the 20th century to support

the development of leadership, which included the great man theories, trait theories, and behavioral theories (Zaccaro et al., 2004).

The concept that some people are born leaders came from the great man theory, originating from Thomas Carlyle in the 19th century (Cawthon, 1996). According to Cawthon (1996), great leaders are born with specific characteristics that lead them to be great leaders. Trait theory is similar to the great man theory, in which specific personality and behavioral characteristics make great leaders (Zaccaro et al., 2004). Behavioral theory states leaders learn great leadership through observations and focused actions of the leader (Stogdill, 1950). The foundations of leadership theories have since developed from the early 20th-century roots. Today's leadership theories have risen from these foundations and evolved into modern leadership, which is centered on relationship-based approaches.

Theoretical Foundations

Leadership foundations have evolved, changed, and adapted since the early 19th century and before. New theories have been developed as society has shifted its mindset and developed new leaders. The shift from a leader in charge to a community leader with a team has given rise to new leadership ideas and theories. Leadership concepts have concentrated on the morals and values in the organization and of its leaders (Lichtenstein & Dade, 2007). Five theoretical foundations provide the background on the leadership mindset and the theoretical framework used in this study.

Servant Leadership Theory

The first use of the term *servant leader* was coined by Greenleaf in 1969 (Valeri, 2007). Greenleaf credited his development of servant leadership to three factors:

(a) the influence of E.B. White, based on his idea of 'see things whole'; (b) the

writings of Herman Hesse, notably, Journey to the East (1956); and (c) his

relationship with his father and the example given of his father's life. (Valeri,

2007, p. 7)

By combining two seemingly contradictory terms (i.e., servant and leadership), Greenleaf

intended to give people pause for thought while challenging long-standing assumptions

that might be held about the relationship between leaders and followers in an

organization (Valeri, 2007). The identifying characteristics of servant leaders are people

with a desire to serve and who make a conscious choice to aspire to lead (Greenleaf,

1970). Specifically, servant leaders value power not for themselves, but for the potential

to benefit their followers, organizations, and communities (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010).

The overriding focus of servant leaders is to serve their followers.

An assortment of changes have confronted leaders in academic settings. When

addressing the *Nation At Risk* report concerning the U.S. education system, D. P. Gardner

et al. (1983) wrote:

The Commission deeply believes that the problems we have discerned in

American education can be both understood and corrected if the people of our

country, together with those who have public responsibility in the matter, care

enough and are courageous enough to do what is required. (p. 6)

Servant leadership has groundbreaking initiatives that give direction and motivation

through these changes. Servant leadership focuses on supporting and fostering the people

inside an organization, and transformational leadership centers around inspiring others to

make progress toward a shared objective (Hallinger, 2005).

Transformational Leadership Theory

A significant difference between transformational leadership and servant leadership is the focus of the leader. Although a servant leader focuses on their followers, a transformational leader primarily focuses on the collective goals of an organization, prioritizing organizational development and growth (Grojean et al., 2004). A transformational leader enables and influences followers to share in a vision that encourages behaviors such as intellectualism, imagination, advancement, and risk taking (Parolini et al., 2009).

Burns (1978) deemed transformational leadership a process in which "leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation" (p. 13). Transformational leadership theory strives to create change in individuals and organizations and enhances the motivation, morale, and performance of followers through a variety of mechanisms. These mechanisms include (a) connecting the follower's sense of identity and self to the mission and collective identity of the organization; (b) being a role model for followers who inspires them; (c) challenging followers to take greater ownership of their work; and (d) understanding the strengths and weaknesses of followers, so the leader can align followers with tasks that optimize their performance in the organization (Bass, 1990).

Transformational leadership includes the idea that motivation drives an organization's success by employees being given autonomy to be innovative and creative. Bass (1990) stated transformational leadership occurs when leaders:

> Broaden and elevate the interest of their employees when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group. (p. 21)

Through focusing on motivation to drive success, leaders have a greater ability to adapt to changes rather than being solely task oriented. Dissimilar to other conventional leadership methods, organizational leadership uses activity and results-based systems to engage others to cohesively work toward a common goal (Kolzow, 2014).

Organizational Leadership Theory

Sinclair (2014) indicated organizational leadership is about leading and managing individuals toward achieving a strategic organizational goal. Organizational leaders combine business understanding and align it with their roles as visionary leaders. Therefore, organizational leadership is a management approach in which leaders help set strategic goals for the organization while motivating individuals in the group to successfully carry out assignments in service to those goals.

The desired organizational change is a blend of diverse attributes like values, attitudes, behaviors, approaches, and ideologies (Sinclair, 2014). Drucker (1954) laid out the basic concepts of management and defined a manager's responsibilities, including setting goals, organizing work, motivating employees, communicating effectively, and measuring and developing staff. Drucker stated a manager's most crucial role is to educate others, giving them the skills and vision, they need to succeed. According to Kollenscher et al. (2018), an organizational leader develops the goals of the organization and tries to make them a reality through the institutionalization of goals and policies ingrained in the organizational structure. An organizational leader has the ability to look more extensively in a more profound way, bringing a higher-level range of abilities to an organization's strategic thinking and decision-making processes.

Growth Mindset Theory

Dweck (2006) started a movement centered on mindset theory with research on adolescent learning. Similar to Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset, growth mindset supports the idea that people understand and respond to the world around them in either a positive or negative way. In a fixed mindset, individuals believe their basic abilities, intelligence, and talents are just fixed traits and are set for their lifetime. According to Heggart (2015), in a growth mindset, individuals understand that their talents and intelligence can be developed through effort, good teaching, and persistence. This idea does not mean everyone has the ability to be as brilliant as Einstein; rather, it means everyone has the ability to become smarter if they work toward that goal (Morehead, 2012). In Dweck's study, students with a growth mindset were more motivated to learn and exert effort and outperformed students with a fixed mindset.

Although several researchers have studied the concept of mindset, Dweck (2006) developed the terms *growth mindset* and *fixed mindset*. Dweck's research dates back to the late 1980s and has influenced how teachers and students are evaluated (Dweck, 2006; Dweck et al., 1995; Glos, 2018). Dweck frequently used the phrases *mindset* and *implicit theories of intelligence* interchangeably. On one end of the continuum is the entity mindset where the mindset is regarded as fixed. On the other side of the continuum is an incremental mindset where people thought to have a growth mindset.

Individuals with a fixed mentality are more likely to shun obstacles, give up more easily, and dismiss their efforts (Dweck, 2006). Fixed mindset principals think some students are naturally intelligent while others are not and learning is exclusively the responsibility of the student (Dweck, 2010). People who have a growth mindset believe

they can improve their intelligence over time if they work hard enough (Dweck, 2006). They accept difficulties, persevere when presented with problems, and see effort as the road to success, as opposed to people with a fixed mindset.

Authentic Leadership Theory

Authentic leaders have healthy alignments between their internal beliefs and their external conduct or behavior. Authenticity comes from finding an individual's leadership style and their way of leading, and making life decisions that reflect their ethics, values, and personality (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Authentic leaders build trust and honesty in their followers and organizations and bring their whole self to the job, which creates a culture of respect (Calderon-Mafud & Pando-Moreno, 2018).

Authentic leadership has been positively linked to desirable work outcomes, including follower trust, leader and follower well-being, and job satisfaction (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014; W. L. Gardner et al., 2011). Positive authentic leadership attributes include employee voice; organizational commitment; work engagement; empowerment; organizational citizenship behavior; and employee, team, and organizational performance. Authentic leadership is negatively related to turnover intentions, antisocial behavior, and burnout (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014; W. L. Gardner et al., 2011). Authentic leadership is a behavioral pattern based on positive psychological qualities that aim to foster an ethical climate in the organization (Walumbwa et al., 2008). This pattern of action demonstrates increased self-awareness, internalized morality, balanced processing of work team knowledge, and transparency in leader–follower relationships.

Theoretical Framework

An infinite mindset is a leader's desire to inspire their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits

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(Sinek, 2019). Sinek (2019) described leadership for unbounded systems in the book *The Infinite Game*, clarifying it is a model that needs leaders to embrace a just cause, demonstrate fearless leadership, actively generate trust, and work from a fluid playbook while interacting with an ever-changing cast of stakeholders. Infinite games are defined by constantly changing surroundings and the necessity for leaders to continually adapt to tackle new challenges (Carse, 1986; Sinek, 2019).

According to Sinek (2019), a leader with an infinite mindset follows five essential practices: (a) advance a just cause, (b) build trusting teams, (c) study worthy rivals, (d) prepare for existential flexibility, and (e) demonstrate the courage to lead. The convergence of these constructs has created an urgent noble cause, or a just cause for a new generation of leaders. A middle school principal's role is to create a learning environment that focuses on student-centered learning, collaboration, and visibility, which are essential factors when leading with an infinite mindset.

A principal directly affects the degree of accomplishment achieved by students in an organization (Terziu et al., 2016). As previously mentioned, several leadership practices can lead to high levels of engagement, school culture, and student achievement. Principals who lead their school sites with an infinite mindset are critical in attaining student academic achievement (Hallinger, 2005). As an infinite-minded leader, a principal is challenged to develop a high level of trust, cooperation, and innovation, which benefits all stakeholders in the organization (Sinek, 2019).

Just Cause

A *just cause* is a vision of an idealized, aspirational future, or something bigger than individuals and an organization (Sinek, 2019). A just cause connects to and reflects the values, emotions, and a sense of purpose of the followers, motivating them to make

sacrifices to achieve it (Carse, 1986; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Mascareño et al., 2019; Noghiu, 2020; Sinek, 2019). According to Sinek (2019), a just cause inspires people to stay focused beyond the extrinsic rewards and individual wins. To achieve effective leadership practices, there needs to be a shift from hierarchical approaches to leadership styles that encourage shared governance and facilitate staff empowerment (Williamson, 2005). Sinek stated people willing to make sacrifices for the just cause will help advance the shared vision of the organization. The just cause inspires people to keep going and stay committed, which leads to empowerment. The just cause serves as an invitation to join others in pursuit of advancing a higher cause.

Building Trusting Teams

A *trusting team* is a unit where individuals work together to know each other on a deeper level while caring about and valuing one another (Sinek, 2019). In working together and valuing each other, a high-performing team environment is created that includes active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and personal accountability in a psychologically safe space (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2002; Sinek, 2019). Respect for others is the foundation on which trust is built (Fairholm, 1997); further, without trust, dissonance and conflict exist. Sinek (2019) claimed trusting teams are where people feel safe and when people feel safe, they feel supported. Organizations should create an environment in which every individual feels safe, and safety in the educational organization starts at the principal level.

Worthy Rivals

Worthy rivals are successful industry leaders who perform as well as or better than a leader or their organization (Sinek, 2019). Leaders or organizations are inspired to

study these players and improve based on the strengths and abilities identified in the worthy rival (Millennial Executive, n.d.; Sinek, 2019). In an infinite mindset, there is a push for constant improvement. Sinek (2019) stated a worthy rival inspires people to take on an attitude of improvement. According to Sinek, it is important for an individual to know their rivals, embrace them, and learn from them. Competition among principals would be considered a worthy rival. Worthy rivals can support other leaders to be better at what they do, which supports the just cause.

Existential Flexibility

Existential flexibility is a leader's ability to anticipate changing conditions and initiate a potentially risky strategic disruption to set the organization on a new path necessary to achieve an idealized future (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Dhiman, 2011; Goleman, 2005; Owen, 2015; Sinek, 2019). Sinek (2019) stated existential flexibility is the ability to initiate a disruption to a strategic course to advance the just cause. One theory that parallels this thought on flexibility is the virtue theory. Arjoon (2000) stated virtue theory is valuable to leadership due to its focus on the common good, rather than profit maximizing; therefore, it earns a place in leadership. Virtue theory allows leaders to be concerned with the dynamic interactions among organizational members.

Courage to Lead

Courage to lead is a leader's ability to stand up to pressures or norms that do not align with organizational or individual goals and values and is characterized by the willingness to take risks for sustained success in an unknown, idealized future (Lassiter, 2017; Sinek, 2019). The pressure can be overwhelming when committing to strong leadership and what is best for the overall success of the organization. The responsibility

of leaders is to not drive results but to create a collaborative and trusting environment. According to Sinek (2019), courage to lead is a willingness to take risks for the good of the unknown, which takes vision and the support of the just cause of the organization. Leaders need to understand how to use the insight concerning how their needs and values shape the creation of goals and strategies that motivate their staff and culture to create more shareholder value (Lichtenstein, 2005).

A Principal's Influence on Academic Achievement

A middle school principal's role is to create a learning environment that focuses on student-centered learning, collaboration, and visibility. Principals are vital in leadership because they catalyze creating transformational change for school improvement (González-Falcón et al., 2020). Principals have a direct impact on student performance in their organizations (Terziu et al., 2016), and many leadership practices can result in high levels of engagement, positive school culture, and student achievement.

School leaders are critical to student achievement (Hallinger, 2005). Bruggencate et al. (2012) found school leadership practices had both a direct and indirect impact on student achievement. Principals are a critical factor in increasing teacher engagement levels by creating a climate focused on trust and collaboration (Eldor & Shoshani, 2016; Leis & Rimm-Kaufman, 2015). Marzano (2003) found the importance of building relationships for the purpose of leading change increased student achievement. The relationship between effective teaching and effective leadership is reinforced by the vital role of school culture. Among the numerous definitions of school culture, Deal and Peterson (1999) concluded *school culture* refers to deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of the school's history, which are

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understood by members of the school community. It is a principal who often influences the culture of staff development and professional growth that takes place in a school.

Leadership Practices of Effective Principals

Principals have found several leadership practices effective to support student achievement. Creating a shared and shaped vision with stakeholders demonstrates effective leadership. Principals who have a vision also have a belief that all students can learn (Mendels, 2012). Shaping schools and creating a hospitable and supportive school climate can lead to effective principal leadership. According to Portin et al. (2009), creating a welcoming environment, prioritizing student and staff safety, and having respect for all members of the school community create a conducive school culture.

Being part of a team allows a principal to create balance and give support to everyone in the school. Mendels (2012) stated effective principals know they cannot lead alone. Further, effective principals are more visible in their leadership when they incorporate others to help improve student achievement while creating professional development opportunities for teachers. An effective leadership practice used by effective principals is being visible and present in classrooms, which allows for a more cohesive evaluation of effective teaching practices. Middle school principals are challenged to engage and support staff and key stakeholders through thoughtful leadership qualities. Middle school principals are called upon to lead, create, and nurture schools that empower students, teachers, staff, and a school community to find the best ways to support student academic success and achievement (Miles, 2002).

Research Problem Statement

Middle school achievement was low in the state of Texas after the COVID-19 global pandemic began. According to Lopez (2021), "The pandemic appeared to undo years of improvement for Texas students meeting grade requirements in reading and math, with students who did most of their schooling remotely suffering significant declines compared to those who attended in person" (para. 6). The Texas Education Agency's (TEA, 2017) ratings are calculated by considering the annual State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test, student performance, changes in STAAR scores, and how effectively schools are educating underprivileged students. Reading, math, science, and social studies are among the disciplines in which pupils are assessed. According to Texas state assessment data, districts were showing improvement before the COVID-19 global pandemic in student achievement and the driving force was teachers and local school leaders (Lopez & Lau, 2022). The state of Texas and local school districts have had high expectations for principals to increase academic results (Cotton, 2003). For principals to address the challenges of school achievement, principals have been increasingly tasked with creating and establishing a culture, and building a collaborative learning community linking students, staff, parents, and other stakeholders (Cheney et al., 2010).

A principal's success is linked to the accountability of student achievement based on indicators established by Texas policymakers (TEA, n.d.-c). Building a purposeful community depends on the principal's influence on student achievement, instructional effectiveness, and school productivity. As a result, building and maintaining a strong,

meaningful, and deliberate community should be a top goal as a principal collaborates

with teachers and other important community leaders. According to Waters et al. (2003):

> Everything that happens in a school happens within the context of a community.
>
> School communities are comprised of students, parents, teachers and other school
>
> staff members, central office administrators and support personnel, the school
>
> board, other social agencies, and businesses. The more this diverse community is
>
> able to coalesce around shared purposes, the more sustainable and effective the
>
> school's change efforts will be. (p. 7)

The data for each indicator are included on the Texas School Dashboard. According to

the National Center for Education Statistics (1996), these data provide schools, districts,

and county offices of education with information intended to provide insights into what

contributes to a positive educational experience for students. Principals are challenged to

use these data to guide instructional improvement based on STAAR data to align

budgetary decisions with strategies for improving student performance (TEA, n.d.-b).

The success and failure of schools are largely determined by how they are led; further,

the need for ethical leadership can make a positive impact on academic success (Mulford,

2003).

Due to multiple challenges confronting middle school principals (e.g., the

COVID-19 global pandemic; student emotional, social, and academic learning), creating

a culture of support for a school is imperative (Cotton, 2003). Principals are in a key

position to guide the formation of positive school culture in collaboration with the

instructors, who are designed to provide a high-quality learning experience for all

students (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Research has indicated a high level of support

and culture created by a principal leads to high student achievement (Heggart, 2015). Furthermore, student performance is directly impacted by principals and the culture they set for their organization (Terziu et al., 2016). Spillane and Anderson (2014) stated principals who prioritize the development of a healthy school culture understand school culture has the power to transform the leaders and schools they serve. Regardless of the educational circumstances, a principal is ultimately in charge of creating a safe, supportive climate and creating a shared vision.

Middle school principals are tasked with the responsibility of being effective instructional leaders for the campuses they serve (Spillane & Anderson, 2014). A significant amount of literature has focused on middle school principal practices that foster student achievement (Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hallinger et al., 2015; Leithwood et al., 2004). However, there is a gap in the literature on the mindset middle school principals can adopt that promotes a culture and practices leading to improved student achievement that persists far into the future.

Many studies have addressed the difficult challenges principals face, and the importance of creating a culture for student achievement (Heggart, 2015; Spillane & Anderson, 2014). However, there has been limited research that has connected how middle school principals develop an organizational culture of achievement that can last far into the future. An effective middle school principal does not just hope to satisfy the requirements to improve student success; rather, they seek to inspire students, staff, and community stakeholders as a collective whole to boost new levels of positive morale (Bracy, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). Understanding the practices middle school principals use to create a culture of excellence may provide insights into the steps

they can take to connect all stakeholders to build a long-lasting culture of student achievement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary middle school principals perceived the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework were embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceived affected the development of an infinite mindset.

Research Questions

The following central research question guided this study: How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded in their organization to achieve extraordinary results? The research subquestions were:

1. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of advancing a just cause is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

2. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of building trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?

3. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of studying your worthy rival is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

4. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

5. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

6. What are the organizational supports and barriers exemplary middle school principals perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset?

Significance of the Study

School administrators who can foster a favorable school culture by building strong relationships with students, staff, and community stakeholders create a stronger sense of community and belonging among their students (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Effective leaders must pave the way for establishing a positive school culture to have flourishing schools. The duties and obligations of a school principal are varied and extensive. Multiple challenges confront middle school principals (e.g., the COVID-19 global pandemic; student emotional, social, and academic learning), making it imperative to create a culture of support for the school (Cotton, 2003). Principals are in a key position to guide the formation of positive school culture in collaboration with instructors, who are designed to provide a high-quality learning experience for all students (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

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The results of this study could provide information to local school districts, school boards, superintendents, and administrative credentialing programs on the practices middle school principals can incorporate to be infinite-minded instructional leaders and more effectively support student achievement. Labby et al. (2012) stated, "It is important to examine the link between effective leadership skills and practices and student achievement" (p. 2). This study examined how exemplary leaders adopt practices aligned with the elements of an infinite mindset and add to the knowledge base regarding implementing effective and enduring organizational improvements to increase student achievement. The findings from this study may provide information supporting the

development of an infinite mindset in the professional practices of middle school principals that leads to higher student achievement.

Definitions of Terms

It is essential to define the terms used in this study to avoid misunderstanding or ambiguity as to the author's intended population and overall objective. Although terms associated with the focus of this study may vary regionally, it is necessary to provide clarification through operational definitions to facilitate the applicability of the study results to other educators (Creswell, 2008; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Theoretical Definitions

To help readers understand the people, setting, and leadership principles that are important to this study, this section provides theoretical definitions of essential terminology, which are in the same order as they are presented in Sinek (2019). These terms are used specifically in the study according to their definitions (Roberts, 2010).

Just Cause

A *just cause* is a vision of an idealized, aspirational future, which is something bigger than people and an organization. A just cause connects to and reflects the values, emotions, and sense of purpose of the followers, motivating them to make sacrifices to achieve it (Carse, 1986; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Mascareño et al., 2019; Noghiu, 2020; Sinek, 2019).

Trusting Teams

A *trusting team* is a unit where individuals work together to know each other at a deep level and care about and value one another, while creating a high-performing team environment that includes active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and personal

accountability in the team in a psychologically safe space (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2002; Sinek, 2019).

Worthy Rivals

Worthy rivals are successful industry leaders who perform as well as or better than a leader or their organization. Leaders or organizations are inspired to study these players and improve based on the strengths and abilities identified in them (Millennial Executive, n.d.; Sinek, 2019).

Existential Flexibility

Existential flexibility is a leader's ability to anticipate changing conditions and initiate a potentially risky strategic disruption to set the organization on a new path necessary to achieve the idealized future (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Dhiman, 2011; Goleman, 2005; Owen, 2015; Sinek, 2019).

Courage to Lead

Courage to lead is a leader's ability to stand up against pressures or norms that do not align with organizational or individual goals and values and is characterized by the willingness to take risks for sustained success in an unknown, idealized future (Lassiter, 2017; Sinek, 2019).

Operational Definitions

A full explanation of technical phrases and measures used during data gathering is referred to as operational definitions of terms. Any time data are gathered, it is important to include operational definitions to specify the data collection process in detail.

Extraordinary Results

Extraordinary results are accomplishments that are remarkable, surprising, exceptional, and go beyond what is usually expected (O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 2000).

Infinite Mindset

An *infinite mindset* is a leader's desire to inspire their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits (Sinek, 2019). A leader with an infinite mindset follows five essential practices: (a) advance a just cause, (b) build trusting teams, (c) study worthy rivals, (d) prepare for existential flexibility, and (e) demonstrate the courage to lead (Carse, 1986; Dweck, 2006; Sinek, 2019).

Leadership

Leadership is the ability to persuade others to work energetically toward goals that are recognized as being for the common good (Hunter, 2004).

Middle School

A *middle school* is a school where sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students receive comprehensive academic instruction.

Principal

A *principal* is a comprehensive middle school's organizational and instructional leader. A principal offers leadership and collaborates with all members of staff, students, and parents to create and preserve a high-performance culture.

Infinite Mindset Delimitations

This study was delimited to eight exemplary leaders in Texas. An exemplary leader in this study was a leader who demonstrated extraordinary results and evidence of

leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits. Exemplary leaders met at least three of the following criteria:

- The principal was employed at a middle school in Harris County, Texas with a minimum of 30 staff members.

- The principal had evidence of leading a school with a culture of high student achievement.

- The principal had a minimum of 5 years of experience at their current site.

- The principal had a minimum of 5 years of experience in the K–12 profession.

- The principal had membership in professional associations in their field, such as the Association of California School Administrators.

- The principal had articles, papers, or other materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I included an introduction, background of the theories and study variables, purpose statement, research questions, significance of the study, definitions of terms, and delimitations. Chapter II presents an expanded view of the content and literature relevant to this study. Accordingly, it includes an in-depth look at the history of leadership, the infinite mindset characteristics defined by Sinek (2019), and how the infinite mindset influences middle school principals. Chapter III presents the research design of the study, methodology, and limitations impacting the study. Chapter IV offers a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of the data collected and a discussion of the findings. Chapter V presents the

findings, conclusions, and recommendations, which reflect a synthesis of components of the research study.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter II provides a comprehensive review of literature related to Sinek's (2019) five infinite-minded constructs: (a) advance a just cause, (b) build trusting teams, (c) study worthy rivals, (d) prepare for existential flexibility, and (e) demonstrate the courage to lead. Over time, the fundamentals of leadership have changed, evolved, and altered. New theories have emerged when society has changed its perspective and has produced new leaders. New leadership theories and ideas have emerged as a result of the shift from a leader in charge to a community leader with a team. Current leadership theories have focused on the ethics and values of organizations and their executives (Lichtenstein & Dade, 2007). The theoretical framework employed in this study and the background information on the leadership mindset were supported by the five infinite-minded constructs.

This chapter begins with an overview of the literature on the development of leadership theories and pertinent leadership practices. Next, it provides a theoretical background on the foundations of leadership before focusing on servant leadership, transformational leadership, growth-minded leadership, and organizational leadership. Then, the chapter covers research on Sinek's (2019) five infinite mindset leadership components, and how these constructs affect leadership. The chapter finishes with a summary of the literature on leadership, a culture of high performance, middle school principal roles, and the effects of these aspects on these cultures. A summary of the literature and the rationale for this investigation are included.

History of Leadership Theories and Leadership Foundations

Leadership dates as far back as the 5th and 6th centuries B.C. and is considered "one of the greatest discussed and argued topics in the social sciences" (Madanchian et al., 2016, p. 198). Greek and Chinese philosophers noted the complexity of leadership. Since this time, leaders have been seen as essential to society and as a method to care for others (Lambert, 2003). Given the strong link between successful operations and effective leaders, the evolution of leadership has become a crucial factor in evaluating an organization's performance.

There are significant differences between leading and becoming a leader (Reynolds & Warfield, 2010; Sadeghi et al., 2013). Although *leadership* refers to the skills and abilities to influence others, a *leader* is typically someone with a designated title or a hierarchical profession (Sadeghi et al., 2013). According to Burns (1978), leadership is the skill of using people for certain goals, standards, and approaches to resources in a competitive perspective, and there may be disagreements while pursuing the goals. Literature has lacked a thorough and precise definition of what a leader is and has not made a distinction between good leadership and bad leadership (Bass, 1991; Stogdill, 1974). To exert their influence on others, different leaders also adhere to a range of leadership tenets. When leadership principles are not used effectively, outcomes and behaviors are not changed. Because leadership entails an effect and connection between people, good leadership is phenomenological on an individual level and influenced by the organizational environment (Akindele & Afolabi, 2013).

Leadership and learning are integrated and observed as a network-based, complementary process centered on connections and intelligence. Understanding and

defining educational leadership is crucial (Shuaib & Olalere, 2013). In the educational context, "Leadership alludes to the tactics of purpose and activities deliberately meant to effect the awareness and motivation of pupils" (Spillane, 2005, p. 389). Education leadership, particularly in the classroom, is used to inspire and motivate pupils to study, which increases the likelihood that their attention, effort, and retention will increase.

The success of a school is fundamentally dependent on the leadership style of its leaders. Likewise, the leadership style of a school principal is a significant factor in the accomplishment of a school and its overall impact on student achievement (N. Bennett & Anderson, 2003). School district stakeholders and school leaders should continue to develop norms that cover good and moral behavior as leadership theories continue to develop and are reimagined throughout the 21st century (Abu-Hussain, 2014). Great leadership is characterized by morals that have the potential to alter the culture of the classroom and lives of students (Fullan, 2001).

Servant Leadership

The concept of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) has gained major attention in the modern leadership sector. The ideas of servant leadership are what corporations need (Wills, 2020). These ideas have gained popularity for boosting morale, emphasizing people-centered management, and inspiring firms to take initiative (van Dierendonck, 2011). The vision of Greenleaf (1970, 1977) was oriented toward leadership that primarily served the needs of others. Instead of focusing only on oneself, servant leadership puts others first and recognizes the role of the leader front and center (Greenleaf, 1977). Greenleaf (1970) stated, "The servant-leader is servant first. . . . It

starts with the instinctive desire to serve first and foremost when one makes a conscious decision" (p. 7).

It is crucial to comprehend Greenleaf's contention that a servant leader is *primus inter pares* (i.e., first among equals), which implies people do not exercise authority in a vacuum; rather, leaders seek to persuade, persuade, and direct their people (van Dierendonck, 2011). This idea suggests servant leaders go beyond self-interest and accountability (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Providing vision, increasing followers' credibility, and influencing others are all things servant leaders do by cultivating people and assisting them in their endeavors and prosperity (McMinn, 2001). Greenleaf (1977) expanded on this notion by asserting the secret to effective leadership is the desire to serve. Servant leadership calls for a commitment to the growth of an organization's staff and a duty to its stakeholders (Reinke, 2003).

Being a servant enables an individual to lead and being a leader implies the person serves. Compared to other leadership theories, such as transformational leadership and growth mindset leadership, the servant leadership idea places a significantly greater focus on service to followers. Influence is attained by servant leaders through acts of service (Russell & Stone, 2002). Followers are urged to freely practice and use their skills. Servant leadership varies from other leadership styles that call for a leader to be solely in charge by eliciting a higher level of trust in followers (Stone et al., 2004).

There are several interpretations of servant leadership because Greenleaf never provided a definite definition. The most significant researchers on the topic of servant leadership have included Laub (1999), Patterson (2003), Russell and Stone (2002), and

Spears and Lawrence (2004). The conceptual model of servant leadership shown in

Figure 1 helps to organize the theoretical ideals and models from various researchers.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Servant Leadership

Barriers (IQ3)
Mindsets

Servant Leadership
Conceptual Framework

Organizational Criteria (IQ1)
Serve and Steward Others
Business Ethics
Other-Oriented Management
High Performance

Grounding Theories
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
Eupsychian Management, Self-Transcendence.
Spirituality, Spiritual Intelligence
Cicero's Virtue Theory of Ethics
Decision Theory

Individual Attributes (IQ2)
Spiritual Wholesome
Ethical Service
Motivation Behaviors
Communication
Team Building

Note. From "Servant Leadership: What Makes it an Effective Leadership Model," by J. P.

Tanno, 2017, p. 222 (https://www.proquest.com/openview/9a5785307b02725128145ea5

9d64944c/1)

Although servant leaders do not necessarily concentrate on company objectives,

they have faith that their followers will participate in activities that will benefit the

organization the most (van Dierendonck, 2011). The focus of servant leadership is on the intention of the leader to serve. Servant leadership is the idea that long-term organizational goals will be achieved by first promoting the growth, development, and general well-being of the people who make up the organization (van Dierendonck, 2011). According to Harvey (2001), the focus of a servant leader's strategy should be on the organization's bottom line before shifting to employees and their personal development.

The foundation of the servant leadership model is the alignment of the desire to lead with the urge to serve, and it is this philosophy that is essential for the theory to succeed in an academic setting. A principal at a school site who practices servant leadership believes in each individual and focuses on recognizing, affirming, and letting each person's skills shine (Greenleaf, 1998). Therefore, by being authentic to themselves and having an accepting attitude, school principals who are honest about not always having the right answers tend to display humility (van Dierendonck, 2011). As a result, teachers, staff, and students experience a climate of safety and trust at work.

Principals who identify as servant leaders have more contented, committed, and productive staff members (van Dierendonck, 2011). A servant leader must be a motivating force to have a productive team. A team leader must be goal oriented and able to work with a range of personalities to create a cohesive environment for everyone. The attitudes and behavior of personnel and a school site can be influenced by the principal's servant leader behavior. As a result of that influence, staff behavior and attitudes may have an impact on how students behave, and vice versa.

The principles of servant leadership have existed for many years. Servant leadership may resemble the type of initiative that Plato (1934) described in *The*

Republic, where "leadership . . . focuses on the good of the whole and those in it" (as cited in Williamson, 2008, p. 397). As a result, servant leadership can result in a real change in an organization. When followers see their leaders upholding the principles of servant leadership, they are more likely to follow suit, which can reduce negative job satisfaction while boosting long-term performance (Braham, 2004).

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership has gained popularity after being introduced by Bass (1985) and Burns (1978). The idea of transformative leadership has gained more traction among practitioners and academics, who have used the notion in a variety of hierarchical contexts. When leaders "broaden and elevate the interest of their employees when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their self-interest for the good of the group" (Bass, 1990, p. 21), transformational leadership takes place. In essence, transformational leadership is a process of assigning responsibility to hierarchical goals and motivating followers to reach those goals (Yukl, 1998). The result encourages followers to achieve (Burns, 1998; Yukl, 1998).

Transformational leaders foster an environment where relationships are formed and shared visions may be realized through fostering a culture of trust (Bass, 1985). Avolio et al. (1991) identified four crucial practices that entail transformational leadership: (a) idealized influence (i.e., charismatic influence), (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration.

Idealized Influence

Idealized influence is what makes transformative leadership so alluring. Using this theory, leaders set admirable examples that their followers can follow (Avolio &

Bass, 2001; Bass, 1998; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Honesty in the form of moral and ethical conduct is a component of the idealized impact in leadership (Tracey & Hinkin, 1998). Consequently, idealized influence shows leaders will put their followers' needs ahead of their own for the greater good while making personal sacrifices for their benefit. Leaders cultivate trust among their followers by idealized influence; in response, their followers grow to respect and have more faith in their leader.

Inspirational Motivation

By "giving meaning and challenge to their followers' work" (Avolio & Bass, 2001, p. 2), transformational leaders inspire and uplift those around them. To produce charismatic-inspiring leadership, a typical consolidation involves idealized influence and inspirational motivation (Bass, 1998). Effective leaders encourage their followers to strive for greatness and exhibit outstanding levels of performance by inspiring them (Tracey & Hinkin, 1998). Additionally, strong communication abilities help leaders inspire followers by clearly communicating their goals and guiding them in the right way.

Intellectual Stimulation

Avolio and Bass (2001) wrote transformational leaders encourage their people to "be imaginative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing challenges, and tackling old situations in new ways" (p. 2). These leaders inspire by encouraging followers to experiment with new approaches while emphasizing the necessity to maintain reason (Bass, 1990). By constructively involving their followers in decision making, they lead by example. Therefore, leaders who challenge themselves intellectually also challenge people around them by posing the question: "Why do we do things and how might we do them differently?" (Avolio & Bass, 2001, p. 2).

Individualized Consideration

A transformational leader gives each follower their attention when considering their specific needs for growth and achievement (Avolio & Bass, 2001). The leader acts as a mentor, inspiring followers to develop "greater levels of potential" (Bass, 1998, p. 6) in a supportive environment. To enable followers to more effectively contribute to the bigger cause, a leader assesses each follower and decides what kind of training and support are required. Through a leader's capacity to amplify their followers, the effects of individualized consideration and the other three transformational leadership traits become real (Behling & McFillen, 1996).

Due to a leader's stronger relationship with the company goals, transformational leadership places a larger emphasis on production (Stone et al., 2004). This strategy fosters teamwork and a principal leadership style that is substantially more community focused, all while continuing to advance the goals of a school site's purpose and vision (Hallinger, 2005). As a result, people other than site principals also influence change and student progress. Transformational leadership, according to Hallinger (2003), "focuses on generating change through bottom-up engagement rather than a single individual, the principal directing and controlling from above" (p. 338).

The organization is a transformational leader's top priority (Graham, 1991). Transformational leaders prioritize the personal development of their followers over what may be most advantageous for the organization out of a desire to improve performance. Transformational leadership has its drawbacks. Transformational leaders could convince their followers to pursue their personal goals instead of the organization's goals by using their idealized power over them (Greaves et al., 2014).

Additionally, narcissistic behavior may increase under transformational leadership. Long-term effects might be severe if leaders use shortcuts, such as striving to increase high profit or maximum advantages as soon as feasible (Giampietro-Meyer et al., 1998). History is rife with examples of charismatic leaders who have manipulated their followers through narcissistic behavior based on being transformative, including religious figures (e.g., cult leader Jim Jones), business figures (e.g., former investment advisor Bernie Madoff), and political figures (e.g., Adolf Hitler). These leaders may possess the charisma necessary to advance to positions of power where they eventually employ their charismatic demeanor in oppressive ways (Lundskow, 1998). These types of leaders act beyond the parameters of the ideal transformational leadership norm (Stone et al., 2004).

Organizational Leadership Theory

In a situational and organizational context, leadership refers to the relationship between a leader and their followers. Leadership is characterized as a power- and value-laden interaction between leaders and followers/constituents who want meaningful changes that reflect their shared objectives and aims (Rost, 1991). The definition of leadership in the context of normative organizational ethics would focus on how employees should or ought to act in a workplace.

Leadership and organizational management go hand in hand. With time, different meanings of leadership have developed. Therefore, most academics have attempted to explain organizational leadership, but more research is still needed (Kanji & e Sa', 2001; Northouse, 2006). Organizational leadership is the process of "facilitating both individual and group efforts to achieve a shared aim and encouraging others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it may be done effectively" (Yukl, 2002, p. 3).

Another definition of organizational leadership is the process of transforming an organization from its current state to the level to which a leader aspires (Dess & Lumpkin, 2003). Today's 21st-century leaders develop other leaders, such as experts of executive management and leadership (Bass, 1991). In actuality, there is still a lack of a thorough and precise definition of leadership (Bass, 1991; Lincoln, 2012).

Integration between individuals and organizations is a long-standing issue. There have been references to the effects of organizations on people since the time of the ancient Greeks (Wardy, 1996). Disputes regarding rhetoric (e.g., whether it was a necessary component of life and leadership or a sleight of hand) divided ancient theoreticians (i.e., Gorgias, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero). Saint-Simon was reportedly one of the first sociologically minded individuals to see the emergence of modern organizational systems, anticipating groups would become more crucial to society (Argyris, 2009). Organizational systems are also incredibly intricate. They appear to be made up of human actions at many different levels of analysis where peoples' personalities, small groups, intergroup relations, norms, values, and attitudes all exist in a very complex, multidimensional pattern. There are times when the complexity appears almost incomprehensible. However, it is precisely this complexity that serves as the foundation for comprehending organizational phenomena (Yukl, 2010).

Leaders set an example for their followers and exhibit acceptable behavior expected in a company. Through newcomers' culture and socialization process, desired and proper behaviors are strengthened. Employees pick up values by observing how leaders behave. The more a leader walks the talk, or puts their principles into practice, the more respect and trust they inspire in their followers (K. W. Brown et al., 2007). Employees are more likely to follow leaders' examples when the leaders are willing to

sacrifice personally for their subordinates or the business as a whole to live up to their moral standards.

When managers take the subject of ethical responsibility seriously, they immediately become more attentive to the demands of their subordinates and the issues of individuals who may be impacted, making it easier for them to spot emerging conflicts (Enderle, 1987). Good leaders are distinguished by a heightened capacity to feel morally committed to a variety of followers, which constitutes knowledge and perspective on the world, not a skill (Ciulla, 2004). Positive outcomes from ethical leadership are seen in followers' perceptions of leaders' effectiveness, their job happiness, their improved dedication, and their reporting of issues (M. E. Brown et al., 2005).

Ethics should not be a one-time sporadic occurrence; rather, it should be a continual process in leader–follower relationships. Leaders must explain ethical principles and constantly assess genuine examples to affect followers' ethical behavior (K. W. Brown et al., 2007). As a result, simply creating an ethics code is not a sufficient first step in implementing ethical behavior in enterprises. Every aspect of organizational life should be infused with ethics. Morally upright leaders punish people who act improperly rather than tolerate them (Treviño et al., 2003). In interviews with senior executives and ethics officers in the United States, Treviño et al. (2003) discovered an individual must be sincere, dependable, credible, and display integrity to be recognized as an ethical leader.

Growth Mindset Theory

The influence of mentality on students' learning has been the subject of a substantial body of research. The majority of Dweck's (2006, 2010) research has concentrated on the school environment because pupils are constantly faced with

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academic obstacles, which increases the chance for their perspective to change (Teal et al., 2012).

Although there has been numerous research on attitude, Dweck (2006) is credited with creating the terms *growth mindset* and *fixed mindset*. Dweck's research, which dates back to the late 1980s, has had a significant impact on how teacher and student performance is evaluated (Dweck, 2006; Dweck et al., 1995; Glos, 2018). Dweck frequently used the phrases *mindset* and *implicit theories of intelligence* interchangeably. According to implicit theories of intelligence, people are positioned along a continuum according to how they perceive themselves to be intelligent (Molden et al., 2006). On one end of this spectrum, there is an entity mindset, which is a fixed attitude; on the other end of the spectrum, there is incremental thinking, which is a growth mindset.

People with a fixed attitude frequently avoid difficulties, give up more easily, and perceive their efforts as futile (Dweck, 2006). Teachers who have a fixed, or entity, mindset believe learning is the complete responsibility of students and certain pupils are fundamentally intelligent while others are not (Dweck, 2010). People who have a growth mindset frequently think they can gradually increase their intelligence if they put in a lot of effort (Dweck, 2006). They are more likely than people with fixed mindsets to welcome challenges, persevere in the face of difficulties, and see effort as the key to success.

Dweck (2006) examined a group of kids' mindsets as they progressed through elementary school and junior high school. The pressures of moving from childhood to adolescence and the academic demands and production requirements rose as these pupils advanced in their education. Dweck's research focused on how students handled the increased academic difficulty and stress brought on by receiving subpar grades in their

classes. Students who displayed a fixed attitude and saw an ongoing drop in academic performance received a low grade. These pupils believed their bad grade was an indicator of their academic competence, as opposed to students who demonstrated a growth mindset and persisted, displaying grit and resilience despite receiving subpar grades (Stinson, 2020).

Dweck et al. (1995) issued a warning about the dangers of considering one mindset superior or more desirable to the other. Instead, they contended the opposing viewpoints should simply be seen as various lenses through which people view their reality and both fixed and growth mindsets have advantages and disadvantages; favoring one viewpoint over the other may have corresponding effects.

Authentic Leadership Theory

Authentic leadership has become more prevalent in the leadership profession. Luthans and Avolio (2003) stated the definition of authenticity best captures the positive leadership style required in the modern world, where the environment is rapidly changing, norms that previously guided behavior no longer apply, and the best leaders are open and honest about their intentions, demonstrating a seamless connection between their professed values, actions, and behaviors. The necessity of leaders engaging followers with compassion and conviction has been highlighted by authentic leadership research; leaders can achieve this connection by being genuine, present in the moment, honest with themselves, and transparent in their actions. Effective leadership necessitates a thorough understanding of oneself, the capacity for openness, and the capacity for critical reflection (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio et al., 2009). Genuine leaders should act as a leader, but they must do so in a way that respects their ideas, values, abilities, and shortcomings (W. L. Gardner et al., 2011).

Healthy alignments exist between an authentic leader's interior convictions and their outward behavior. Finding an individual's leadership style and manner of leadership—and making judgments in life that are consistent with their morals, values, and personality—are the keys to authenticity (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Because genuine leaders put their whole selves into their work, they foster an environment of respect among their followers and in their organizations (Calderon-Mafud & Pando-Moreno, 2018).

The phrase "thine own self be truthful" (W. L. Gardner et al., 2005, p. 3) is a key concept in philosophical works that refers to authenticity. Avolio and Vogelgesang (2011) described *authenticity* as knowing, accepting, and staying true to oneself. The essential component that unites the authentic leadership aspects is authenticity. Although there is no commonly agreed-upon definition of authentic leadership in the literature, Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) definition goes beyond the idea of being true to oneself and highlights several presumptions that comprise authentic leadership. According to their definition, authentic leadership is "a pattern of leader conduct that draws upon and supports both positive psychological capacities and a good ethical climate, to foster more self-awareness, an internalized moral compass, and an internalized sense of responsibility" (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94).

Authentic leadership consists of four related dimensions (i.e., self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, relational transparency, and balanced processing; Bishop, 2013). These four factors have been studied, and empirical data have demonstrated a core authentic leadership factor consists of the interactions between the four factors. Authentic leadership differs from other leadership philosophies like transformational, moral, charismatic, servant, and spiritual leadership through these distinctive elements. Self-

awareness is a crucial component and the foundation for the growth of true leadership. Genuine leadership requires self-awareness and loyalty to oneself (Zhu et al., 2004). Self-awareness is the extent to which a leader is aware of their advantages, weaknesses, and leadership style.

Theoretical Framework

In *The Infinite Game*, Sinek (2019) claimed approaching leadership with an infinite perspective enables people to inspire themselves and the people around them, pursue distinctive and compelling causes, and provide safety for internal stakeholders. Sinek contended it is simple to view the world in terms of margins and profits, winners and losers, and finite games. This idea is drawn from Carse's (1986) treatise, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*. Carse asserted playing to maintain a game's momentum is far more gratifying than playing to win. Leaders with a finite mindset compete to win (Sinek, 2019). Sinek's theoretical model of infinite mindset leadership states an infinite-minded leader is focused on investigating possibilities or creating ideas that could benefit their organization. Thus, according to Sinek, an infinite leader (a) advances a just cause, (b) builds trusting teams, (c) studies worthy rivals, (d) prepares for existential flexibility, and (e) demonstrates the courage to lead (see Figure 2). This model details how the infinite leadership constructs work together in a cyclical manner to support an organization.

Figure 2

The Model of Constructs

Note. Adapted from "The Infinite Game," by S. Sinek, 2019, Portfolio/Penguin.

Advance a Just Cause

A just cause is a compelling future vision that inspires people to participate in its creation even though they may never see it come to fruition (Sinek, 2019). It might be simpler to understand how such a legitimate cause should look for organizations or social and governmental groups at first glance. Because every group is a part of society as a whole, they can all work toward a noble goal. According to Carse (1986), a culture is characterized by its horizon, but society is defined by its boundary. An oppositional phenomenon is a border and a horizon is a visual phenomenon. According to Sinek (2019), "A just cause is something we stand for and believe in, not something we oppose" (p. 37). You can only stretch it; you cannot look at it or touch it. It might support the provision of nutritious meals in schools or provide funding for other enterprises to promote local economic growth. Other businesses are devoted to investigating how technological innovation may progress activities that are important to society, such as

social inclusion or climate protection, while also raising production. In the 21st century, what motivates leaders to continue playing the game is a just cause (Sinek, 2019).

Sinek (2019) stated a few factors need to be articulated while considering how to build a just cause. First and foremost, people need to support something that is open to all and exists solely for the good of others. The cause also needs to be tenacious and durable. Furthermore, the cause must be audacious and idealistic, making it likely impossible to achieve. This vision ought to be preserved so future leaders will inherit a clear sense of direction (Yukl, 2006).

Building Trusting Teams

Sinek (2019) asserted a team is not simply a collection of individuals; rather, a team is a collection of people who trust one another. Trust is crucial to the team's effectiveness and success. Without trust, a team cannot function. Without an effective and reliable team, it is impossible to realize a vision. Taking care of their team is one of the core responsibilities of a leader (Sinek, 2019). Sinek claimed trusting teams are the glue that binds everything together. Employees on a trusting team are aware their supervisors and coworkers will encourage them through mistakes and provide assistance when requested in a nonjudgmental manner; thus, they feel comfortable being sincere.

The dynamics of trust and mistrust inside an organization have the power to strengthen or weaken its culture and bonds (Turaga, 2013). Nothing could be more harmful than a lack of trust among an organization's personnel. Like Sinek, this statement emphasizes the importance of trust in an effective workplace. When employees trust one another, they work together toward a common objective, take calculated chances with their thinking, and communicate honestly (Sinek, 2019). Workers compete, hoard information, and do not promote new ideas when there is not trust between them. A

business culture that lacks trust falls back on the lowest common denominator of conduct and is unable to make any real progress.

According to Sinek (2019), leaders with expansive minds understand the ideal candidate for a position may not always be the one who performs the best. High performance is a reflection of competence, but reliability is a reflection of character. Character can be a more accurate sign of a great employee, or someone who benefits the company, raises coworkers' productivity, and makes everyone do their tasks more effectively (Maslow et al., 1998). A group of self-serving individuals who never work together in a meaningful collaborative style but instead accumulate information, take credit for others' efforts, and escape accountability may result from a team of highly skilled but lowly trusted members, as seen in the performance versus trust matrix (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Performance Versus Trust Matrix
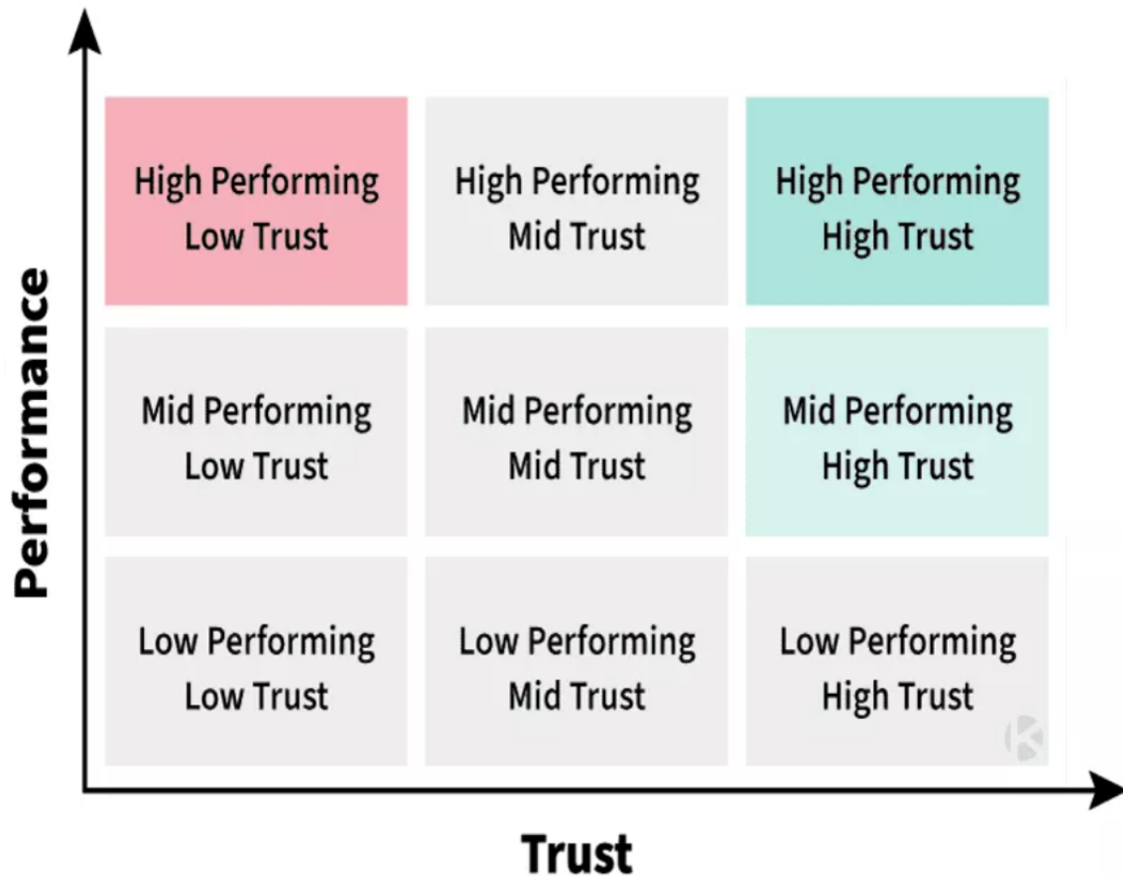
Note. From "Performance vs Trust: How to Choose the Right People For Your Team," by Kanban Zone, n.d., para. 6 (https://kanbanzone.com/2021/performance-vs-trust-how-to-choose-the-right-people-for-your-team/)

To emphasize these ideas, Sinek (2019) referenced the U.S. Navy SEALS' recruitment methods. According to Sinek, the SEALS evaluate applicants based on both performance and trust. Because these individuals frequently exhibit narcissism, self-serving behavior, and unfavorable attitudes toward other team members, which eventually undermines the team's cohesion and performance, they will not accept a

candidate with high-performance indicators but poor trust markers. If individuals have strong trust markers, they are more likely to choose candidates with medium or even poor performance scores than people with high-performance scores but low trust.

Worthy Rivals

According to Sinek (2019), concentrating attention on the process rather than the result by seeing a competitor as a worthy rival as opposed to merely a competition might motivate someone to succeed rather than just to win. Respecting competitors and recognizing their accomplishments helps an individual recognize how their strengths might help them overcome their weaknesses (Carse, 1986).

Although rivals and opponents are not always foes, it is important to know who they are. Carse (1986) claimed organizations having a competitor forces people to research a worthy opponent. It is crucial to concentrate on the idea of what a respectable adversary entails. Sinek (2019) stated competition is viewed as legitimate rivals rather than as competitors because they can push people to become better and play a higher-level game. As an adversary, they might perform certain tasks just as well as the competitor, some tasks better, and some tasks more poorly. By taking into account a worthy adversary, organizations can learn how to strengthen and improve their weaknesses. Additionally, they serve as a reminder to be flexible and humble because they demonstrate everyone can participate, which benefits the organization from the increased participation.

According to Sinek (2019), a worthy rival outperforms their competitor in some or many ways; weaknesses are shown by strengths. Worthy rivals' worth lies in highlighting areas for development and improvement. A competitor challenges organizations to improve, which leads to growth because it forces people to step outside

of their comfort zone and the task is accepted with a competitive spirit. People are challenged when they step outside of their comfort zone; they can only develop when faced with challenges. If people want to improve at something, they can compete against a superior opponent. The importance of having a worthy competitor (i.e., someone or some organization that helps people understand and see their shortcomings) is one of the main ideas in Sinek's constructs. The objective of an infinite game is to outlast an opponent rather than to outperform them. People do not automatically win if a previous opponent withdraws from the contest; they need to simply find a new foe.

Existential Flexibility

Being existentially flexible entails accepting that a game will continue with or without an individual. If that individual is not willing to advance their organization, the market will take care of it (Sinek, 2019). Therefore, to lead with an infinite mindset, people must be willing to drastically alter their perspective and approach. The ability to make a drastically large strategic move in an altogether new direction to further the cause is known as an *existential flex*. Existential flexibility is the capacity to fundamentally alter a whole organization when it is the correct thing to do to further the cause. A leader must have a good cause that is very obvious to be able to exercise existential flexibility because this cause will guide organizational decisions. Additionally, the leader should work with individuals who adore and respect them because there will be hardship in the short term, and leaders need people who will support them because they think the cause is worthwhile.

An infinite-minded leader is transformed by surprises and disruptions, whereas finite-minded players fear them. According to Sinek (2019), the ability to start an extreme disruption to a business model or strategic path to more successfully advance a

just cause is known as existential flexibility. Sinek used the development of Walt

Disney's just cause as an excellent illustration of existential flexibility. To discover a

different path to advance the just cause, Walt Disney risked everything when he quit Walt

Disney Productions. Walt Disney believed he could no longer support his just cause with

the production company. This flexibility led to the building of Disneyland. He risked

everything to start over because he thought his first business could no longer serve his

just cause. According to Sinek, this risk demonstrated existential flexibility because it

showed how disruptive and adaptable an infinite-minded player is when pursuing a just

cause. The practice of infinite leaders being flexible is neither defensive nor reactive;

after they demonstrate existential flexibility, they motivate others to join the trusted

group. Because of the great uncertainty and the potential for failure, it is considered an

existential flex.

Sinek (2019) stated existential flexibility is the ability to start a major upheaval in

a strategic direction or business model to successfully pursue a just cause. They can make

these kinds of modifications because of their limitless appreciation for unpredictability.

The infinite-minded player enjoys novelty and disruption and the finite-minded player

fears them. A leader with an endless mindset and a strong sense of purpose will flex

when they can see how their current course will severely impede their potential to further

their just cause in the future.

Courage to Lead

Sinek (2019) stated the willingness to take chances for the benefit of an

unknowable future is the courage to lead. Rather than being taught, courage is a learned

trait people develop through risk-taking experiences. With self-awareness and reflection

on lessons learned along the way, people get stronger every time they confront a difficulty or an opportunity (M. Johnson, 2017).

Extreme bravery is required to maintain a just cause (Sinek, 2019). A leader should be willing to take a chance to hold onto concepts that could come across as idealistic and are frequently daring. A leader's job is frequently on the line, and it takes uncommon vision to take chances for an uncertain future and look beyond what is dictated by society or capitalist conventions. A willingness to adopt and uphold an unlimited attitude is referred to as having the courage to lead. Resisting the temptation of finite leadership requires courage.

The verb *to lead* creates the expectation of action. A good leader is always an excellent student (M. Johnson, 2017). People may be put off by the idea of leadership at first; it requires guts because growth takes time, effort, and vulnerability. Growth takes intentionality that comes from the heart, not just the mind, to behave and act in a way that motivates, encourages, supports, and enables others to go on a strategic path. Emotions can make people feel vulnerable as leaders, but when they are combined with strategic thinking, they can lead to results that people will not forget.

Courageous leaders are powerful because they are aware they are not in complete control and do not have all the answers (Sinek, 2019). However, courageous leaders have each other and a just cause to serve as their compass. A weak leader chooses the easy path; they believe they have all the solutions or may attempt to manipulate every factor. When leaders demonstrate the courage to lead, people who work for them will begin to exhibit the same courage. For infinite games to function, brave leadership is necessary. To remain faithful to the cause, people must be prepared to resist pressure from within the organization (Sinek, 2019).

Employees imitate their bosses just like kids imitate their parents. Leaders who put their needs above the needs of the group produce employee cultures that put progress ahead of the well-being of the firm (Maslow et al., 1998). The ability to lead breeds more ability to lead. Leaders with courage look beyond their annual performance reviews and merit objectives (Ciulla, 2004). Even if they do not instantly notice success, they consider the organization's long-term prospects. Sinek (2019) stated finite-minded leaders frequently consider solely their interests whereas courageous leaders can foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, which makes people more likely to follow them. All these factors result in a formula for success, growth, and evolution inside an organization.

Culture of Student Achievement

Leaders who have self-efficacy generate the energy that influences a culture of student achievement (Seashore Louis et al., 2010). Seashore Louis et al. (2010) stated, "Principals who see themselves as working collaboratively towards clear, common goals with district personnel, other principals, and teachers are more confident in their leadership" (p. 31). Principals have a central role in creating a culture of achievement. While collaborating with their team to create a culture of student achievement at the school, effective leaders must evaluate both internal and external influences on the learning environment. Bamburg and Andrews (1990) asserted a principal's responsibilities as the instructional leader of a school must include the following essential elements: (a) hold a specific vision for the school that is clear, and focuses on the desired outcomes like "ensuring student success and academic excellence" (p. 110); (b) convey that vision to teachers, staff, and stakeholders to acquire their needed support; (c) give

and additionally obtain the resources required by the school to achieve the vision; and (d) manage oneself so the first three items are accomplishable.

Over time, instructional leaders' mindsets have shifted to the elements that contribute to a higher culture of student achievement (Leithwood, 2005). Heck (1992) stated, "A driving force behind political efforts to improve public education suggests that improved student outcomes can be attained through strategic school organization and strong principal leadership" (p. 21). Two key elements that have received considerable attention in the area of enhancing academic performance are school culture and school leadership (Cotton, 2003; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Leithwood, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005; Reeves, 2006).

Principals of school sites are "held responsible not just for the structures and procedures they set up, but also for the performance of those under their charge" (Leithwood, 2005, p. 4). Supporting positive staff connections is the first step in fostering a healthy learning environment for students. Honesty, open communication, and taking risks are factors that thrive in environments where healthy connections exist (Ames & Miller, 1994). Cooperative learning and mutual respect are expected of both instructors and students in a true learning community. Creating a supportive learning environment at school boosts students' achievement and self-worth (Cantwell, 2003). Middle schools require a positive school climate to be successful. Middle school students transition from an inclusive setting to one that is unfamiliar and rotating with classes and teachers. A setting that is warm and focused on adolescents is welcoming, relaxed, respectful, quiet, and energizing. This type of environment supports a nurturing learning environment geared for student success. Positive student and teacher behavior and attitudes improve the entire school climate. Establishing a school climate that encourages collaboration,

trust, loyalty, openness, pride, and commitment is essential to creating a productive

environment that is conducive to learning. Academic success, instructor morale, and

student behavior are all correlated with school atmosphere (Parish, 2002). The ideal

middle school environment caters to each student's developmental needs, encouraging

both academic and personal progress (A. M. K. Johnson, 2002).

It has been challenging in the past to compare student outcomes to a teacher or

principal performance, but technology "makes it possible to tie student learning outcomes

more directly to teachers and school leaders' performance" (Leithwood, 2005, p. 4). The

demand placed on educators by "teachers, principals, and district leaders to generate

documented evidence of effective performance" (Leithwood, 2005, p. 4) has increased

significantly as a result of technology. Leithwood and Jantzi (1999) asserted it has been

difficult to quantify the precise factors that lead to an increase in high performance.

However, numerous research on leadership has revealed several factors associated with a

high-performance culture (Cotton, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2005;

Palmour, 2000; Prater, 2004; Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1999).

The U.S. federal government passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in

2015 as a measure of academic achievement accountability (ESSA, 2015). As a

component of the results driven accountability (RDA) system, the state of Texas uses the

ESSA program. A local education agency is given the necessary intervention actions by

the RDA system based on annual performance on specific metrics or trends across

indicators. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) was

superseded by the ESSA, which was signed into law in 2015. The ESSA set expectations

for transparency for parents and communities while giving states more latitude in the area

of education. Every state is required by the ESSA to evaluate students' performance in

reading, math, and science. The Department of Review and Support is in charge of RDA performance standards, determining the need for interventions, and overseeing and supporting RDA (Texas Education Agency [TEA], n.d.-a).

With the publication of the 2022 dashboard on September 14, 2022, the State Board of Education in Texas approved the modifications to the accountability system so all schools would be included in its system of yearly meaningful differentiation using the same academic achievement and graduation rate indicators for Texas School Accountability Dashboard (ESSA, 2015). For Texas's public schools, the State Board of Education establishes rules and requirements. Educational discussions include topics like responsibility, academic success, and school effectiveness (Huguet, 2017). School site leaders' main concern is ensuring all kids have equitable access to high-quality public education (Nichols et al., 2006). Furthermore, "The effective school's research has been a driving force behind political efforts to improve public education, suggesting that improved student outcomes can be attained through strategic school organization and strong principal leadership" (Heck, 1992, p. 21).

Leadership and Student Achievement

Strong leadership has an immeasurable positive effect on student achievement, and ineffective leadership has equally clear negative effects. Leadership accounts for one fourth of the total influence of all school characteristics, which affects the overall performance of students and schools (Leithwood, 2005). Although educational officials and scholars have disagreed over the extent to which principal leadership and performance impact student achievement and school performance, studies have demonstrated poor leadership can have long-lasting, negative effects on these outcomes (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). According to Leithwood (2005), the principal's

decisions have a significant impact on both student accomplishment and school performance.

The key player in building leadership at a school site is a principal. A principal's leadership style can affect their behavior inside the school as they adjust to challenges they face and work in a framework that has undergone several changes (Abu-Hussain, 2014). Because principals are tasked with ministering to the needs of schools they oversee, they are to schools what doctors are to hospitals (Sergiovanni, 2006).

The guidelines for student success are established by a school's agreed values and purposes. A principal is simultaneously a leader of leaders, a follower of ideas, a minister of values, and a servant to the followership when moral authority informs leadership practice (Leithwood, 2005). A leader influences authoritative culture through actions "aimed at building shared norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes among staff and promoting mutual caring and trust among staff" (Leithwood, 2005, p. 20). Principals' actions have a quantitative impact on student success, school performance, and overall school effectiveness (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). According to Murphy et al. (2008), "Leadership is the central ingredient in ensuring that meaningful student engagement and widespread rewards and recognition become defining elements of school culture" (p. 27). O'Donnell and White (2005) discovered a fundamental component of overall school effectiveness was the link between a principal's decisions to foster and increase student academic, social, and emotional progress. They also developed the idea that school administrators must "motivate and lead all people who influence student learning" (O'Donnell & White, 2005, p. 57).

According to Arnold et al. (2007), principals who set strict standards for teachers, students, and staff have a notable and quantitative impact on increased performance,

giving more opportunities to kids and overall school progress (Hallinger & Heck, 1998).

To facilitate teachers' work and give them confidence that all pupils will learn, a school's principal should organize activities based on the support of the institution's mission and vision (McGuigan & Hoy, 2006). Heck (1992) said, "The effective school's research has been a driving force behind political efforts to improve public education, suggesting that improved student outcomes can be attained through strategic school organization and strong principal leadership" (p. 21).

Marzano et al. (2005) found a link between a principal's leadership style and their school's success, and these results are "compelling and should stir school leaders to seek ways to improve their leadership skills" (p. 32). According to Cooper et al. (2005), excellent school principals frequently define their position as being similar to that of servant leaders. Principals in Cooper et al.'s study also stressed the importance of teamwork on the school campus and acknowledged their position was better suited as a manager of systems than a manager of details to create an environment that encourages consistently greater performance. According to Marzano et al. (2005), "In broad terms, research indicates that principals can have a profound effect on the culture of high performance and students' academic success in their schools" (p. 38). In a study of the relationship between principal leadership and high achievement, Palmour (2000) discovered a direct link between the two factors. According to Leithwood et al. (2004), "Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 5).

Role of the Principal

The principal of a school plays a key role in fostering a favorable school climate and culture. Principals influence communication systems in a school; expectations for

staff and teachers; promotion of a culture of teamwork; organization of professional development opportunities; and management of progress toward the mission, vision, and objectives of the school site (Wills, 2020). A principal must represent the school's vision and goals in their actions, give organizational and instructional leadership and support, develop a culture of trust and collaboration, empower people to take charge, communicate clearly, and provide a safe atmosphere where learning is the priority (Schreiber, 2019).

Leaders must balance cultivating relationships in an organization with promoting the work of the organization (McKinney et al., 2015). In other words, both productivity and people must be nurtured and taken care of equally. To consistently lead on a favorable path, an administrator must comprehend the culture of the school and be able to recognize changes in it. When it comes to influencing the academic achievement of students and how it relates to creating a high-performance culture, principals are key players. Principals of the 21st century are different from principals of the 20th century (Grobler, 2013). There have been noticeable changes in the principal role due to the expansion of administrative responsibilities and duties. Changes in school culture, the need to support student academics, and the ability to operate a school's daily needs are responsibilities of principals.

Successful school leaders set a good example for their staff and operate in ways that support the institution's mission (McKinney et al., 2015; Turan & Bektas, 2013). By presenting themselves as learners who collaborate with teachers and take advantage of professional development opportunities, they foster a culture of learning (McKinney et al., 2015). School principals have found modeling the behavior they want from their staff members is an effective management technique.

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As principals continue to engage with a range of cultures and norms in their school sites, there is greater focus on developing connections with all school stakeholders (Sergiovanni, 2006). Additionally, Sebastian et al. (2016) said creating a safe and good learning environment is a key responsibility of a school principal; it is via this commitment to a positive school culture that school administrators most directly influence student progress. Administrative support is another important aspect that influences a positive school culture (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Seashore Louis & Lee, 2016; Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011). The culture of a school is greatly influenced by supportive principals in many different ways. Administrative assistance can affect teachers' self-efficacy, attitudes toward their work, job satisfaction, and retention (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). Additionally, assistance from a principal can have an impact on a school's culture of trust at both the individual and organizational levels (Çogaltay & Karadağ, 2016; Huguet, 2017; Sarikaya & Erdogan, 2016).

According to Terziu et al. (2016), a principal who can effectively communicate and support teachers and staff lays the foundation for student success. Marzano et al. (2005) highlighted other duties of a school principal, such as concentration, input, communication, connections, and flexibility as professional factors related to the predetermined standards that go into the work of a principal. Pierce and Stapleton (2003) stated, "The principal serving primarily as a manager has been supplanted by the need for the principal to be the leader of instruction" (p. 93). Marzano et al. also suggested three key requirements for success as a school principal: creating a strong leadership team, allocating duties, and supporting the transition process.

Middle School Principal Leadership and a Culture of Student Achievement

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2000), "The notion that early adolescents have social, psychological, and academic needs that are distinct from those of older and younger students has long been recognized" (p. 13). A middle school is specifically organized to address the unique formative needs of young adolescents, according to the National Middle School Association (1982). In middle school, children between the ages of 10 and 14 acquire social skills, develop their identities, learn to make decisions on their own, and develop their morals and values (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992).

Young teens go through considerable changes during these transitory years. Teenagers experience physical, intellectual, moral, psychological, and social–emotional changes during middle school (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992). Self-awareness and intellectual growth in middle school "set the stage for success in high school and beyond, or for disengagement and the likelihood of becoming a high school dropout" (Caskey & Ruben, 2007, p. 1).

Creating a Culture of Student Achievement

It is crucial to first comprehend culture to comprehend school culture. Schein (1985, 1992) provided a widely accepted definition of *culture* as a pattern of shared fundamental beliefs that a group has learned over time through problem solving. This definition states culture is taught to new members of the organization as the proper way to perceive, think about, and feel about those problems.

According to Sergiovanni and Corbally (1984), culture is a group's shared values, symbols, and meanings, which might include tacit understandings, habits, conventions, expectations, common meanings attached to items and rituals, shared presumptions, and subjective interpretations. In agreement, Bolman and Deal (1997) asserted culture is "the

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interwoven pattern of beliefs, values, practices, and artifacts that define for members who they are and how they are to do things" (p. 217). Deal and Kennedy (1983) contended that a community's common beliefs and values make up its culture. According to Weick (1985), culture is a "coherent statement of who we are that makes it harder for us to become something else" (p. 385).

By fostering relationships between faculty, students, and families, middle school principals can significantly impact and improve the culture of their institution. The Association for Middle-Level Education, which is formerly the National Middle School Association (2010), asserted, "Research confirms that middle grades education is a significant and distinct level of schooling with its own tenets and characteristics" (p. 7). As suggested by Caskey and Ruben (2007):

> [An] effective middle school principal must have the following four qualities: (a) a shared commitment to participation in leadership, (b) establishing a shared vision with all individuals involved, (c) formulating guidelines to handle the academic and social issues that are typical for middle school students, and (d) creating an environment at school where everyone feels comfortable and appreciated while talking about crucial educational topics. (p. 29)

As previously mentioned, school site principals have a significant impact on campus and school culture (Kise & Russell, 2007). Franklin (2002) researched the impact of principal leadership on teachers in high academic performing schools. When a principal leads by example, teachers are more likely to believe in and follow that model. Franklin asserted the leadership philosophies of a principal and the school's mission statement must be intertwined. The school's mission statement and the principal's leadership philosophies do not have to be the same, but they should be connected and

reflect a similar shared vision. A school site principal must incorporate their leadership ideology to enhance the learning environment (Kokolis, 2007).

Challenges to Developing a Culture of Student Achievement

School culture is impacted by the school's leaders (Lucas, 2001; Miles, 2002; Schooley, 2005; Valentine, 2001). The culture of a school should demonstrate concern for other people's achievement, especially for pupils (Valentine, 2001). It ought to include working together with each student's achievement at the forefront. Every student should be provided with support they need to be an effective member of the school community, according to the school's core values. Transformational leaders who appreciate and promote ownership, empowerment, and cooperation create effective cultures. The culture encourages risk taking, self-reflection, forward thinking, and continual professional growth in the interest of each student's success. Staff members prioritize the success of students over their own convenience. Common beliefs of faculty and staff members that either hinder or promote student growth make up the school's culture. By addressing these presumptions, leaders have the ability to influence culture.

A leader shapes the company culture through actions "aimed at building shared norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes among staff and promoting mutual caring and trust among staff" (Leithwood, 2005, p. 20). Sergiovanni (2006) advised school administrators to concentrate on the informal, subdued, and symbolic facets of school life if they wish to change the culture of their institution. According to Bates (1981), a principal has a significant influence on the school's culture. It is conceivable to think of school culture as influencing student achievement. Deal and Peterson (1999) asserted that "school cultures, in summary, are crucial to school accomplishment and student learning" (p. xii), which suggests school cultures have a substantial impact on students' academic achievement. In

a longitudinal study, McLaughlin (1995) discovered enormous diversity in student accomplishment levels among schools and even departments serving related populations. Positive, focused school cultures distinguished higher-performing schools from poorer-performing schools, which were distinguished by toxic, negative school cultures (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Certain principal actions and student learning are related, and strong principal leadership is correlated with high-achievement cultures (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). The guiding principles, assumptions, and expectations that may be seen in how a school conducts its operations are the culture of a school. A principal's awareness of the complexities and undercurrents in the administration of the school and the use of this information to address existing and potential problems are an example of such behavior (Waters et al., 2003). Additionally, "Effective leadership means more than knowing what to do—it's knowing when, how, and why to do it" (Waters et al., 2003, p. 2).

Anfara (2013) asserted middle school principals who "recognize teaching and learning as the main business of the school, communicate the school's mission and vision clearly and consistently to all constituents, promote an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, and emphasize professional development" (pp. 697–698) are the most effective. These four areas have a direct bearing on how a middle school principal interacts with students, teachers, staff, and other stakeholders in the local school community. School administrators indirectly contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning through their significant impact on working circumstances, commitment, and motivation (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Middle school principals who prioritize the institution's key personnel are the most successful (McIver et al., 2009). Middle school site leaders who are aware of the

school's mission and purpose can pinpoint their own goals and how they relate to those objectives. Middle school principals ensure individuals in charge of the students on campus understand their job and what is required to improve students' academic achievement by expressing the mission, goals, and purpose to all stakeholders. Middle school principals fulfill the duty of an infinite-minded leader by cultivating and fostering a culture of high academic accomplishment at their organization.

Synthesis Matrix

The themes for this study were organized coherently according to the literature using a synthesis matrix (see Appendix A). The researcher received a summary of the literature via the synthesis matrix, which also shed light on the relationships between these themes. The references and variables that described each major heading covered in this study were also arranged by the researcher according to the matrix.

Summary

Chapter II provided an overview of the historical and theoretical elements important to this study on Sinek's (2019) infinite-minded leadership constructs and its perceived impact on a culture of student achievement. The examination of numerous aspects related to infinite-minded leadership and a culture of student achievement were based on infinite-minded leadership researchers and the theoretical framework of Sinek's infinite-minded leadership constructs that impact infinite-minded leader conduct. These themes embraced a culture of student achievement, leadership and student achievement, the role of a principal, and middle school principal leadership, creating a culture of student achievement.

This examination of the literature revealed a wealth of studies that supported and established the link between a culture of student accomplishment and Sinek's (2019)

infinite-minded leadership conceptions. However, there was a dearth of research that has

formally codified the significance of Sinek's five integral-minded leadership constructs

when they are applied by middle school principals to promote a culture of student

achievement. All of the research components looked to support the need for this study

and the approach used to undertake it are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to investigate and describe middle school principals' perceptions of the influence of Sinek's (2019) infinite-minded leadership conceptions on creating a culture of student achievement. The study explored the lived experiences of exemplary middle school principals on each of Sinek's five leadership constructs: (a) advance a just cause, (b) build trusting teams, (c) study worthy rivals, (d) prepare for existential flexibility, and (e) demonstrate the courage to lead. This qualitative research design was used to gain a deeper understanding of middle school principals' lived experiences (Patton, 2015). This section of the dissertation, according to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), "describes the design of the study" (p. 37).

This chapter begins with information about the research methodology. It also goes over the research questions and purpose statement. The research design, population, sample, and instrumentation are also presented in this chapter. The term *peer researchers* is used throughout the study to refer to the eight University of Massachusetts Global doctoral students who collaborated on the design and execution of this thematic study under the supervision of three faculty members and one faculty chair. A description of the methods used to gather and analyze data is also provided. The interview procedure is described in the chapter along with the techniques used to improve validity and reliability. Limitations of the study are presented as a conclusion.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary middle school principals perceived the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework were embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of

extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceived affected the development of an infinite mindset.

Research Questions

The following central research question guided this study: How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded in their organization to achieve extraordinary results? The research subquestions were:

1. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of advancing a just cause is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

2. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of building trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?

3. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of studying your worthy rival is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

4. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

5. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

6. What are the organizational supports and barriers do exemplary middle school

principals perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset?

Research Design

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010) and Patton (2002), qualitative

research is very adaptable, allowing researchers to employ techniques that raise the

potential impact of reflexivity, enhancing the credibility of the findings. When gathering

data, reflexivity entails an individual looking at their own beliefs, practices, and

judgments. Being reflexive is recognizing any personal beliefs that might have

unintentionally influenced the research (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022). Reflexivity is said to

improve credibility that might otherwise be weakened by researcher bias. Additionally,

according to McMillan and Schumacher, when coupled with qualitative research, a

variety of intuitive research methodologies may influence the decision-making process.

The methodology selected for this study was phenomenology. The eight peer

researchers in the thematic study group, faculty advisors, and faculty chair determined a

phenomenological design would be most suitable for this study. According to Patton

(2002), the phenomenological point of view is concerned with the theory and the main

issue is the significance, organization, and core of the individual's or group's lived

experience of this phenomenon. Phenomenology refers to a person's perception of the

significance of an event rather than the event as it occurs (Patton, 2002). The researcher

obtained information by conducting an in-depth investigation using interviews (Creswell,

2008), which helped to gather data needed for this methodology to experience the most

direct and honest responses.

Phenomenological research is a descriptive and nonexperimental methodology. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explained how a nonexperimental approach differs from an experimental approach. Without directly altering the conditions encountered, nonexperimental research approaches explain the occurrences and study the relationships between various phenomena. Researchers are also able to explain the achievements, attitudes, actions, or other features of a group or subject while using a phenomenological technique.

In this phenomenological study, the researcher aimed to develop an understanding of how an individual's life experiences linked to particular opinions (Creswell et al., 2007). The researcher conducted in-depth interviews to obtain a clear understanding of the individuals' lived experiences. The individual experiences of the researcher and the interviewees were the main emphasis of this study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2002). The researcher sought to collect and preserve accurate information to identify trends and themes, and to support the presentation of the philosophies related to middle school principals' perceptions.

A phenomenological investigation explains the significance of people's actual experiences with an idea or phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). In-depth interviews with participants in phenomenology studies are necessary (Patton, 2015). As a result, this chapter provides information about the research methodology. It also goes over the research questions and the purpose statement. The research design, population, sample, and instrumentation are also presented in this chapter. A description of the methods used to gather the data and analyze them is also provided. The interview procedure is

described in the chapter, along with the techniques used to improve validity and reliability. Limitations of the study are presented as a conclusion.

Population

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), a *population* is a collection of elements or particular cases that resemble criteria established by the researcher and represent the elements or situations to which the research's findings are specific. There are 20 educational service center (ESC) regions in the state of Texas. Houston ESC is located in Region 4 of the state.

There were 1,673 middle and junior high schools active in Texas in the 2020–2021 school year (Texas Education Agency [TEA], n.d.-b). Junior high schools and middle schools consist of sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students between 12–14 years of age. Houston is diverse and the range of students' ethnicities represents the various cultures supported in the middle schools. Across ESC regions in 2021–2022, Region 4 (i.e., Houston) continued to serve the largest proportion of total state enrollment (i.e., 22.7%). Middle schools in the Houston region counties ranged from a high of 303 schools to two counties with only three middle schools each. The largest number of middle schools were concentrated in Austin, Brazoria, Chambers Fort Bend, and Harris counties, representing 96% of the total number of middle schools in the greater Houston area. The largest number of middle schools (i.e., 303 out of 386) were located in Harris County, which was in Region 4. In the Houston, Texas area, there were middle schools located in nine counties (see Table 1).

Table 1

Houston Counties and Middle Schools

Houston area school districts (Region 4)	# of middle schools
Austin County	19
Brazoria County	14
Chambers County	20
Fort Bend County	15
Galveston County	5
Harris County	303
Liberty County	3
Montgomery County	4
Waller County	3
Total of all counties	386

Note. Adapted from "Texas Education Agency," by Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b

(https://tea.texas.gov/)

Middle schools are led by a principal. Bartell (1989) stated principals are

instructional leaders who highlight accomplishments; establish instructional strategies;

maintain a structured learning environment; regularly assess student progress; coordinate

instructional programs; assist teachers; articulate clear, well-informed visions; set goals;

and intervene as needed. A principal in Texas holds an administrative credential along

with a master's degree. A principal's main responsibility is to lead the school's

curriculum. A principal also determines the educational objectives for the school and

provides the means to carry them out. Being an instructional leader is a crucial

responsibility that necessitates a principal setting clear goals for how to enhance teaching

and learning and managing curriculum development to achieve academic success in their school. A principal develops new academic programs with assistance from the faculty to raise student achievement. According to the TEA (n.d.-b), the main responsibilities of Texas principals include:

- Know and understand the Texas Standards for Principals.

- Understand the Principal Evaluation System.

- Prepare for the pre-evaluation conference, including a self-assessment, identification of performance goals, and identification of change initiatives underway at their school.

- Gather data, artifacts, and evidence to support performance in relation to standards and progress in attaining goals.

- Develop and implement strategies to improve personal performance/attain goals in areas individually or collaboratively identified.

- Participate in the mid-year and final evaluation conferences.

- Draft goal(s) for the subsequent year based on the final evaluation.

Therefore, the population for this study was 386 public middle school principals in Region 4 in Houston, Texas.

Sampling Frame

The *sampling frame*, according to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), is the grouping of individuals drawn from the larger population from whom inferences about the smaller population can be drawn. The sample frame chosen for this study was two school districts located in the Houston area Region 4. The first district was the Katy Independent School District (ISD) located in the city of Katy in Harris County, Texas.

The district had 17 middle schools and 17 middle school principals at the time of the study. Ten middle schools were labeled as exemplary in the school district. The sampling frame for this study was 10 exemplary middle school principals from the Katy ISD.

Exemplary middle schools are schools that meet or exceed the Texas state dashboard's State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) testing averages (TEA, 2017). The district used STAAR test scores as a means to measure student academic achievement. Accordingly, schools with high student academic achievement are labeled as exemplary middle schools.

According to the TEA (n.d.-b), students must demonstrate increased cognitive complexity as evidenced by raised focus, clarity, and depth in questioning rigor as they move from the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills to the STAAR. Region 4 set the STAAR testing at an average of 77% for eighth-grade students to meet. There are three levels of achievement in the STAAR testing: approaches, meets, and masters. Approaches level is set at the 77% mark, which is the lowest the state recommends for understanding the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills Standards. Schools are ranked by the state on a letter rating scale of A, B, and C levels. Schools in the C range are assessed by the state as in need of support for student learning and achievement. Schools that average a B on the STAAR testing are in good standing. Middle schools ranked as an A school are exemplary. Katy ISD is an exemplary district and had the highest rating in Region 4. In 2021, the district was ranked as an A+ for overall student achievement. Overall, Katy ISD was the highest-performing district in Harris County, Houston, with an 89% average on the STAAR test for eighth-grade students (Katy ISD, n.d.).

The sampling frame for this study was 10 exemplary principals leading middle schools with high student achievement based on the STAAR test results for the 2021–2022 school year. An exemplary leader in this study was a leader who demonstrated extraordinary results and evidence of leading their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits, meeting at least three of the following criteria:

- The exemplary middle school principal demonstrates evidence of collaboratively leading an organization fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements.

- The exemplary middle school principal actively participates in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.

- The exemplary middle school principal has a minimum of 5 years of experience in the profession.

- The exemplary middle school principal has had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.

- The exemplary middle school principal has received recognition by their peers as a leader who gives respect to all people.

- The exemplary middle school principal is a member in good standing in professional associations in their field.

Sample

A *sample* is a group of people from whom information is collected (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this study, the researcher used nonprobability sampling.

Nonprobability sampling is a sampling strategy where samples are chosen based on the researcher's own assessment as opposed to by chance. It is a less strict sampling approach. The researcher was mainly reliant on this sampling technique and carefully chose sample participants to ensure responses would amply illuminate the inquiry subject under investigation (Patton, 2002).

To find participants for the study and answer the main researcher question, the researcher used purposeful sampling. When a researcher chooses participants based on particular criteria, they are using purposeful sampling, which is a sort of nonprobability sampling (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). Based on their assessment of who will provide the most information to address the research objective, a researcher chooses volunteers. The researcher in this study sought middle school principals who demonstrated five specific criteria to participate in this study.

The researcher also used convenience sampling with their resources, time, and location (Creswell, 2008). In convenience sampling, a researcher chooses participants as they are willing and available to be investigated (Creswell, 2005). Convenience sampling is a different kind of nonprobability sampling. Researchers may choose convenience sampling, also known as available sampling, because it is convenient or easily accessible (McMillian & Schumacher, 2010). The first eight participants who responded to the email invitation were chosen for this phenomenological study. The researcher could extrapolate the research findings to participants with the same traits as the target population using both purposeful and convenience sampling. The goal of these sampling techniques was to understand the common experiences of the sampling frame. Figure 4

outlines the population, sampling frame, and sample population for this

phenomenological qualitative study.

Figure 4

Population, Sample Frame, and Sample

Population →	N= 386 Middle School Principals in the Houston, Texas region 4
Sample Frame →	N= 10 exemplary Middle School Principals in the Katy Independent School District located in Harris County, Houston Texas
Sample →	N= 8 exemplary Middle School Principals in the Katy Independent School District of a high student academic performing middle school
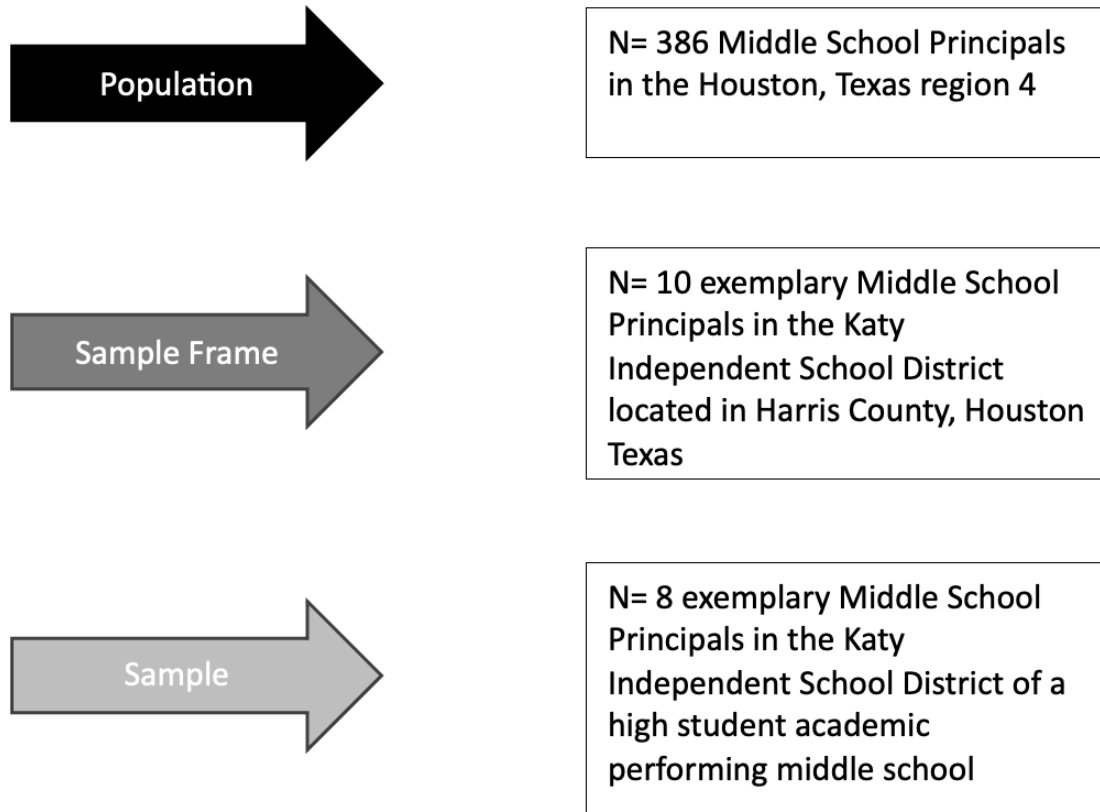
A portion of the individuals in the sampling frame from which data were collected

served as the sample for this study. Using this information, the researcher was able to

establish the population, assuming the population's characteristics were similar to those

of the sample (Patton, 2015). The eight middle school principals who participated in this

study led schools with sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students. The value of a sample

lies in the depth of information that each member may contribute, not in the sheer number

of participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). According to Patton (2015), the sample size should be determined by the phenomenon's projected reasonable coverage given the study's goal. The researcher chose eight participants as the sample size for the study. This number was an adequate sample size to investigate the real-world experiences of middle school principals in academically rigorous public schools in Texas.

Sample Selection Process

The researcher identified high-performing schools in Katy ISD. As directed by the TEA, each school had student achievement levels of a minimum of 77% overall rating on the STAAR 2021–2022 results. To find participants who met the requirement of years of service in their present district, the researcher in Katy, Texas, contacted the assistant superintendents of student services at both of the local school districts. One assistant superintendent agreed to assist the researcher in obtaining the permission of the school district's approval to participate in the study and to identify principals who met the study's selection criteria. The assistant superintendent used the selection criteria to determine which principals were qualified to participate in the study. He informed the researcher that 10 middle school principals in the district met the selection criteria and were eligible to participate in the study.

The researcher sent an email to the district's assistant superintendent outlining the research study and the requirements for participation and applied for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at the district (see Appendix B). The 10 middle school principals were identified as potential participants once verification and approval were established, which led to a total of 10 potential participants who satisfied the study's eligibility

requirements. The researcher sent emails to the 10 principals to invite them to take part in the study.

Once the principals agreed to participate in the study, the researcher individually emailed the eight principals who responded first and shared they had been selected for the study (see Appendix C). The researcher shared the following documents before the scheduled interview: (a) the 12 open-ended, semistructured interview questions (see Appendix D), (b) the University of Massachusetts Global IRB Research Participant's Bill of Rights (see Appendix E), and (c) the informed consent and audio release form (see Appendix F). The IRB Research Participant's Bill of Rights helped to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of all participants. The eight principals were instructed to sign and email back the forms to the researcher. Principals were also able to verbally consent at the beginning of their scheduled interviews and the informed consent was reviewed and agreed upon prior to beginning the interview. Verbal consent was also recorded and transcribed.

The researcher used multiple procedures in the process of choosing participants for this qualitative phenomenological research study to create a sample that would produce reliable and insightful data. The procedures were:

- The researcher downloaded and used a list of all middle school principals in Harris County from the TEA website to identify potential participants.

- The researcher identified two school districts in Harris County with exemplary middle schools in student achievement in the area located close to the researcher (i.e., Katy ISD with 10 exemplary middle school principals and Cypress-Fairbanks ISD with six exemplary middle school principals).

- The researcher chose the first eight middle school principals who responded and indicated a commitment to engage in the study. The researcher contacted each middle school administrator identified as a participant based on sample criteria via email or telephone to request their participation (see Appendix G).

- The principals responded via email to the researcher's invitation. Once a principal accepted, they were added to the list, assigned a number, and sent the interview questions along with the informed consent and IRB form in a second email (see Appendix H).

To finish the interview and artifact collection in the allotted time frame, the researcher scheduled interviews based on the availability of the participants and researcher.

Instrumentation

In-depth interviews served as the primary method of data gathering for this qualitative study. Participatory interviews aim to capture participants' lived experiences by evoking anecdotes and stories (Patton, 2015). Although interviews can be subject to subjectivity and bias, the researcher took measures to lessen bias in the study by developing an interview protocol, finalizing interview questions with expert researchers, and piloting a field test with a knowledgeable and retired public school principal and knowledgeable researchers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

To provide feedback and check for bias in the questions, interviewer, and procedures, conducting an interview field test (i.e., pilot test) is a crucial step in preparing for research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Together with four academic advisors, the thematic team created semistructured questions that were in line with the research topics. Open-ended, semistructured questions with a clear purpose allow respondents to react

openly and freely. The faculty advisors formed working groups in the thematic team by giving one of the five constructs from Sinek's (2019) infinite-minded leadership constructs to a pair of thematic team participants.

For each component, the thematic group pairs had to create two interview questions and one probe. Probes had to be impartial so as not to influence the response because they were intended to request more information or elaboration (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). To verify the survey questions and research questions were aligned, the thematic team produced an alignment table (see Appendix I). Individual groups evaluated one another using the alignment table after sharing their questions and probes with the entire group. A draft interview protocol with 12 interview questions and 14 probes was produced as a result of this procedure (see Appendix J). The interview protocol had a script that was read to all participants before the interview.

Four faculty advisors who were regarded as experts in qualitative research reviewed and approved the research procedure for use in a field test to gauge the efficacy of the interview questions. Each team member conducted a field test on a subset of the study's participants. An observer with experience conducting qualitative interviews was also included in the field test to provide input on the questions and methodology. The thematic team returned to the team with the collective comments, worked with the advisors to improve the interview probes and questions, and created the final interview instrument.

Researcher as Instrument

The primary instrument for data collection in this phenomenological study had to be the researcher due to the nature of the investigation. When a researcher immerses

themselves in a setting to gather information about a phenomenon, they become the instrument in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). To comprehend individuals' actual lived experiences for this study, the researcher conducted interviews and gave out surveys. At the time of the study, and in the area where the study was conducted, the researcher was employed as a middle school science instructional coach and had more than 20 years of experience in education. They were well aware of potential biases because of their previous experience in a comparable situation, their current position, and their relationships (Patton, 2015). The researcher took measures to reduce any potential personal bias, including using a set of questions created and analyzed by a team of peer researchers and faculty advisors, having a process expert observe the interview during the field test, and having an outside researcher code 10% of the data gathered.

Validity

To ensure the validity of their research, qualitative researchers use a variety of techniques, including triangulation, member checking, low-inference descriptors, mechanical data collection, participant evaluation, and peer debriefing (Creswell et al., 2007; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). When an instrument accurately measures what it is intended to measure, it is considered legitimate (Patten, 2012). The research questions and Sinek's (2019) five infinite-minded leadership constructs guided the development of the interview questions for this study. The instrument went through a field test process involving eight researchers, eight interviewees, and eight expert observers to ensure the questions were clear and easily understood.

The interview protocol was also developed by several researchers and approved by four highly qualified qualitative researchers. The alignment matrix was used to verify

the study's research questions and interview questions were aligned and grounded in the literature. A synthesis matrix was created to further inform and validate the variables and other components of the study. Together, these techniques improved the interview protocol's validity.

Once the eight participants accepted the email offer for an interview, the researcher sent additional emails scheduling interview dates and times. The interviewee's consent was attested to by the email because it was the principals' approval to be part of the research. At the start of each interview, the researcher followed the interview process and went through the declarations of purpose and focus. To supplement the participants' first responses to each of the 14 semistructured, open-ended questions, the researcher questioned each principal individually using the preset thematic interview questions. Additional probes were used when more clarification or information was desired (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2002).

All interviews were recorded using two recording devices. In the first device, the researcher recorded all of the interviews using the Zoom recording feature and compared the transcripts to each recorded session to ensure accuracy. A backup recording device was available if it was needed during the interview. The researcher took handwritten notes during the interviews to record study participants' nonverbal responses to questions, including their facial expressions and other nonverbal actions. These procedures of mechanically capturing data and participant evaluation were useful methods to improve the quality of the data protocol (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Reliability

If an instrument consistently produces accurate data, it is regarded as reliable (Patten, 2012). The researcher served as the primary data-gathering tool in this qualitative study. The interview protocol was created by 10 researchers and approved by four expert qualitative researchers to enhance reliability. All 10 members of the thematic team participated in a field test to determine the validity and reliability of the data-gathering tool. The results of the field test were consistent among the 10 researchers. The researcher followed the protocol for conducting each interview and never deviated from the script. They used probes to prompt the participants to fully explain their lived experiences relative to fully responding to each question.

The researcher used an additional method (i.e., intercoder reliability) to reduce individual researcher bias while coding the information obtained from the semistructured interviews. Intercoder reliability creates the comparability of ratings obtained with an instrument when employed by various observers (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008). The 10-person thematic peer research team discussed the interviewees' real-world experiences and exchanged their collective knowledge. To increase research trustworthiness, each researcher also asked a colleague to examine and code 10% of the collected data (Patton, 2002).

Data Collection

The goal of interviews is to give people or groups more profound access to authentic viewpoints (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2002). Thus, a qualitative researcher must be certain an interviewee's thought process, opinions, and perspectives are genuine. A researcher must also guarantee responses are trustworthy and accurately

capture the participant's perspective. The type of interview procedure and data collected depends on a researcher's expertise. In this study, the researcher solicited responses and reactions using a combination of arbitrary questions, inquiries, and transitions during interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2002).

To conduct qualitative research, interviewees must be directly engaged through interviews and the examination of artifacts (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher used in-depth, semistructured interviews to obtain the data for this phenomenological study. The researcher collected artifacts both before and after interviews, and collected data reports from the TEA, Texas dashboard, Katy ISD website, individual school websites, and the principals. After the interview, the researcher asked participants if they had any pertinent artifacts they could share.

To guarantee the rights of the study's participants were safeguarded, the researcher applied to and was granted permission to conduct the study by the University of Massachusetts Global IRB (see Appendix E). The researcher conducted each interview on Zoom with a backup device. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interview times varied between 30–45 minutes. To prevent coercing a response from the subject, the interviewer followed the protocol. To elicit thoughtful responses, the researcher used probes in every interview. Each participant was assigned a number to avoid identifying personal information. Data were stored on a password-protected computer known only to the researcher. Any physical records were stored in a locked cabinet located at the researcher's private residence. All records were stored for a period of 3 years following the publication of the dissertation and were destroyed.

Data Analysis

Through the process of inductive analysis, qualitative researchers provide meaning to the data by creating categories and patterns from particular facts (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). It is possible to examine the obtained qualitative data in a variety of ways. Due to the vast amount of data gathered during the investigation, it was difficult to identify common themes (Patton, 2002). The 8 hours of interviews covering responses to 12 open-ended questions required a thorough analysis of the data, followed by any probing questions that may have been required to develop or explain the preliminary answers. The researcher classified the observational notes and artifacts in the same way as the interview transcripts. The researcher sorted data results to assess their importance and draw conclusions. The analysis process of the statistical data was:

1. The researcher transcribed audio recordings.

2. Participants checked transcriptions for accuracy.

3. The researcher examined all data, including transcriptions, observations, and artifacts, for any potential themes.

4. The researcher entered data into the NVivo program.

5. The researcher conducted data coding with the NVivo program.

6. The researcher arranged codes according to themes.

7. The researcher examined the impact of Sinek's (2019) five infinite-minded leadership constructs on developing a culture of student achievement as viewed by middle school principals through the analysis of themes and the creation of frequency tables.

In qualitative research, organizing or coding raw data into words, phrases, and concepts is essential (Patton, 2002). A peer researcher collaborated to code some of the

data in this study to ensure the calibration of developing themes to increase

trustworthiness of the collected data (Lombard et al., 2004; Seidman, 2013). The

qualitative researcher represented connections between the study questions and the raw

data. To carry out the coding process for this study, the researcher entered all of the data

gathered (i.e., transcripts, observation field notes, and artifacts) into the qualitative

research program, NVivo.

The researcher used the shadowing data-gathering technique recommended by

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) after doing a thorough analysis of all the data to

acquire a general sense of the information gathered. The researcher created introductory

codes to compare to one another, and eliminated similar or duplicate codes through

merging (Patton, 2002). During the process, the researcher discovered significant codes

because iterative coding improved the coding framework. The coding methodology was

further developed using these critical codes. After that, the themes were created from

these significant codes. Finally, the researcher examined the themes to show how Sinek's

(2019) constructs for infinite-minded leadership were considered to influence the

development of a culture of student achievement.

It is crucial to achieving intercoder consistency to improve the validity and

dependability of the data. The interrater is supposed to ensure the validity of the results

(Patton, 2015). The consistency created between the scoring of various observers using

the same instrument is referred to as intercoder reliability (McMillan & Schumacher,

2010; Patton, 2015). One of the interviews was independently coded and examined by a

theme team member. According to Creswell (2003), themes from the coding process need

to be identified when there is at least a 10% degree of agreement. The member of the

thematic team achieved the necessary degree of 80% agreement.

Limitations

Research study constraints are characteristics that could hurt the results and the researcher's capacity to draw generalizations from the data (Patton, 2002; Roberts, 2010). Generalizations are restricted to the experiences of individuals at a specific time and location because the goal of a phenomenological investigation is to describe the lived experiences of the sample population (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten, 2012; Patton, 2002; Roberts, 2010). Due to the study's sample size, time frame, geographic location of its participants, and researcher's role as an instrument of study, it was not possible to fully understand the perceived perceptions of middle school principals.

Time Constraints

Because middle school administrators were extremely busy, arranging repeated, in-depth interviews with each participant was not feasible, which added to the study's time constraints. The 12 interview questions could only be discussed for a total of 45 minutes for each session. To overcome this time constraint, the researcher gave each study participant the chance to go over the interview transcript to clarify any initial replies they may have had questions about. Because interviews and research were conducted as part of a dissertation that had to be completed within university deadlines, the actual number of calendar days available to perform the study was another potential limitation.

Sample Size

The thematic group, which included peer researchers and faculty advisors, decided on a sample size of eight exceptional leaders because phenomenological studies often had sample sizes of 6–25 study participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patton, 2002). The thematic team decided this number was a sufficient sample size to

obtain in-depth, detailed information from administrators at school sites that are known for fostering a student academic culture. In qualitative research, growing the sample size hinders the ability to gather thorough data (Creswell, 2008). The sample size for this study was eight exemplary middle school principals.

Researcher as Instrument of Study

When a researcher immerses themselves in a setting to gather information about a phenomenon, they become the instrument in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). Researchers must be aware of any potential bias they may have, including their experiences and opinions, and be upfront about it. To increase reliability, the researcher should convey objectivity and possess interviewing expertise. To reduce bias in this study, the researcher acknowledged and discussed their experience as an educator.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

Chapter III presented the methodology used to describe how middle school principals viewed the influence of Sinek's (2019) five infinite-minded leadership constructs on building a culture for student academic achievement. The chapter started off with a description of the purpose and research questions, then included information about the population, sampling frame, sample, and sample selection procedure. The researcher also discussed validity and reliability details of the apparatus used in the study. The chapter also offered information on how the data were examined and how they were collected. The study's limitations, including those related to time, sample size, and instrumentation, were presented. The research findings reflecting middle school principals' perceptions of Sinek's five infinite-minded leadership theories on the culture of student academic achievement are presented in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

This chapter begins with a review of this study's purpose, research questions, methodology, data collection procedures, population, and sample. The data collected in this study are then presented by research question, followed by a detailed report of the findings. Finally, the key themes found in the overall data are shared as major findings.

Overview

This qualitative study explored and described the lived experiences and perceptions of eight exemplary middle school principals in relation to the five practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework. The variables for this study were the five practices of the infinite mindset framework: (a) just cause, (b) trusting teams, (c) worthy rivals, (d) existential flexibility, and (e) the courage to lead (Sinek, 2019). Data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews with each principal. The researcher also collected artifacts to triangulate the data gathered in the interviews.

The researcher investigated and coded the gathered data into subjects by variable and research question. The discoveries are introduced by research subquestions in this chapter to address the purpose of the study. The principals' perceptions of the organization's infinite mindset practices are outlined in the findings of the first five research subquestions. Discoveries from the sixth research subquestion answered the secondary purpose of the study, which was understanding the supports and barriers principals perceived to be embedded in their organization that affected the organization's infinite mindset.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary middle school principals perceived the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework were embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceived affected the development of an infinite mindset.

Research Questions

The following central research question guided this study: How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded in their organization to achieve extraordinary results? The research subquestions were:

1. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of advancing a just cause is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

2. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of building trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?

3. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of studying your worthy rival is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

4. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

5. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

6. What are the organizational supports and barriers exemplary middle school principals perceive affect the development of infinite mindset?

Research Methodology and Data Collection Procedures

This study employed phenomenological qualitative research as the research design. The purpose of selecting this design was to enable the researcher to identify patterns in the perspectives of multiple principals. The researcher asked 12 semistructured, open-ended questions of each participant in a one-on-one interview. The primary method of data collection in this study was these in-depth interviews. Additionally, the researcher collected artifacts from study participants as a secondary data source.

The researcher interviewed eight exemplary middle school principals who met the study's requirements. The meetings were led and recorded virtually through Zoom. Each interview lasted between 30–45 minutes. The researcher asked each principal the same 12 questions using a semistructured interview protocol. They compiled transcripts from the virtual recordings and examined them for themes in the responses.

The researcher also gathered and examined artifacts related to the five practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework. Each principal was asked to provide three artifacts. The researcher looked at 17 artifacts from the eight principals altogether. The artifacts included principal emails to families, school website messages, social media posts, vision and mission statements, campus improvement plans, school websites, and a

staff meeting agenda. To gain a deeper comprehension of the gathered data, the researcher identified common themes between the interview transcripts and the artifacts.

Population

The population in this study was public middle school principals in Texas. A middle school principal interacts with students, parents, and staff while also maintaining a safe academic environment and overseeing the school's operations (Arnold et al., 2007). Because accessing all of Texas' 1,673 middle school principals was not practical, the population was reduced to a target population. The target population used in this study was middle school principals in Harris County, Texas. In 2020, Harris County had 303 middle school principals (Texas Education Agency [TEA], n.d.-a).

Sample

The sample used in this study was eight exemplary middle school principals in Katy Independent School District (ISD) located in Harris County, Texas. A leader was considered exemplary for the purposes of this study if they achieved extraordinary results at their school site, received an award or accolade in their capacity as principal, or were regarded as a model principal by other administrators. The researcher deliberately selected particular participants with greater insight into the phenomenon by developing specific criteria. Participants were required to have 2 years of administrative leadership experience and a minimum of 5 years of education experience. Additionally, the exemplary leader must have fulfilled at least three of the following criteria:

- The exemplary middle school principal demonstrated evidence of collaboratively leading an organization, fostering creativity and future-orientation improvements.

- The exemplary middle school principal actively participated in community leadership and shared problem-solving activities.

- The exemplary middle school principal had articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings on leadership.

- The exemplary middle school principal received recognition by their peers as a leader.

- The exemplary middle school principal was a member in good standing in professional associations in their field.

In addition to purposive sampling, the researcher also used convenience sampling. The researcher selected middle school principals who worked in the same public school district as them through convenience sampling.

Demographic Data

The researcher collected demographic data from each participant in the research study. The sample population included eight middle school principals selected from a target population using a set of criteria as previously described. Five of the eight of the principals identified as White or Caucasian, one identified as African American or Black, one identified as Middle Eastern or North African, and one identified as Hispanic or Latinx (see Table 2). Five of the eight participants identified as female and three of the eight participants identified as male. All of the principals interviewed in this study worked in the field of education for 13 or more years. For their highest level of education, seven of the eight participants held a master's degree and one earned a doctoral degree. None of the principals were enrolled as a student at the time of the study.

Table 2

Description of Sample

Participant	Race/ethnicity	Gender	Experience (years)	Degree
Principal 1	White or Caucasian	Male	13+	Doctorate
Principal 2	White or Caucasian	Female	13+	Master's
Principal 3	Hispanic or LatinX	Female	13+	Master's
Principal 4	White or Caucasian	Female	13+	Master's
Principal 5	Black or African American	Female	13+	Master's
Principal 6	Middle Eastern	Male	13+	Master's
Principal 7	White or Caucasian	Female	13+	Master's
Principal 8	White or Caucasian	Male	13+	Master's

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The researcher gathered information for this study through interviews and an assortment of artifacts; then, they dissected data subjectively to grasp how exemplary middle school principals viewed the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework were embedded in their organization. An additional purpose of collecting and analyzing these data was to understand the organizational supports and barriers that exemplary middle school principals perceived as affecting the development of an infinite mindset. To categorize data and identify patterns, the researcher began data analysis by inventorying and organizing the data collected. To classify information and recognize designs, the researcher started an information examination by reviewing and arranging the information gathered.

The researcher made transcripts from each interview recording and associated significant artifacts with the connected meeting information. Related artifacts and transcripts were assigned a letter that corresponded to the participant's interview data. After that, the researcher analyzed the data to find common codes for each study variable.

In the data that were gathered, the researcher identified 19 themes. The frequency of the themes discussed by the participants totaled 602 responses. The researcher identified 14 as the minimum number of responses for a given theme. The minimum number of participants were four for a response to be valid because this represented half of the respondents for the baseline. A second researcher, who had a doctoral degree, separately coded 10% of the same data to ensure the reliability of the findings and concluded the findings were reliable.

Central Research Question

The following central research question guided this study: How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results? The central research question was answered by the collective findings related to each of the study's subquestions. The findings for each of the subquestions are presented in the following sections. These data are presented based on the subquestions' findings and discussed. Findings are organized by research subquestion.

Research Subquestion 1: Just Cause

Research Subquestion 1 was: How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of advancing a just cause is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results? The researcher asked two questions during each of the eight qualitative interviews to collect data for Research Subquestion 1. The first of the two interview questions asked the principals to share how their organization ensured priorities were connected to their school's visions and aspirations.

The second subquestion asked the principals to explain how their organization connected values and a sense of purpose to advance the organization's just cause.

The data collected were clustered into four overarching themes based on the interview responses from the middle school principals and artifacts collected. The four themes that emerged related to the practice of advancing a just cause were (a) Beliefs and Values of the School, (b) Focus on Student Learning, (c) Collaborative Involvement of the Vision With Staff, and (d) Referring Back to the Vision and Mission. Table 3 shows the number of respondents mentioning each theme and the frequency of these statements.

Table 3

Research Subquestion 1 Themes

Theme	Respondents	Frequency
Beliefs and Values of the School	7	32
Focus on Student Learning	6	25
Collaborative Involvement of the Vision With Staff	7	19
Referring Back to the Mission and Vision	7	18

Note. N = 8.

Beliefs and Values of the School

The theme with the highest frequency for the practice of advancing a just cause was the Beliefs and Values of the School. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the frequency of responses that emerged for this theme included 32 interview statements and five artifacts. The principals in this study shared numerous ways in which they referred to the beliefs and values of their organization. They communicated their beliefs and values to all stakeholders and referred to them when making decisions regarding student learning and outcomes. Principals shared artifacts connecting the

values of learning and the organization's overall purpose. All eight of the interviewed principals spoke about the belief and value systems of the school. Principals were focused on making sure the beliefs and values were connected to the vision of the school. Regarding his connection to the vision, Principal 1 stated:

> I came into this building, and the mission and vision were crafted for the building and it was a very successful school. One of the things I did was identify what key stakeholders target their beliefs and values. It was just a short activity with just a variety of stakeholders from parents to students to teachers to see if what they reported matched what was originally written, which was pleasant and nice. So, from there, we have just crafted priorities around those values and beliefs around our organization and we put it on the agendas so it is constantly in our face per se and we refer back to it when making key decisions.

Six principals shared their organization's values were located in the vision statement on their school website. Principal 1 shared his campus values as an artifact and explained students and families are sent the values at the beginning of the year in the school newsletter. He reiterated how he held his students accountable to the values and referred back to those values when dealing with student discipline issues. In the campus improvement plan, which was an artifact from Principal 3's organization, the beliefs were clearly stated. Principal 3 explained how her school made their values known, stating:

> How we connect our values in general for the organization is that we're always revisiting our values and then, even like when we're interviewing candidates, we're asking questions that, ask things that will let us know how, what is our attitude towards students, what's our attitude towards the whole child.

Principal 7's message to families that she shared as an artifact included her organization's values. The vision statement that Principal 7 shared as an artifact supported her statement about the school's vision. She shared, "It's really, its organizational structure, is to first kind of gather the information, and then you come back together and you work to solve those issues and continue to really promote the vision of the campus."

The principals collectively shared that a school's beliefs and values support the advancement of the just cause, or the why of the school. Similarly, Sinek (2019) stated people will support and believe in a just cause, not something they oppose. Seven of the eight principals expressed beliefs and values that helped guide their schools in a purpose-driven direction.

Focus on Student Learning

The theme with the second highest frequency for the practice of advancing a just cause was Focus on Student Learning. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the responses for this theme included 25 interview statements and four artifacts. Seven of the eight principals shared the importance of commitment to student learning and achievement.

Seven of the interviewed principals spoke about students and the need to support student academic achievement. Principal 7 shared:

> Our priority was always to establish students and help instill in them what it
> means to have that kind heart, that fierce mind, and that brave spirit while
> continuing to push forward with their academics. So, my vision when I started out
> at junior high was really to truly take care of the social–emotional growth

component of the students because, at my campus, they're coming to me with a lot of background knowledge and a lot of push on the academic side.

The need for students to succeed was a constant topic of conversation for seven of the eight principals interviewed. The academic success of students and their success in social–emotional learning and behavior were of primary concern to principals. The seven principals' mission and vision statements, which were collected as artifacts, all focused on students. As an artifact, Principal 7 shared her school's belief statement, saying those beliefs are that "all students can learn, we will promote lifelong learning and encourage students to pursue their passions, and when the classroom and school environment supports the social, emotional and educational needs of our students they will rise to excellence."

Two principals discussed the idea that all students can learn and are lifelong learners. They valued the commitment to enable a safe learning environment for all levels of learners. Principal 1 spoke about the commitment to student learning. For his organization, the vision was to include all stakeholders in the commitment to student learning. He shared:

> I think if you're really, truly living your values, you're going utilize those to make decisions for your organization as it moves forward. So, that is something we have really reconsidered this year as it comes to student learning and keeping that as focus and really making sure that parents understand that we want kids to feel safe and that is a priority but we also want all kids to learn.

A common theme found on the focus of student learning was a whole school collaboration to meet the needs of all learners. An artifact that Principal 5 shared

supported this theme in the school's mission statement. It read, "A community of leaders and learners and develops the whole individual through choice, challenge, and feedback."

Principals were focused on the academic achievements and social–emotional characteristics of students. The principals shared the value of the school community knowing and understanding the commitment to having all students be lifelong learners.

Collaborative Involvement of the Vision With Staff

The theme with the third highest frequency for the practice of advancing a just cause was Collaborative Involvement of the Vision With Staff. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the responses for this theme included 19 interview statements. This theme was not represented in any of the artifacts collected for this study.

Seven of the eight principals discussed the idea of developing the organization's vision as a collaborative effort. Several of the principals shared the district was leading a professional learning community (PLC) academy that promoted the development or restructuring of each middle school's mission and vision statements. Katy ISD had implemented a PLC academy for six of the 17 middle schools in the district at the time of the study. The purpose of the PLC academy was to create a cycle of improvement that includes the learning of adults—via collaborative school teams—to improve the learning of students. The PLC academy was piloted in the summer of 2022 and was a professional learning structure developed, operated, and supported by the district whose principals participated in the study.

Some principals were part of the pilot school academy while other schools were starting the PLC academy in the summer of 2023. Principals 1, 4, and 5 shared their experiences with the PLC academy. Principal 1shared the effectiveness of having those 4

days during summer shaped the collaboration for the overall school vision of student learning. Schools' leadership teams are collaborating to update and redefine missions, visons, and values. Principal 4 described this collaboration in developing their vision, stating:

> Well, something that we did when I first came in as principal was, we looked at creating our vision, our purpose together. So, we really looked at what we wanted our vision and our mission to be. And, we kind of established all of that together.

Principal 8 shared that when he and his staff were developing the mission and vision, the process was longer than anticipated. He stated several staff members had different opinions and what he was looking for was a whole community input. He stated:

> Collaboratively, we really looked at what we wanted our vision and our mission to be. We wanted to be collective in our values and we wanted to help our kids be problem solvers, but we wanted to make sure that we were leading with our heart.
>
> Three principals identified the PLC academy as important district support to

embed the collaborative development of the mission and vision. When the school developed the mission and vision together, it created an interschool support for stakeholders to be a part of and value.

Referring Back to the Mission and Vision

The theme with the fourth highest frequency for the practice of advancing a just cause was Referring Back to the Mission and Vision. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the responses for this theme included 18 interview statements and eight artifacts.

The principals in this study shared numerous ways in which they referred to the vision of their organization. They communicated their vision to all stakeholders and referred to it when making decisions regarding the next steps. Seven of the eight principals stated their organization's vision was located on their school's newsletters that went out to families weekly. Some of the newsletters had the mission and vision embedded in the front of the message. Other principals' newsletters had the message near the end of the newsletters. Principal 6 shared his mission and vision in an email to the researcher because his was not located in the newsletter. The schools' websites had the mission or the vision located on the main page but the researcher had to search tabs to find them.

The main theme in the mission and vision statements for the middle schools was developing leaders and learners in the commitment to student achievement. Principal 3 talked about how they always went back to the goals to make sure the decisions they made were in line with their vision of doing the best they could to prepare students for their futures. Three principals indicated the mission statements referred to students and teachers being lifelong learners and to provide learning opportunities for them.

In Principal 3's organization, they were committed to continually referring back to the mission and vision. She shared:

> When we look at what goals we're setting, we always go back to our why. I mean, that's why we go in and we have our, not professional, but you know, our vision statement and our mission statement that are the technical, is to make them sound fancy, but really what our why or our goal here is we want a student's day, life, to be better having been here.

Principals described how they looked to their vision when deciding how to encourage and engage students. They followed this process to determine whether the suggestion was consistent with the vision. To ensure her decisions reflected her vision of doing what was best to prepare children for the future, Principal 7 highlighted how she constantly went back to the goals that were in line with the vision.

Research Subquestion 2: Trusting Teams

Research Subquestion 2 was: How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of building trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results? The researcher asked two questions during each of the eight qualitative interviews to collect data for Research Subquestion 2. The first of the two questions asked the principals to share the practices their organization used to create a trusting and mutually supportive team environment. The second question asked the principals to explain how their organization promoted a psychologically safe space that fostered trust.

The data collected were clustered into three overarching themes based on the interview responses from the middle school principals and artifacts collected. The three themes that emerged related to the practice of building trusting teams were (a) Building Trusting Relationships With and Between Staff Members, (b) Fostering a Culture of Collaboration, and (c) Creating a Family Environment With Staff at the School. Table 4 shows the number of sources mentioning each theme and the frequency of these mentions.

Table 4

Research Subquestion 2 Themes

Theme	Respondents	Frequency
Building Trusting Relationships With and Between Staff Members	7	22
Fostering a Culture of Collaboration	7	21
Creating a Family Environment With Staff at the School	8	15

Note. N = 8.

Building Trusting Relationships With and Between Staff Members

The theme with the highest frequency for the practice of building trusting teams was Building Trusting Relationships With and Between Staff Members. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the responses for this theme included 31 interview statements and one artifact.

One of the ways principals shared they facilitated relationship building was through their open-door policy. With this policy, staff were invited anytime to share celebrations, thoughts, or concerns with principals. In Principal 2's campus improvement plan, which she provided as an artifact, one of the major actions to improve their school's environment was listed as promoting positive relationships among adults. In her interview, Principal 2 shared the following description of how she developed trust:

> I have an open-door policy. The staff knows that they can come to me with any
>
> concern or question. I have lunches with my staff about four times a year and it's
>
> just me and them during their lunches. They come in and meet with me and
>
> they're able to air out anything that they don't agree with, anything that they want
>
> to change, and I just sit there and listen and I just take notes and write it all down.
>
> And, I tell them if it's something that I feel like I need to share with the

administrative team and it's appropriate, then I will; if not, I won't. And, they've, I've used that feedback to make changes, so I think that's really built trust with the staff because they know that I'm listening to them and really trying to implement some of the things.

Two of the principals said they treated each employee as if they were another human being. They considered the teachers' social and emotional well-being as much as they did the students at their school. Principal 5 described the trusting relationships they had with teachers, sharing:

I hope that I'm fostering that sense of where my head space is, as far as the importance of the relationships that I want to build here across the board. And so, it's just making sure everybody knows that I'm here to support. And, I'm just listening. You know, I feel like this morning's meeting, I think just listening to y'all's conversations, I can tell that where I was already thinking is going to support where we're trying to go.

Principals 5 and 6 shared they had a program called Sunshine Club that fostered relationship building of social relationships on campus for staff. The purpose of the Sunshine Club was to create fun, social, and community-building events and time with the staff. Principal 3 shared the club had fun activities and team building, emphasizing the importance of this time on her campus. She stated:

We have a group of staff that gets together and we plan three activities, I would say per month, but usually probably per 6 weeks. It's an activity like, what are we going to do something, to build or like, a team builder at staff meeting, something

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that we're going to do during the day and then something we can do outside the

school.

The Sunshine Club promoted a school culture of trust and team building in the school.

Principal 3 further explained the club created a culture of fun between herself and the

staff, which promoted the trust between her and her colleagues and staff. Principal 5

shared the Sunshine Club on her campus fostered a whole campus social event during the

lunch hour. She shared the staff looked forward to this time to relax and connect with

each other.

Principals shared that celebrations were intentional in the district and at schools as

a means for fostering supportive relationships. Principals reported relationship-building

activities created opportunities to build both professional and personal relationships.

Fostering a Culture of Collaboration

The theme with the second highest frequency for the practice of building trusting

teams was Fostering a Culture of Collaboration. After examining the interview responses

and artifacts, the frequency responses for this theme was 21 among seven principals with

three artifacts. Seven of the eight principals interviewed shared it was a common practice

to have a dedicated time for collaborative teams to work together. Some of this time was

built into the school day, while other times were after school or in district professional

development sessions. An artifact collected from Principal 8, which was a photograph

from his Twitter social media profile, showed teachers working together during a

dedicated time to build a community of practice with one another. Principal 4 explained

how this dedicated time for a collaborative team meeting worked, stating:

We made sure during our PLCs we had norms where everyone felt respected, and kind of created those safe environments for them to be able to have those types of discussions, especially with the lesson planning. That was, that's the big part where the team kind of shares and supports each other the most is through our planning sessions and through our professional learning, our like [collaborative team meeting] and planning times.

The intentional collaboration time created a team environment where everyone could agree on expectations. Sinek (2019) stated when people are a part of a trusting team, it is safe for them to make mistakes, be open about flaws, and ask for assistance when needed.

Several of the principals shared the district promoted a culture of collaboration in their principal community and in the administrators, the instructional coaches, and the teachers. Principal 8 shared his experience in the district PLC academy as being one that promoted the collaboration of all staff for the development of the school's learning goals and outcomes for students. Principal 1 shared the importance of collaboration by stating, "Giving teachers collaborative time and being proactive and thinking about innovative ways to give teachers more time to learn together to learn during the school day."

An examination of the vision statements of the schools contained no mention of collaboration. This finding was contrary to what principals shared in the interviews regarding support and collaboration in their schools and in the district, which highlights a discrepancy between what the principals communicated verbally and what was included in their documents.

Creating a Family Environment With Staff at the School

The theme with the third highest frequency for the practice of building trusting teams was Creating a Family Environment With Staff at the School. The frequency of interview responses for this theme was 15 interview responses; no artifacts supported this theme. Four of the eight principals reported the need for the campus to build and create a family environment. Principal 3 shared how her school fostered a family environment. She said:

> We do like, the Easter egg hunt, we did a Thanksgiving trot, we did little silly things during school. And then, we try to do like an after school, we alternate between a happy hour and a family outing. Like we did space cowboys, like a baseball game where you bring your families. And so, it's things like that that we do in our staff lounge. We also do like, a highlighted team of the month. So, it's just like, having people spend time with teams. So, there's different things that we're trying to get the staff involved with each other.

According to Sinek (2019), good leadership and trusting teams let the members of those teams do their best work. Similarly, Principal 2 also shared the following statement about the family culture on her campus:

> We monthly have socials where everyone's invited and it can be, it's a range of things. So, each department is responsible for planning one and one of them was like, a painting party in our art teacher's room and sometimes they're happy hours with bingo or things like that or a picnic with family and stuff like that. So, I think that helps to build trust amongst the whole staff.

Four of the principals shared they had social events for the whole staff that ranged from one every 6 weeks at the school to one principal sharing that she planned a monthly social for her staff. Principals shared the staff looked forward to this time to socialize and create memories outside of the school building.

Research Subquestion 3: Worthy Rival

Research Subquestion 3 asked: How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of studying your worthy rival is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results? The researcher asked two questions during each of the eight qualitative interviews to collect data for Research Subquestion 3. The first of the two questions asked the principals to share how their organization learned from other successful leaders or organizations. The second question asked the principals to explain how people in their organization learned from successful people who held the same or similar positions.

The data collected were clustered into three overarching themes based on the interview responses from the middle school principals and collected artifacts. The three themes that emerged related to the practice of studying your worthy rival were (a) District and School Systems That Create Collaboration, (b) Collaborating With Outside Organizations, and (c) Working With Principals Inside and Outside of the District. Table 5 shows the number of sources mentioning each theme and the frequency of these mentions.

Table 5

Research Subquestion 3 Themes

Theme	Respondents	Frequency
District and School Systems That Create Collaboration	8	44
Collaborating With Outside Organizations	8	36
Working With Principals Inside and Outside of the District	6	25

Note. N = 8.

District and School Systems That Create Collaboration

The theme with the highest frequency for the practice of studying your worthy rival was District and School Systems That Create Collaboration. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the responses for this theme included 44 interview statements. This theme was not represented in any of the artifacts collected for this study.

Principal 5 shared the district's principal collaborative time was important to her. She said:

> In the district's professional development that we do, you sit in these trainings and they are pretty much laid out. When you get a folder full of professional development to grow by department. You don't get that all the time. Our district offers so many growth opportunities and is growing towards the way things are changing. Staying on top of the latest and greatest and making sure that we have that support when we transform to something else that we're being taught. Offering those opportunities, you know, some of it is self-paced, some of it is, yes, you've got to because that's the initiative that we're moving towards. But I will say, I've never felt there's a lack of support when it comes to how to grow.

Principal 2 shared her experience as she collaborated with outside agencies and organizations. Sinek (2019) shared competitors who deserve respect can come from inside or outside an organization. They could be fervent adversaries or, on occasion, collaborators or coworkers. Principal 2 explained she visited schools outside of her organization and brought back information to share with her staff. She explained this process allowed for collaboration and teamwork on her campus to build her teachers' capacities professionally. She stated:

> So, we're a part of the Schools to Watch. We're a middle school, a Texas school
> to watch. And that's kind of like a, it's kind of like a network of schools that are
> doing great things for kids. One of the things I do is I go and visit other schools
> that have been designated or are trying to get designated. They've asked me to go
> help kind of evaluate schools and see if they're going to be designated. So, if I see
> something there, I'll bring it back to my campus. I usually do bring in some type
> of speaker every year.

All of the principals also shared the idea of learning walks for teachers, instructional coaches, administrators, and themselves. Learning walks are collaborative tools that allow staff to observe each other in the classrooms. They are powerful collaborative tools used for professional development. Principal 8 shared his thoughts about the positive effects of the learning walks, saying:

> Through our instructional coaches, we do learning walks where we'll ask for
> volunteers. And the teachers that are willing to let people come into their
> classrooms, they allow groups to kind of come through and coaches will highlight
> things, but really, it's a lot of reflective talk and practice where the teachers really

kind of go in and see themselves and then afterwards have discussions and debrief

about what the experience was, things that they thought that they would like to

adopt into their own classrooms, things like things of that nature.

Principals 1 and 5 referred to the district's newly implemented PLC academy in

support of creating systems of collaboration for middle schools in the district. Principal 5

shared her campus was in their 2nd year of the PLC academy and she had seen the

growth of collaboration of support in her school's PLC guiding coalition team. She

shared her instructional coaches collaborated with teachers to create new systems of

support for student learning and outcomes from the district's academy. Time was built

into the school day for the teacher team collaboration, which aligned with the district's

PLC academy for the support of student achievement.

Collaborating With Outside Organizations

The theme with the second highest frequency for the practice of studying your

worthy rival was Collaborating With Outside Organizations. After examining the

interview responses and artifacts, the frequency of responses for this theme included 36

interview statements and two artifacts.

Some principals discussed professional development opportunities offered by

their district for principals to meet and collaborate with leaders outside the organization.

Several principals shared their experiences with opportunities for elementary and

secondary principals to collaborate at district professional development days. Principal 4

shared how she gave opportunities for staff to attend conferences with leaders outside the

organization. Principal 4 explained:

As a leader, you have to model that professional growth constantly. And that was

something that I made sure was an opportunity to attend Lucy Calkins, like at

Teachers College, I took a whole group to New York and went and learned with

them. We, with a lot of our diversity inclusion committee, we wanted to bring the

Ron Clark Academy to our campus for professional development.

In multiple interviews, participants described ways to expand their practice by

mentioning a number of outside organizations. Principals explained the district hosted

conferences and other opportunities for professional development for leaders. Principal 5

shared her experience in meeting other principals at the district professional development

days, saying:

I will say that professional development and collaboration is not lacking here in

our district at all. You know, because we are allowed to have conversations with

elementary. We are allowed to have conversations with other secondary

campuses. And the minute that I was named, all the secondary, all the junior high

principals reached out immediately and, you know, and offered support. After our

first meeting, we all sat down and had lunch and allowed us to have a

collaboration time.

Two principals also mentioned collaborating with experts outside of their school

district, in addition to inside of their own organizations. Two principals talked about

working with educational consultants. The principals attended conferences on these

experts, who were well-known speakers across the country. Principal 7 invited a

specialist to attend the all-staff professional development day at their school. In addition,

Principal 6 provided a Twitter post with pictures from an event he attended as an artifact. In a post, he said he was happy to be there and learn from a well-known expert.

Working With Principals Inside and Outside of the District

The theme with the third highest frequency for the practice of studying your worthy rival was Working With Principals Inside and Outside of the District. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the frequency of responses for this theme included 25 interview statements. This theme was not represented in any of the artifacts collected for this study.

Multiple principals mentioned the district office's structured principal meetings. They thought these meetings were good opportunities to learn from each other and work together to improve their leadership skills. Principal 2 shared she collaborated with other campuses. If there was something another campus was doing and was very successful at doing, then they were happy to implement it.

During the professional development collaboration meetings, six of the eight principals stated they had opportunities to share observations from their schools and discuss systems of leadership. Principal 1 shared his thoughts on the principal's collaborative time together, saying:

> I have a group of junior high school principals that I collaborate with on a regular basis. Weekly, we call it discuss-and-cuss sessions where we are either cussing at each other or discussing something, but we have created this system where we collaborate and we are not focused on being on these islands anymore and I think if you are always open to hear how other organizations do it.

Through the district's newly implemented PLC academy, principals also learned from one another in addition to principal meetings, observations, and walkthroughs. Principal 5 explained the PLC process for principals in her district by sharing, "It's the cohort process and then they're building an [assistant principal] cohort, they're building principal cohorts, and they're also about to add a teacher cohort where we're teaching teachers. You know, building our own educators in this space."

Worthy rivals accomplish a lot more than others do, regardless of who they are or where they are found. According to Sinek (2019), worthy rivals have a better product, are better leaders, or act with a clearer sense of purpose than others do. They also command more loyalty. Others simply acknowledge that worthy rivals possess abilities and strengths from which others could possibly gain some insight.

Research Subquestion 4: Existential Flexibility

Research Subquestion 4 asked: How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results? The researcher asked two questions during each of the eight qualitative interviews to collect data for Research Subquestion 4. The first of the two questions asked the principals to share how their organization identified new opportunities to achieve the organization's vision. The second question asked the principals to describe a time when staying on the same path was not going to fulfill their organization's just cause.

The data collected were clustered into three overarching themes based on the interview responses from the middle school principals and artifacts collected. The three themes that emerged related to the practice of preparing for existential flexibility were (a)

Reflecting on What Works and What Does Not Work, (b) Goals to Accomplish, and (c)

Identifying Resources for Opportunities. Table 6 shows the number of respondents

mentioning each theme and the frequency of these mentions.

Table 6

Research Subquestion 4 Themes

Theme	Respondents	Frequency
Reflecting on What Works and What Does Not Work	8	78
Goals to Accomplish	6	33
Identifying Resources for Opportunities	5	24

Note. N = 8.

Reflecting on What Works and What Does Not Work

The theme with the highest frequency for the practice of preparing for existential

flexibility was Reflecting on What Works and What Does Not Work. After examining the

interview responses and artifacts, the responses for the theme included 78 interview

statements and four artifacts.

All eight principals spoke about how they were always looking at what worked

and what did not work for their staff and students, whether they were using the data to

make a decision or just thinking about data or instruction. Principal 4 gave the following

description of her method for reflecting on ways to improve:

I guess it's just, it kind of depends on what district initiatives or directives kind of

come through, if there are new programs on campus that we're having. We really

truly do look at that needs assessment with our campus improvement plan and try

to, whether it's something we didn't do well on for testing or whether it's a

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behavior initiative, or whether we're looking to bring our staff together. It all depends on what's happening at that time. That really, we kind of go on our needs for students, based on our needs.

Four of the principals reflected on the prior 3 years of school with the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Many principals noted the differences in behavior of students and families and the need to change and reflect on how to support students. Four principals shared new initiatives the school introduced after the whole staff reflected and shared new procedures to support learning due to the pandemic's impact on students. Principal 1 shared:

Well, I would say probably a specific time was after the year of COVID. I guess you could say we just came out of a year of just grace. We survived. We were just trying to hold it together. When we passed that, as a leader, I said, okay, we've done that. We've held it together, but we've got to get back to where we were. Kids are coming back to school. We've built the plane, but we need to remember what we were doing and how we are achieving it. And so really, we started to focus on making a difference in kids' lives.

Principal 2 shared the following reflection on the school's needs due to the pandemic's impact:

I would say 2020, obviously, we couldn't continue to do things that we did. Yes, yes. Because of the logistics of everything. And, I think because of that, because of going all online, and then also having the hybrid model of some online and some in person, it's made us do things differently. Like, we'll never go back to how we did things like on Zoom, like we wouldn't, the pandemic is over. So, I

think, I don't know the purpose has changed, but we're doing things differently

from the pandemic.

The principals shared they often reflected on what works and what does not work related to leading their school. Principal 6 shared his reflection on change, sharing, "Change is a process. You know the process of change. Change comes slowly. Don't expect it to come quickly and swiftly, unless it's a process of change that is in demand immediately."

At the beginning of the school year, Principal 8 wrote a welcome letter to the families. In it, he talked about the successes of the prior 3 years and the changes that will be made to better meet the needs of their students. This artifact demonstrated how, following their own reflection, principals communicated with the school community on what works and what does not work in regard to supporting students.

Goals to Accomplish

The theme with the second highest frequency for the practice of preparing for existential flexibility was Goals to Accomplish. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the responses for the theme included 33 interview statements and three artifacts.

According to Sinek (2019), goals should be used as indicators of how far people have come in a quest for something bigger than themselves. Six of the eight principals referred to goals when interviewed. Some principals shared personal goals while most had professional goals in support of student learning and engagement. Principal 3 referred to a school goal regarding the English language learners in her organization. She shared:

Our goal for this year was to incorporate more students talking to each other, right? Because those students that are doing the talking are the ones doing the learning. So, it was just then we did a little training on that with everyone.

Principal 3 also shared an artifact supporting the goal of reaching a certain percentage of English language learner students passing the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System. She shared the English Learners Department collaborated to set goals for the students' performance. Principal 1 also shared his experiences with goals and accomplishing goals. He explained goals should be celebrated when they are accomplished. He stated:

I think, if you create yourself a queue of accomplishable things, you're always going to have something to strive for and move forward to. But, I think you also have to be intentional in highlighting the successes that you have. We do something with our campus improvement team where we come together with all the team leaders four times a year and we put up our goals that we set out at the beginning of the year and then we provide feedback on how we've accomplished those goals in the different arenas and then we document that and what that has allowed us to do is it has allowed us to see from the ground level how are we really accomplishing what it is that we said we're going to accomplish this year.

An artifact gathered from Principal 7 was a letter about the school's mission, vision, and goals, which was sent to all families and posted on the school's website. The letter invited parents and guardians to look at the school's goals, which were developed in conjunction with the staff. The vision and objectives Principal 7 had for her school community were made clear in this letter. Principals shared the importance of goals and

incorporating stakeholders with the development and accomplishment of goals in support of student learning and engagement.

Identifying Resources for Opportunities

The theme with the third highest frequency for the practice of preparing for existential flexibility was Identifying Resources for Opportunities. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the frequency of responses for the theme included 24 interview statements and four artifacts.

Seven of the eight principals referenced resources for opportunities to advance the just cause of the organization. Two principals referred back to the district as a means for resources to grow professionally. Principal 8 shared the various professional development opportunities the district provided for principals, assistant principals, and teachers throughout the year. He stated the district fostered professional development. The district superintendent supported his growth to be able to lead and build greatness at his campus. He shared the biggest goal in the district was building and continuing to be great for the support of students' learning.

Principal 7 explained how she looked for opportunities to find resources to support the campus. She shared:

> We are constantly looking for those opportunities. I've sent folks to professional development to drum up new ideas. I'm really big on those Ed Foundation grants. "Okay, let's really think outside the box. What kind of grant can we write that kind of pushes our thinking?" Because if you're not pushing the thinking, then you're becoming complacent.

Principal 4 included a district newsletter as their artifact, which mentioned the district's

grant foundation. The newsletter stated the district inspired teacher grants, which

provided financial support for innovative programs throughout the district, and were the

heart and soul of the foundation. The district leadership encouraged all elementary,

middle, and high school campuses to apply for grants for educational opportunities.

Research Subquestion 5: Courage to Lead

Research Subquestion 5 asked: How do exemplary middle school principals

perceive the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead is embedded in their

organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results? The researcher asked

two questions during each of the eight qualitative interviews to collect data for Research

Subquestion 5. The first of the two questions asked the principals to share how their

organization stayed aligned with its values and goals when pressured to take a different

path. The second question asked the principals to explain how their organization modeled

the willingness to take risks.

The data collected were clustered into three overarching themes based on the

interview responses from the middle school principals and artifacts collected. The two

themes that emerged related to the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead were (a)

Willingness to Take Risks and (b) Having the Courage to Make Changes When

Necessary. Table 7 shows the number of participants and frequency for each theme

mentioned.

Table 7

Research Subquestion 5 Themes

Theme	Respondents	Frequency
Willingness to Take Risks	8	47
Having the Courage to Make Changes When Necessary	4	29

Note. $N = 8$.

Willingness to Take Risks

The theme with the highest frequency for the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead was Willingness to Take Risks. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the responses for this theme included 47 interview statements and two artifacts.

All eight principals demonstrated the willingness to take risks for the betterment of the organization at multiple points in their interview. Some principals discussed how they believed it was okay to try something new and make mistakes. Others discussed organizations, leaders, and programs from whom they valued as risk takers. Principal 1 explained:

> We celebrate risks, at least in this organization. I think that's just something we've really started doing this year is embracing risk taking, celebrating risk taking, showing appreciation for risk taking, awarding risk taking, being intentional about risk taking. When a teacher knows that they're not going to be chastised or punished for taking a risk, they're going to do it. Teachers are natural risk takers in my opinion, especially the great ones.

A willingness to take risks for the benefit of an uncertain future demonstrates the courage to lead (Sinek, 2019). Principal 3 said taking risks has an adaptable and pivotal

nature. She stated someone can simply pull back when trying something new that does not work. She further stated:

> Our staff knows that they can take a risk and they could fall flat on their face and they're not going to get written up. They're not going to get in trouble and that it's okay. I think part of that is me when I get up and I'm like, "Hey, we tried this, it didn't work. It didn't work. I, it just didn't work." So, we're going to go back to how we used to do it.

When an initiative was not working at her school, Principal 5 would contact other principals to find out what was working for them. Principal 7 disclosed, "While pressures or new initiatives might work well for one specific teacher or team, if it doesn't positively impact the campus as a whole, then we typically steer away from that."

Principals 3 and 4 referred to data when sharing the risk of not fulfilling the district's initiative in support of their campus. Principal 3 shared she observed her school's data and if she thought the initiative would not benefit her school, she had the data to support her claims. She knew it would be a risk saying no, but she had the data to support her reasoning. Principals stated they were not afraid of taking risks because they were aware that risk taking could lead to positive changes and outcomes in the organization.

Having the Courage to Make Changes When Necessary

The theme with the second highest frequency for the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead was Having the Courage to Make Changes When Necessary. After examining the interview responses and artifacts, the responses for this theme included 29

interview statements. This theme was not represented in any of the artifacts collected for this study.

A few of the principals shared their thoughts in the interviews about not conforming to initiatives. Principal 6 stated, "If it's a district mandate, it's nonnegotiable." He shared there were times when he would question initiatives and their purpose for his school. A few principals shared how they reflected on the district's initiatives to see if they aligned with the school's just cause. Principal 3 mentioned a time when she had to deal with a technology initiative from the district. She discussed her opinions regarding supporting the initiative and whether it would be most effective on her campus. She said:

> I think I would say, even when we get like, our district initiatives, we always kind of look at it and we're like, "Okay, how much of this do we want to take on now? How much of it fits with our campus?" Because I am okay with getting in trouble for not doing something if I know that it's not right for our campus or our kids.
>
> So, I am not just blindly, "Oh the districts are doing this, we're doing it 100%."

Principal 7 shared her thoughts on when to make changes for her organization. She shared, "While pressures or new initiatives might work well for one specific teacher or team, if it doesn't positively impact the campus as a whole, then we typically steer away from that."

The path of integrity is the pursuit of a just cause. Sinek (2019) stated words and actions should align. Sinek also indicated leadership will have to make the decision to ignore all of the voices urging the organization to serve the interests of people who do not necessarily subscribe to the just cause. The principals interviewed for this study believed

taking risks was a necessary function for improving their school's culture and performance.

Research Subquestion 6: Supports and Barriers

Research Subquestion 6 asked: What supports and barriers do exemplary middle school principals perceive affect the embedding of infinite mindset practices in their organization? The researcher asked two questions during each of the eight qualitative interviews to collect data for Research Subquestion 6. The first of the two questions asked the principals to share the support they believed existed in their organization that fostered embedding infinite mindset practices. The second question asked the principals what barriers existed in their organization that hindered embedding infinite mindset practices.

Supports for Embedding an Infinite Mindset

The data collected were clustered into three overarching themes based on the interview responses from the middle school principals and artifacts collected. The three themes that emerged as support that fostered the embedding infinite mindset practices were (a) Commitment to a Growth Mindset, (b) Hiring the Right People, and (c) Use of Leadership Teams and/or Collaborative Teacher Teams. Table 8 shows the number of respondents mentioning each of these three themes and the frequency of these mentions.

Table 8

Research Subquestion 6 Themes: Supports

Theme	Respondents	Frequency
Commitment to a Growth Mindset	8	43
Hiring the Right People	6	38
Use of Leadership Teams and/or Collaborative Teacher Teams	5	21

Note. N = 8.

Commitment to a Growth Mindset. The theme with the highest frequency for support for embedding an infinite mindset was Commitment to a Growth Mindset. All eight of the principals referenced how their organization supported the growth mindset and commitments to staff and students. Some of the principals spoke about leading with a growth mindset in support of students and families. Principal 5 explained having a growth mindset is helpful in fostering the development of the whole child. Principal 6 stated he used feedback from staff as a means for his growth mindset to be reflective and show that reflection to staff members. In Principal 7's interview, she shared where she started in helping develop a growth mindset. She said:

I always try to find what motivates that person. What is it about this new initiative or this mindset that I'm asking them to adjust that's holding them back? And then we talk through it, and then we try to work within that.

According to Sinek (2019), the desire of others to contribute to an organization's ability to continue succeeding not only during their time there but also well beyond their own tenure is a good indicator of its true value.

Principal 2 shared her thoughts on intentional hiring to support the betterment of the organization. She shared they looked for a growth mindset to help in hiring the right people. She stated:

> I look to hire the right people that have that growth mindset. To have the mindset of, we're going to continually grow. You know what I mean? We're not ever going to stay stagnant. So, I guess the questions that we ask when we hire, we're looking for that growth mindset and commitment.

A few of the principals shared a growth mindset also supports the commitment to the school. Principal 8 shared his experience in regard to commitment to growth mindset and his staff. He expressed he would make the rounds and show people he was there for them, his understanding, and that he had compassion when it was required. There was a commitment to his staff to be able to listen when needed, even if it was something he did not like to hear. Upon Principal 6's reflection, she stated the growth mindset supported any decision she made for her staff and students. Fostering growth in children—emotionally, physically, and educationally—was her commitment to families.

Hiring the Right People. The theme with the second highest frequency for support for embedding an infinite mindset was Hiring the Right People. Six of the eight principals referenced the need to hire teachers and staff who were motivated to support students. Principal 4 described the type of teachers she looked to hire as ones who would create amazing educational experiences for kids because a priority in her organization was for students and families to have an enriching, fulfilling experience in education. Principal 5 shared she looked for authentic individuals, or ones who were team oriented

and built relationships inside and outside of the classroom. Principal 2 shared how she fostered that mindset in the hiring process, saying:

> I added a question to our interview this year specifically to see if they're committed to the profession. I am looking for someone who models that commitment on each team. So, when we form our teams, we're strategic in making sure that there's someone on the team that has that commitment, that mindset.

When choosing staff members, several principals stated they looked for inspiring, motivated people who wanted to be a part of their team. According to Sinek (2019), the goal of an organization is to feel fulfilled at the end of the day, create safe environments, and be inspired every morning when walking into the building.

Use of Leadership Teams and/or Collaborative Teacher Teams. The theme with the third highest frequency for support for embedding an infinite mindset was Use of Leadership Teams and/or Collaborative Teacher Teams. Two principals referenced the participation of administrative teams and instructional coaches as being an integral part of the support system of the school. Principal 7 explained:

> We do a lot of mindset practice. I work a lot with my leadership team and my instructional coaches. We get into this planning session and so that we start seeing kind of a stale way of thinking, then we start really asking folks to go outside their comfort zone and implement just one additional practice and that has helped kind of with some more flexible thinking. And some of it is on this tough conversation but we really have worked hard for thinking here at our school.

For any organization to function effectively, trusting teams are essential (Sinek, 2019). One principal said she felt comfortable expressing her vulnerability when she worked with a trusting team. Principal 1 referred back to his school's collaborative teams, stating:

> So, I think that just creating a culture of collaboration, truly living out collaborative teams and making sure those decisions are living out in my leadership teams working with different stakeholders and valuing their input, but at the end of the day, and making a decision and moving on.

Although the majority of principals described a single leadership team for their school site, a few also described the process by which they established multiple teacher committees to pursue specific objectives and goals. Principal 6 established separate teacher committees on the campus for the Sunshine Club, multiple tier student support, positive behavior intervention and support, and student council. He explained these committees assigned teachers leadership responsibilities outside the classroom. Principals described one leadership team for their school site and explained how they created multiple teacher committees to take on specific goals.

Barriers to Embedding an Infinite Mindset

The major theme that emerged as a barrier to embedding infinite mindset practices was Tenured Staff With a Finite or Fixed Mindset. Table 9 shows the number of sources mentioning the theme and the frequency of the theme.

Table 9

Research Subquestion 6 Themes: Barriers

Theme	Respondents	Frequency
Tenured Staff With a Finite or Fixed Mindset	6	23

Note. N = 8.

Tenured Staff With a Finite or Fixed Mindset. Throughout the interviews, there were 23 mentions of Tenured Staff With a Finite or Fixed Mindset as a barrier. Principal 2 explained one of the barriers was some staff members resisted change. She referred to the long-term generation of teachers as having a mindset that did not value changes in education and pushed back against them. Principal 2 described the barrier to an infinite mindset as the mindsets of adults and not the kids. She shared:

> So, it would be the adult's mindset, not the kids. It's all about the adult mindset.
> And, you know, again, like I had a teacher say to me recently, "Our kids are
> higher achieving. Why can't they just have a break during the day?" It's just that
> mindset that's not good enough for them. There are kids that need support. Our
> job is to reach all of our kids, not just the self-motivated ones.

> Several principals mentioned staff members being the barrier to change in the
organization. Principal 2 indicated she needed to find strategies to inhibit the fixed mindset of older staff from influencing the growth mindset of the new staff. Principal 3 shared how some long-term teachers refused to change. She said:

> Two people in particular on my campus were phenomenal teachers 15 years ago.
> Like, I would have wanted my kids in that class 15 years ago, but they're refusing
> to change. And unfortunately, due to circumstances in their life, they can't retire,

although they're eligible to retire. And, it's just to keep working on them. And,

then they kind of, you know, get a hold of my job right now, what I'm trying to

do, and it sounds horrible, I'm just trying to get them from not latching on to the

newer staff because I don't want that to be spread.

Principal 7 echoed this sentiment by stating many of her veteran teachers came with their

own way of thinking. When they heard a new idea brought to the school, they reacted

with comments such as, "Oh, here comes another new initiative." Principal 7 reflected on

the fact that fear could be an inhibitor to tenured teachers' growth mindsets. She shared:

I really kind of hear the struggle or the fear that they are experiencing going

outside of what they've always done to extend their mindset, and that's what we

work through. So, it usually is a very controlled process where I'm involved,

admin's involved, and we spend a lot of time getting to know the person who

might be the barrier.

Principals reflected on long-term teachers who inhibited them from advancing the

just cause of the organization. They stated the teachers' resistance reduced the positive

changes and initiatives they and the district wanted to use as a means for student

achievement.

Data Summary

The following central research question guided this study: How do middle school

principals perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded in their organization

to achieve extraordinary results? The themes that emerged from the 12 subquestions

along with 2 probes per subquestion collectively provided insights to answer the central

research question. Seventeen artifacts were collected from the principals and used as

support with the themes. Artifacts included school newsletters, school websites, principal newsletters, and the mission and vision statements for each school from the school's website. The themes, data, and insights gained from the analysis of participant interviews and artifacts were the findings of this study and are summarized in this section.

The researcher identified 19 themes throughout the eight interviews with the exemplary middle school principals. Table 10 summarizes the themes found in relation to each research subquestion and variable. Research Subquestion 1 had the highest number of themes (i.e., four), including (a) Beliefs and Values of the School, (b) Focus on Student Learning, (c) Collaborative Involvement of the Vision With Staff, and (d) Referring Back to the Mission and Vision in support of the organization's just cause. Principals saw the value in the organizational support of stakeholders and referred to that collaboration with them throughout their interviews. Research Subquestion 6 had the lowest theme frequency with only one theme in Barriers to Embedding an Infinite Mindset; however, there were six principals with 23 responses who referred back to tenured staff members as being their barriers to embedding an infinite mindset. The theme with the lowest number of principal interview counts was Creating a Family Environment With Staff at the School. Four principals shared the importance of this family environment with a response frequency of 15. Half of the principals reported the importance of creating an all-inclusive, family oriented school environment. Six of the 19 themes had all principals unanimously share responses about Research Subquestions 2, 3, 4, 5, and Research Subquestion 6 supports. Several other themes emerged in the principals' interviews but did not make the lowest threshold to be considered in support of the variables in the study.

Table 10

Summary of All Themes

Themes	Interview count	Interview frequency
Research Subquestion 1: Just cause		
Beliefs and Values of the School	7	32
Focus on Student Learning	6	25
Collaborative Involvement of the Vision With Staff	7	19
Referring Back to the Mission and Vision	7	18
Research Subquestion 2: Trusting teams		
Building Trusting Relationships With and Between Staff Members	8	31
Fostering a Culture of Collaboration	7	21
Creating a Family Environment With Staff at the School	4	15
Research Subquestion 3: Worthy rivals		
District and School Systems That Create Collaboration	8	44
Collaborating With Outside Organizations	8	36
Working With Principals inside and Outside of the District	6	25
Research Subquestion 4: Existential flexibility		
Reflecting on What Works and What Does Not Work	8	78
Goals to Accomplish	6	33
Identifying Resources for Opportunities	5	24
Research Subquestion 5: Courage to lead		
Willingness to Take Risks	8	47
Having the Courage to Make Changes When Necessary	4	29
Research Subquestion 6: Supports		
Commitment to a Growth Mindset	8	43
Hiring the Right People	6	38
Use of Leadership Teams and/or Collaborative Teacher Teams	5	21
Research Subquestion 6: Barriers		
Tenured Staff With a Finite or Fixed Mindset	6	23

The findings of the study showed that exemplary middle school principals embedded the practice of advancing a just cause in their organization by supporting the beliefs and values of the school, focusing on student learning, having a collaborative involvement of the vision from staff, and referring back to the school and district mission and vision. They embedded the practice of building trusting teams in their organization by providing opportunities to build trusting relationships with and between staff members, creating a fostering culture of collaboration, and creating a family environment

with staff at their school. Exemplary middle school principals embedded the practice of studying a worthy rival in their organization by aligning with district and school systems that create collaboration, collaborating with outside organizations, and working and collaborating with principals in the district. They embedded the practice of preparing for existential flexibility in their organization by reflecting on what works and what does not work, having goals to accomplish, and identifying resources for opportunities. Finally, these middle school principals embedded the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead in their organization by demonstrating willingness to take risks and having the courage to make changes when necessary. Exemplary middle school principals demonstrated a growth mindset and commitment to the organization, hiring the right people, and the use of leadership teams and/or collaborative teacher teams as supports for embedding infinite mindset practices, while having tenured staff with a finite or fixed mindset was perceived as a barrier.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary middle school principals perceived how the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework were embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A second purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary middle school principals perceived that affected the development of an infinite mindset. This chapter provided an analysis and summary of the qualitative data collected through eight interviews and 17 artifacts. The researcher described the findings in this chapter to better understand the perceived experiences of the exemplary middle school principals interviewed.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the study's purpose statement, research questions, methods, population, and sample. The major findings described in this chapter are expanded to determine conclusions and implications for action. The researcher also addresses unexpected findings in this chapter. Then, recommendations for future research are provided. Chapter V ends with concluding remarks and reflections from the researcher.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary middle school principals perceived the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework were embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceived affected the development of an infinite mindset.

Research Questions

The following central research question guided this study: How do successful leaders perceive the practices of an infinite mindset are embedded in their organization to achieve extraordinary results? The research subquestions were:

1. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of advancing a just cause is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?

2. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of building

    trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of

    extraordinary results?

3. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of studying

    your worthy rival is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement

    of extraordinary results?

4. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of preparing

    for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the

    achievement of extraordinary results?

5. How do exemplary middle school principals perceive the practice of

    demonstrating the courage to lead is embedded in their organization to inspire

    the achievement of extraordinary results?

6. What are the organizational supports and barriers exemplary middle school

    principals perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset?

This study was a thematic study with eight peer researchers and four faculty advisors designed to explore the perceived experiences of exemplary leaders in the education system. The population in this study was middle school principals in the state of Texas. The target population narrowed down the population to middle school principals in Harris County, Texas. The sample for this study was exemplary middle school principals in Harris County, Texas who met specific criteria as participants.

Key Findings

In analyzing the 19 themes coded from interviews and artifacts, the researcher identified seven key findings that described how exemplary middle school principals

perceived the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset were embedded in their

organization. The researcher synthesized patterns and commonalities among the themes

to identify the following key findings of the study.

Key Finding 1: Using a School-Centered Vision as a Guide for Decision Making

Exemplary middle school principals embedded the infinite mindset practice of

just cause by using a school-centered vision as a guide for decision making on what was

best for the organization. They continuously referred back to the vision when making

decisions in their organization. Principals were committed to making sure the beliefs and

values were connected to the vision of the school and that teachers had collaborated in

the process of creating and sharing the vision. The principals collectively shared in their

interviews that a school's beliefs and values supported the advancement of the just cause,

or the why of the school.

Principals expressed beliefs and values that helped guide their schools in a

purpose-driven direction. The principals acknowledged the collaboration of the

stakeholders when developing and committing to the belief and values of the

organization. They recognized the importance of sharing the values and beliefs of their

school with the stakeholders and community for support in all students' achievement.

Key Finding 2: Prioritizing and Building Relationships Among All Staff

Exemplary middle school principals embedded the infinite mindset practice of

trusting teams by intentionally prioritizing building relationships with all staff members.

Sinek (2019) stated it is impossible to realize a vision without an effective and reliable

team. The principals unanimously supported open communication and provided

collaborative team planning time for teachers. Principals said staff members were invited

to share celebrations, ideas for improvements, or concerns about issues affecting the culture of the school with them, creating a trusting relationship in the organization. Principals considered the teachers' social and emotional well-being as much as they did the students at their school and created systems for fostering relationships.

Principals created systems of intentional collaboration, which created a team environment where everyone could agree on expectations. When teachers were part of a trusting team, it was safe to make mistakes, be open about flaws, and ask for assistance when needed. Principals shared the district promoted a culture of collaboration in their principal community and with the administrators, instructional coaches, and teachers. They shared the importance of the district professional learning community (PLC) academy as being one that promoted collaboration that fostered relationships and led to promoting trusting teams.

Key Finding 3: Being Open to Collaborate and Learn With Professionals Inside and Outside the Organization

Exemplary middle school principals embedded the infinite mindset practice of worthy rivals by being open to collaborate and learn with professionals inside and outside the organization. Sinek (2019) stated competition is viewed as legitimate rivals rather than as competitors because they can push people to become better and play a higher-level game. Principals shared they were open to learn from their district peers, educational experts, and other educators from inside and outside their school district. Principals valued learning with leaders and teachers who had a wide range of knowledge, opinions, and expertise. Principals shared they valued the district offices' structured principal meetings as a key method for developing collaboration in the district. They

thought these meetings were good opportunities to learn from each other and work together to improve their leadership skills. Principals also shared the idea of learning walks for teachers, instructional coaches, administrators, and themselves. Learning walks were powerful collaborative tools they used in their schools for professional development.

Principals spoke of the importance of seeking opportunities outside of the organization for leadership growth. They shared how they were able to bring back information to share with staff for growth opportunities when they visited schools and districts outside of their organization. Principals discussed professional development opportunities offered by their district for principals to meet and collaborate with leaders outside the organization. The described ways to expand their practice by mentioning a number of outside organizations and valued the benefit of seeing the exposure of outside leaders. They valued the ability to attend conferences for professional development.

Key Finding 4: Constantly Striving for Improvement

Exemplary middle school principals embedded the infinite mindset practice of existential flexibility by constantly striving for improvement in their organization. According to Sinek (2019), people must be willing to drastically alter their perspective and approach if they want to lead with an infinite mindset, taking into account current realities and anticipated future conditions. When something was not moving toward the desired results, these principals described how they developed needed improvements. For example, principals noted differences in the behavior of students and families due to the COVID-19 global pandemic; thus, the principals changed how they responded. Principals shared they developed new initiatives to introduce a staff reflection process. They also

shared they developed new procedures in response to the pandemic-related learning and behavior impacts on students. The principals focused on changing the postpandemic school culture to support the needs of all students and create goals that supported meaningful learning.

Key Finding 5: Courage to Take Risks to Improve the Performance of the School

Exemplary middle school principals embedded the infinite mindset practice of courage to lead by demonstrating a growth mindset and the willingness to take risks for the betterment of the organization. Courage is a learned trait people develop through risk-taking experiences (Sinek, 2019). Principals expressed how they believed it was okay to try something new and commit errors. They expressed the value of having opportunities to take risks in the district and their school in support of staff and student achievement.

Principals shared how they reflected on the district's initiatives to see if they aligned with the school's mission and vision. They shared they would analyze data the district shared for new programs or student support. They did not back down from taking the chance of failure and tried out new programs and ideas. If these initiatives did not align with the vision of the school for student achievement, they shared their concerns with the administrative staff and district and did not implement it if it had no value. Principals shared they took risks only if there was a possibility of a positive change or support to the school, staff, and students they served.

Key Finding 6: Using Leadership Teams and Collaborative Teacher Teams to Foster a Growth Mindset

Exemplary middle school principals used leadership teams and collaborative teacher teams to foster a growth mindset as supports for embedding an infinite mindset in

their organization. Individuals who have a growth mindset frequently believe they can gradually increase their intelligence if they put in a lot of effort (Dweck, 2006). Principals referenced how their organization supported the growth mindset of staff and students. They spoke about infusing a growth mindset in support of staff, students, and families to support the culture of student achievement. Principals explained that having a growth mindset was helpful in fostering the development of the whole child to their greatest potential.

Principals shared a growth mindset supported their commitment to the school. They referenced the participation of administrative teams and instructional coaches as being an integral part of the support system of the school in creating a growth mindset. Principals reflected on the impact of gaining feedback from the staff as a means of promoting both professional and personal growth. They displayed a growth mindset when sharing how they focused on making targeted academic decisions for students that fostered their emotional, physical, and educational growth.

Key Finding 7: Tenured Staff With a Finite or Fixed Mindset Resist Change

Exemplary middle school principals recognized that some tenured staff with a finite or fixed mindset resisted change in education and pushed back against the change, which principals viewed as a barrier to embedding an infinite mindset in their organization. Principals stated some teachers' resistances to change impeded educational reform implementation. They shared their veteran teachers were often fixed in their ways of thinking and could negatively influence the mindset of the 1st-year or new teachers. Principals expressed the struggle or fear that some of the older generation teachers feared going outside of what they had always done was inhibiting their abilities to adopt new

methods for increasing student performance. Principals emphasized most longer-term career teachers did not resist change, but a vocal minority of teachers could negatively influence the culture of the teacher community at the school.

Principals explained a need to create a protocol for teachers who resisted change. Principals described the longer-term career teachers' dissatisfactions with decreasing instructional and interpersonal time as a result of increased curricular expectations, increased technology use, and increased emphasis on testing and data collection. Principals shared their teachers expressed frustration with growing curricular expectations that were affecting their instructional time with students. Several principals shared increasing curricular demands was a factor when teachers pushed back against new initiatives they saw as unnecessary and not promoting the further professional development of principals and staff.

Unexpected Findings

The majority of the experiences that the principals recounted were consistent with the researcher's knowledge of educational organizations, the results of the literature review, and the responses made by all eight of the principals. During the interview process, the lack of parent involvement in the schools emerged from the principals' responses, which resulted in an unexpected finding. Katy Independent School District (ISD) was ranked as the top school district in the Region 4 greater Houston area in Texas at the time of the study. Success of students and schools depends on the involvement of parents. According to national policy, one of the four essential components (i.e., teaching, curriculum, setting, and parents) for excellence and enhanced education is parent engagement and school–family collaboration (Epstein, 1987). As the highest ranked

school district for student achievement, it was a surprise that principals did not report more involvement with parents in the school community.

The second unexpected finding was the lack of community involvement in the school's development and implementation of the mission and vision, which supports student achievement. This unexpected finding was also a surprise because high-functioning schools and school districts tend to have the support of the community. In the interviews with principals, there was very little mention of community support or resources to support student achievement. According to Epstein (1987), to improve school programs, family practices, and student learning and development, collaboration with the community should involve gathering and coordinating the resources of businesses, cultural, civic, and religious organizations; senior citizen groups; colleges and universities; government agencies; and other associations.

Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe the perceptions of how the practices of Sinek's (2019) infinite mindset framework were embedded in middle schools to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. Another purpose of the study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers the principals perceived to affect the development of an infinite mindset in their organizations. The researcher drew the following six conclusions from the findings in this research and literature presented in Chapter II.

Conclusion 1: Principals Reinforced the Importance of the School's Values, Beliefs, and Vision

Based on the review of the literature and the findings of this study, the researcher concluded that when principals consistently reinforced the importance of the school's values, beliefs, and vision, the teachers more clearly understood decisions and were more responsive in collaborating to increase student performance. According to Anfara (2013), the most effective middle school principals are principals who "recognize teaching and learning as the main business of the school, communicate the school's mission and vision clearly and consistently to all constituents, promote an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, and emphasize professional development" (pp. 697–698). The principals in this study demonstrated the desire to collaborate with the district and their staff when defining and implementing the school's mission and vision to the community it served.

Kollenscher et al. (2018) shared an organizational leader fosters the values of an organization and attempts to make the values a reality through the regulation of goals and policies rooted in the organizational structure. Organizational leaders facilitate the establishment of long-term strategic goals and objectives for the organization and inspiring members of the group to successfully carry out assignments in support of those goals. Further, the principals in this study involved stakeholders in constructing the school values and beliefs, which served as a foundation for achieving extraordinary results.

Conclusion 2: Principals Building Relationships With Stakeholders Is Critical

Based on the review of literature and the findings of the study, the researcher concluded that exemplary middle school principals embedded the infinite mindset

practice of trusting teams by intentionally making relationship building among all staff members their top priority. Principals discussed the importance of both a student-centered approach and always doing what was best for the community of students they served. As principals in general have continued to work to improve performance at their school sites, they have placed greater emphasis on developing relationships with all school stakeholders (Sergiovanni, 2006). Several of the principals in the current study also emphasized the importance of building trusting relationships with teachers and knowing them on a personal level. They perceived teachers' senses of social and emotional well-being increased when the teachers could trust the leader and their peers.

Putting others first is one of the characteristics of transformational leaders (Saeed & Jun, 2021). Sinek (2019) even described one facet of establishing trusting teams as having people who truly care about one another. Therefore, close relationships among a team are beneficial to the success of an organization (Salanova et al., 2022). The researcher noted principals shared the importance of building trust with the collaborative teacher teams and among the staff in the school.

Conclusion 3: Collaborative Learning From Leaders Inside and Outside the District

Based on the review of the literature and the findings of this study, the researcher concluded that when exemplary middle school principals visited other districts, attended conferences with exemplary educational leaders, and collaborated with other principals in the district, they became more adept at understanding their schools' strengths and weaknesses and were better able to help visualize future improvements for increasing student performance. Principals recognized their strong influence on the culture of the staff and voiced the need to learn from other leaders to advance in their leadership

position. In support of principal professional development, they frequently used external consultants and speakers with relevant expertise to provide new perspectives and open the door to new opportunities.

According to Sinek (2019), a worthy rival does some or many things better than others in the same or similar position. Their strengths reveal to leaders their weaknesses. The value of worthy rivals is to show where leaders can improve and grow. Principals valued the ability to seek development from people inside and outside the district to support them in their leadership. Principals in this study systematically evaluated their worthy rivals and strategically observed them finding new pathways for achieving extraordinary results.

Conclusion 4: The Lack of Parent and Stakeholder Involvement Hindered Principal Decision Making

Based on the review of literature and the findings of this study, the researcher concluded that although exemplary principals were focused on the future and supported a culture of learning in their schools, the lack of involvement from outside stakeholders and parents in planning and decision making hindered principals' abilities to progress in realizing the school's vision for improving student achievement. According to Sinek (2019), having an unlimited perspective necessitates agility and a readiness to change course. Parental participation improves academic performance and attitudes and behaviors of the students. A parent's interest in and support of their child's education can have an impact on the child's motivation, self-esteem, attitude toward school, and behavior in class.

In this study, the principals expressed their views of improving achievement for all students with the involvement of all stakeholders. At the same time, most principals did not mention parent and community involvement in their responses. Only one principal spoke about parent involvement at the school. None of the principals commented on parent groups or other community support. Principals continuously referred to the district and staff as an integral part of the vision and mission of the school but did not discuss parental involvement as a priority in achieving the school's vision. Studies have overwhelmingly shown that involving parents in children's learning positively relates to achievement (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989).

Conclusion 5: Risk Taking to Improve Performance

Based on the review of literature and findings of this study, the researcher concluded that when district initiatives did not align with the school's shared vision and improvement strategies, exemplary middle school principals felt empowered to resist mandates they perceived would negatively affect their school's culture of learning. According to Sinek (2019), strategic changes, especially significant ones, have a tendency to be reactive or opportunistic without a sense of infinite vision. Principals concluded they were sometimes willing to risk going against district initiatives to better serve their school community. They stated if there was not a significant amount of data to support a change in student achievement, they would not embrace the change. Principals shared they were willing to make changes that aligned with their school values and beliefs and even shared some failures along the way to create a culture of change.

Conclusion 6: The School's Commitment To A Growth Mindset Was Enhanced By Piloting New Approaches To Increase Student Performance

Based on the review of literature and the findings of this study, the researcher determined that when exemplary middle school principals fostered risk taking through piloting new approaches to improve student performance, the school community developed a stronger commitment to a growth mindset that embraced the belief that everyone can learn and grow to their highest potential. A growth mindset is the idea that people may learn and evolve instead of having a fixed capacity (Dweck, 2006). The emphasis on growth is linked to a greater degree of accomplishment (Dweck, 2006) and an increase in motivation and self-efficacy (Burnette et al., 2018). Bostwick and Becker-Blease (2018) pointed out that leaders who have a growth mindset succeed more than leaders who have a fixed mentality. One way principals achieved this growth mindset was by focusing on progress for both themselves personally or independently, and for the organization as a whole. Many of the principals described making decisions to strive for improving the growth mindset in the organization.

Conclusion 7: Resistant Teachers With A Fixed Mindset Hindered School Improvements And Innovations

Based on the review of literature and the findings of this study, the researcher determined that when there was a segment of a school's tenured teachers with a fixed mindset who were resistant to change, meaningful improvements and innovations for increasing student learning were more likely to be delayed or abandoned. Exemplary middle school principals in this study were frustrated by some tenured teachers' resistances to change, and perceived it as a barrier that inhibited the achievement of

extraordinary results. Principals stated teachers with a fixed mindset prohibited them from moving forward with initiatives and changes supporting student achievement. On the other hand, principals expressed understanding of the tenured teachers' resistances to continual change, such as being overloaded with too many tasks and new initiatives, and took their feedback into account when making decisions for their organizations. Principals collectively shared frustrations about teachers who undermined the changes in the organization to support the achievement of all students as a barrier for advancing the just cause. They also shared it was not all veteran or tenured teachers who resisted change; rather, it was only a select few individuals in the school.

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Implications for Action

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Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the researcher provides implications for action to assist principals in embedding the practices of an infinite mindset in their organization to achieve extraordinary results. These implications are specific actions, providing tangible next steps principals and school districts can implement to support the inclusion of infinite mindset principles. These actions are in alignment with the literature review and are ultimately aimed at increasing the performance of middle schools.

Implication 1

The researcher recommends the Texas Education Agency (TEA) include the infinite mindset principles of just cause, building trusting teams, worthy rivalry, courage to lead, and existential flexibility as content and performance expectations in the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support Standards required for completion of a Principal Administrative Services Credential Program. By adding the infinite mindset practices of

student-centered learning and well-being, cultural proficiency, systems knowledge, collaboration, communication skills, continuous improvement, change process, and evidence-based practice, the existing domain modules (e.g., leadership qualities that nurture ongoing improvement with the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support Standards) would be strengthened. State and school districts need to work together to support principals by adopting a vision, valuing relationships, and dealing with resistant teachers through ongoing and informed professional development.

Implication 2

The researcher recommends districts provide opportunities for principals to attend professional developments inside and outside the school district to learn how to lead the process for developing their school's vision to increase student performance. School achievement can be positively impacted by having a shared vision that the principal and stakeholders firmly believe in and develop together. Members of the school and community create compelling school visions that serve as a roadmap for the job of continuous improvement (Bailey & Jakicic, 2022).

Principals in this study communicated the importance of a shared vision based on values and beliefs. Often, their vision statement was limited to no more than a motto or marketing tag line. Instead, a vision needs to be aspirational, communicate a desired future state, and describe the commitment and means to achieve the vision. Further, the school's vision should clearly link to the district's vision and strategic goals. Therefore, the school district can partner with principals in developing the school's vision through training and modeling best practices. In addition, new principals can benefit from participating with an experienced principal throughout the vision development process.

Experienced and new principals require continual assistance and professional growth, and a coach or mentor may play a crucial role in this process (Educational Research Service, 2000).

Implication 3

The researcher recommends principals build a culture with their school and surrounding communities that will enhance sustainability. This culture can best be built by involving community members and organizations through the creation of focus groups in support of advancing the mission and vision of the school. Further, the researcher recommends principals also create student focus groups to gather students' opinions and recommendations regarding how to improve the learning environment in the school community. When a school changes its emphasis on student learning and develops a clear vision for the future it wants to build, the school and community must make a commitment to aligning its actions and behaviors with its mission and vision (Bailey & Jakicic, 2022). Most importantly, engaging in parent involvement, actively listening to student voices, and involving community stakeholders allows for sustained outcomes that focus on the school's mission and vision. Thus, principals will be able to give a visible reminder to the parents and community stakeholders of the importance and presence of the educational mission in the community.

Implication 4

The researcher recommends districts and principals seek opportunities for cross-curricular professional development by developing a pathway for students, parents, teachers, and principals to ensure smooth transitions from one level of school to the next. Districts and principals can work together to develop PLCs for teachers to attend cross-

curricular learning walks. By partnering with the transition school, teachers and administrative leaders can support the success of students transitioning from elementary school to middle school, and then high school. Principals working with the district can facilitate cross-curricular transitions by using data to help teachers better understand the continuum of learning needs across the entire K–12 system. Further, teachers working together across the segments can more fully understand how to effectively use the Texas Education Knowledge Standards to increase student achievement.

Implication 5

The researcher recommends school district superintendents improve the efficacy of their principals as infinite-minded leaders by encouraging and supporting the possibility of creating a new and successful strategies through risk taking. Principals can be inspired to imagine and accomplish new things by creating space for risks, which encourages both teachers and students to explore new ideas and possibilities. District office administrators can also promote risk taking by ensuring there are no negative repercussions for taking appropriate risks and by considering mistakes as a part of the learning process. Even if these initiatives fail, teachers and administrators will have learned something that will help the school in the long term. Principals can further be inspired to imagine big and accomplish new things through the district leaders serving as risk-taking mentors and advisors. Creating a culture of practice where risk taking is encouraged can help the entire school community innovate in pursuit of increasing achievement (Beghetto, 2018).

Implication 6

The researcher recommends the Texas state departments and school districts provide professional development on leading with a growth mindset to insist that every teacher and administrator is committed to the premise that all students have the capability of learning and achieving their full potential. New principals should be encouraged to attend the web-based professional development events developed by the Center for the Collaborative Classroom's (n.d.) evidence-based programs such as Beyond Good Intentions: Teaching With a Social, Emotional, and Cultural Lens and Student-Focused Coaching. To effectively model a development growth mindset for all of their staff members and students, principals need to be knowledgeable and trained in fostering a mindset that all students can learn. Principals can seek out opportunities for their school to participate in additional professional development activities centered on a growth mindset. They can also lead book studies on leadership among their teachers to further reinforce the development of a growth mindset. Principals who provide teachers the chance to experiment and learn from their failures support a willingness to take risks. Teachers may find this process of risk taking intimidating, but it is necessary to foster a growth mindset because being open to trying new things is one of the fundamental principles (Wood, 2000).

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings in this study led the researcher to provide six recommendations for further research for exemplary educational leaders and the practices of an infinite mindset. The recommendations offered are intended to further expand the body of research related to creating an infinite mindset in leaders.

Recommendation 1

Harris County, Texas served as the site of this study. To establish if the same findings and conclusions are generalizable across a broader population, it is recommended future researchers conduct a mixed-methods study to examine the experiences of exemplary middle school principals in different parts of Texas. Educational leaders could use the results of this study's research to see if the conclusions hold true in various geographic contexts.

Recommendation 2

To ascertain whether infinite-minded leadership practices are shared throughout high-performing and low-performing school locations, it is recommended that future researchers conduct a replication study using principals in low-performing schools based on student performance criteria.

Recommendation 3

By using statistical information to assess if principals who adhere to infinite-minded leadership constructs are regarded as effective by subordinates, it is recommended that a correlational causal-comparative research design be conducted to examine the relationship between the perceptions of principals and their subordinates.

Recommendation 4

A mixed-methods research design collecting both qualitative and quantitative data could help provide further insight into the use of infinite-minded leadership constructs by middle school principals. Therefore, a mixed-methods research study could expand on the phenomenological methodology by adding quantitative data to gain additional insights beyond the qualitative approach.

Recommendation 5

This study only considered the experiences of middle school principals. A mixed-methods study could help ascertain the degree to which high school principals embed infinite mindset practices in their schools. The proposed study results could further be compared with the current study results related to exemplary middle school principals. This research could help districts create and implement professional development for high school principals at both exemplary and low-performing high schools to develop the infinite mindset for higher student achievement.

Recommendation 6

The researcher recommends future researchers conduct a meta-analysis of the results from the eight infinite mindset thematic team dissertations to comprehend the infinite-minded leadership practices of leaders.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

It is important for the researcher of any study to reflect on the experience with the research process. In this section, the researcher shares three thoughts: (a) reflections from the experience, (b) what they learned from the experience, and (c) the impact the experience had on the researcher.

Reflections

I had the opportunity to meet and interact with eight highly professional and knowledgeable middle school principals. I valued the insights and wisdom they shared with me and I appreciated the time they took out of their extremely busy schedules to share their experiences. Each principal was exemplary in their own professional leadership style but I loved hearing about their passion for students, for the staff they

worked with, and their respect for each other. They each shared both personal and professional experiences that shaped them into the principals they were at the time of the study. They were vulnerable and honest about their experiences. I appreciated each one of them for allowing me insight into the risks they took and the goals they hoped to accomplish. Their feedback was focused and their voices were each unique and valued in their style. They all shared a similar vision, which was making sure students were valued, supported, and received the best learning experience while they attended their school.

What Was Learned

From conducting the interviews with and collecting artifacts from these eight exemplary middle school principals, I learned a significant amount about educational leadership. I learned about integrity, building trust, and the importance of continued professional development.

I am taking away from this experience the importance of integrity and trust. What really stood out to me was how these principals strived to build communities of collaboration and trust inside their schools. They valued the staff as family and created activities inside and outside of the school for relationship building. I learned about the importance of being able to stand up for initiatives and values you believe in and to not be afraid to take risks. Each principal stated on several occasions the importance of putting students first. They loved the communities and students they served. They valued the teachers they worked with and looked for opportunities to develop them and grow with them.

Impact on the Researcher

The impact this study had on me was significant. I am leaving this experience with a new respect for education and the leaders who serve children. I am excited to start my career in administration and take the experience from working with these amazing principals as a growth opportunity. I value how hard administrators work to provide the best educational experiences for students and the teachers who serve them. I have a new appreciation for professional development and an understanding of how important collaboration is in an organization.

The importance of building relationships and trust is the key to achieving extraordinary results. The principals modeled this importance and generously gave time to help me in the journey. They taught me the importance of education and gave me the passion to want to further my administrative and professional career.

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Reference Matrix

	Leadership	Infinite	M.S. Principal	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rivals	Extesential Flexibility	Courage to Lead
Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations.* New York, NY: The Free Press.	▓							
Bass, B. M. (1990). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Organizational Dynamics, 18*(3), 19-31. https://doi.org/ 10.1016/0090-2616(90)90061-S	▓							
Bass, B. M. (1998). *Transformational leadership: Industrial, military, and educational impact.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.	▓							
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Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership.* New York, NY: Harper & Row.	▓							
Burns, J. M. (1998). Transactional and transforming leadership in Hickman, G.R. (Ed.), *Leading Organizations.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.	▓							

	Leadership	Infinite	M.S. Principal	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rivals	Extesential Flexibility	Courage to Lead
Abu-Hussain, J (2014). Leadership styles and value systems of school principals. *American Journal of Educational Research, 2*(12), 1267-1276. https://doi.org/ 10.12691 /education-2-12-22.	▓							
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Bass, B. M. (1960). *Leadership, psychology, and organizational behavior.* New York, NY: Harper.	▓							

	Leadership	Infinite	M.S. Principal	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rivals	Extesential Flexibility	Courage to Lead
Carse, J. (1986). Finite and Infinite Games. Free Press.	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Cotton, K. (2003). Principals and Student Achievement: What the Research Says. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).	X		X					
Dweck, C. S. (2007). Mindset: The new psychology of success. Ballantine Books.	X							
Dweck, C. S. (2006). Mindset: The New Psychology of Success. Random House.	X							
Dweck, C. S., Chiu, C. Y., & Hong, Y. Y. (1995). Implicit theories and their role in judgments and reactions: A word from two perspectives. Psychological inquiry, 6(4), 267-285.	X							
Finnigan, K.S. & Stewart, T.J. (2009). Leading change under pressure: An examination of principal leadership in low-performing schools. Journal of School Leadership, 19, 586-618		X	X					
Franklin, J. (2002). The necessary principal: The importance of instructional leadership. Curriculum Update, 6-7.		X	X					

	Leadership	Infinite	M.S. Principal	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rivals	Extesential Flexibility	Courage to Lead
Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.	X	X						
Hallinger, P. (1992). School leadership development: Evaluating a decade of reform. *Education and Urban Society, 24*, 300-316. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-3368-7_69	X		X					
Johnson, M. (2021). Embodied mind, meaning, and reason. In Embodied Mind, Meaning, and Reason. University of Chicago Press.	X	X			X			
Joseph, E.E., & Winston, B.E. (2005). A correlation of servant leadership, leader trust, and organizational trust. *Leadership & Organizational Development Journal, 26*(1), 6-22. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1108/01437730510575552	X			X	X			
Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2002). *The leadership practices inventory: Theory and evidence behind the five practices of exemplary leaders.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.	X	X						
Lassiter, C. J. (2017). The courage to lead: Activating four types of courage for success. Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association (TEPSA). https://www.tepsa.org/resource/the-courage-to-lead-activating-four-types-of-courage-for-success/			X					X
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	Leadership	Infinite	M.S. Principal	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rivals	Extesential Flexibility	Courage to Lead
McGuigan, L., & Hoy, W. (2006). Principal leadership: Creating a culture of academic optimism to improve achievement for all students. Leadership and Policy in Schools. 5. 203-229. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/15700760600805816.	X	X	X					
Miles, M. T. (2002). The relative impact of principal instructional and transformational leadership on school culture (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Missouri, Columbia, US.	X	X	X					
Millennial Executive. (2021). On worthy rivals. Millennial Executive. https://themillennialexec.com/on-worthy-rivals/	X	X				X		
Mundell, T. W. (2010). *Principal leadership in a middle school culture: An autoethnography* (Publication No. 3416858) [Doctoral dissertation, Northcentral University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.	X	X	X					X
Nichols, S. L., Glass, G. V., & Berliner, D. C. (2006). High-stakes testing and student achievement: Does accountability pressure increase student learning?. Education Policy Analysis Archives/Archivos Analíticos de Políticas Educativas, 14, 1-175.	X		X			X		
Palmour, J.R. (2000). The relationship of principal leadership orientation to student achievement. Dissertation Abstracts International, A61 (07), 2545. (UMI No. 9979906).	X	X	X					
Prater, M.E. (2004). The relative impact of principal managerial, instructional, and transformational leadership on student achievement. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Missouri – Columbia.	X	X	X					

	Leadership	Infinite	M.S. Principal	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rivals	Extesential Flexibility	Courage to Lead
Reeves, D. B. (2006). The learning leader: How to focus school improvement for better results. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.	X	X	X					
Seashore Louis, K., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K., & Anderson, S. (2010). Investigating the links to improved student learning: Final report of research findings. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation.	X	X	X					
Sergiovanni, T., & Corbally, J., (1984). *Leadership and Organizational Culture: New Perspectives on Administrative Theory and Practice. University of Illinois Press.* (pp. 170-185) Seidman, I. (2013). Interviewing as qualitative research: A Guide for researchers	X	X	X					
Sinek, S. (2019). *The Infinite Game.* Portfolio.	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Sinek, S. (2020). The Infinite Game. Penguin Random House.	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Terziu, L., Hasani, N., & Osmani, O. (2016). The role of the school principal in increasing students' success. *Revista de Stiinte Politice, 50,* 103-113. Retreived from https://cis01.central.ucv.ro/revistadestiintepolitice/files/numarul50_2016/9.pdf	X	X	X					
Texas Education Agency. (2012). Public education information management system (PEIMS) report 2011–2012. Retrieved from ritter.tea.state.tx.us/adhocrpt/	X	X	X					

	Leadership	Infinite	M.S. Principal	Just Cause	Trusting Teams	Worthy Rivals	Extesential Flexibility	Courage to Lead
The Wallace Foundation. (2013). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning*. New York, NY: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/effective- principal-								
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U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education 2000, NCES 2000–062, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000. Valentine, J. (2001). Frameworks for continuous school improvement: A synthesis								
Yukl, G. (2010), *Leadership in organizations*. (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.								

APPENDIX B

District IRB Approval Letter

KATY
Katy Independent School District

Natalie Martinez, M. Ed
Executive Director of School Improvement

March 22, 2023

Christina Gfell
████████████████
████████

RE: Research in Katy Independent School District

Dear Christina Gfell,

The Katy ISD Research Application Review committee met to consider your application for research in our district entitled "The Transformational Mindset of Middle School Principals on Culture and the Impact of Student Achievement."

I am happy to inform you that the committee has chosen to approve participation in your study.
However, if any changes are made to your study, please notify our office immediately.

Approved with the following conditions:

* Researcher is approved to conduct research in Katy ISD and survey only those indicated in the application.
* The researcher is approved to utilize only the approved surveys, instruments, and interview questions.
* The researcher must provide a consent form for the interview questions and the surveys.
* Researcher cannot utilize professional time to complete the research study.
* Researcher is required to utilize an email account other than a KISD email account.
* Researcher must maintain confidentiality at all times.
* Removal of Katy ISD from all published information is required.
* When sending the survey or communications to participants, include the approval letter so that staff members are aware your research study has been approved by the district.

We appreciate your interest and consideration of our district and wish you the very best in your endeavors. *When your research is complete, please send a copy of the results to my office.*

Sincerely,

Natalie Martinez
Executive Director of School Improvement

6301 S. Stadium Lane - Katy TX 77494 | 281.396.6000 | www.katyisd.org

APPENDIX C

Letter of Acceptance and Participation

Principal Email Letter for Acceptance and Participation

Dear Study Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to take time out of your incredibly busy schedule to participate in this research study to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's infinite mindset framework (i.e., just cause, trusting teams, worthy rivals, existential flexibility, and courage to lead) are embedded within their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. We are seeking to better understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

As was previously shared, there will be two parts to the research study. The first phase consists of a short demographic study that should take 5–10 minutes to complete. I have sent you the Google form. Please click on the link to access the survey. Once it is completed, we can schedule an interview for the second phase.

The second phase is a 45 minutes to 1 hour Zoom interview. I am more than happy to schedule an interview time to accommodate your busy schedule. To make sure that you have as much information at your disposal as possible, I have attached the Infinite Mindset Interview Questions, Definitions of Terms in the study, and the Participant's Bill of Rights for you to review prior to our time together on Zoom. I am looking forward to meeting with you.

If you would have additional questions please do not hesitate to email or call me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX.

Sincerely,

Christina Gfell

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions for Exemplary Middle School Principals

Note: Your organization is referring to you as a leader and your school site.

1. Please share how your organization ensures priorities are connected to the organization's vision and aspirations.

2. How does your organization connect values and sense of purpose to advance the organization's just cause?

3. What practices does your organization use to create a trusting and mutually supportive team environment?

4. How does your organization promote a psychologically safe space that fosters trust?

5. How does your organization learn from other successful leaders or organizations?

6. How do people in your organization learn from successful people who hold the same/similar positions?

7. How does your organization identify new opportunities to achieve the organization's vision?

8. Tell me about the time that staying on the same path was not going to fulfill your organization's just cause?

9. How does your organization stay aligned with its values and goals when pressured to take a different path?

10. How does your organization model the willingness to take risks?

11. What supports exist in your organization that foster the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices?

12. What barriers exist in your organization that hinder the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices?

UMass Global Institutional Review Board Research Participant's Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the UMASS GLOBAL Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The UMass Global Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

UMass Global IRB Adopted 2021

APPENDIX F

Informed Consent Form Information

ABOUT: Middle School Principals as Exemplary Leaders

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Christina Gfell

PURPOSE OF STUDY: You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Christina Gfell, a doctoral student from the School of Education at University of Massachusetts Global. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in an individual interview. The interview will last approximately 45–60 minutes and will be conducted electronically using Zoom. Completion of the individual interview will take place June 27, 2022.

I understand that:
   a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality by keeping the identifying codes and research materials in a locked file drawer that is available only to the researcher.
   b) I understand that the interview will be recorded. The recordings will be available only to the researcher and the professional transcriptionist. The recordings will be used to capture the interview dialogue and to ensure the accuracy of the information collected during the interview. All information will be identifier-redacted and my confidentiality will be maintained. Upon completion of the study all recordings will be destroyed. All other data and consents will be securely stored for 3 years after completion of data collection and confidentially shredded or fully deleted.
   c) The possible benefit of this study to me is that my input may help add to the research regarding the lived experiences of exemplary Middle School Principals that produce extraordinary results. The findings will be available to me at the conclusion of the study. I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation.
   d) If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Christina Gfell at xxxxx@xxxxx.edu or by phone at (XXX) XXX-XXXX; or Dr. Patrick Ainsworth (Advisor) at xxxxx@xxxxx.edu.
   e) My participation in this research study is voluntary. I may decide to not participate in the study and I can withdraw at any time. I can also decide not to answer particular questions during the interview if I so choose. I understand that I may

refuse to participate or may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the Investigator may stop the study at any time.

f) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be informed and my consent re-obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, UMASS GLOBAL, at 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the "Research Participant's Bill of Rights." I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

_____
Signature of Participant

_____
Signature of Principal Investigator

_____
Date

APPENDIX G

Invitation Letter to Participate

Date: October 2022

Dear Potential Study Participant:

I am a doctoral candidate at University Massachusetts Global, completing research toward a doctorate in Organizational Leadership. I am conducting a study that explores and describes middle school principals' perceived impact of infinite-minded leadership constructs established by Sinek (2019) on creating a culture of student achievement.

I am asking for your assistance in the study by participating in a virtual interview, which will take 45–60 minutes and will be set up at a time that is convenient for you. If you agree to participate in the interview, you will be assured that it will be completely confidential. No names will be attached to any notes or records from the interview. All information will remain in locked files accessible only to the researcher. No one from your school district will have access to the information obtained during the interview. You will be free to stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any time.

I am available via telephone at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email at xxxxx@xxxxx.edu to answer any questions you may have. Please email or call me if you are willing to consider being a part of this study. Your participation would be greatly valued.

Sincerely,

Christina Gfell
Doctoral Candidate in Organizational Leadership, UMass Global

APPENDIX H

Assistant Superintendent Nomination Email

Dear Assistant Superintendent _____,

I am a secondary instructional coach in Harris County and an active doctoral student at University of Massachusetts Global. I would greatly appreciate your assistance. I am part of a thematic dissertation group of 10 peer researchers guided by four faculty members who are studying leaders of schools who exemplify a culture of student achievement. The purpose of my phenomenological study was to explore and describe middle school principals' perceived impact of infinite-minded leadership constructs developed by Simon Sinek (2019) for establishing a culture of student achievement. Participants may experience minimal risk during the in-person interview, and all personal and professional information, including school site and district, will be kept confidential.

To complete the study, I need your help to identify potential candidates to participate in a 45–60-minute interview, be observed in the workplace, and provide artifacts of their principal leadership. To be eligible for participation, candidates need to meet five of the following six criteria:
- Principal was employed at a middle school in Harris County with a minimum of 30 staff members.
- Principal leads a school with a culture of student achievement.
- Principal has a minimum of 2 years of experience at their current site.
- Principal has a minimum of 5 years of experience in the K–12 profession.
- Principal has membership in professional associations in their field, such as ACSA.
- Principal has articles, papers, or materials written, published, or presented at conferences or association meetings.

If you could respond with a list of middle school principal names, emails, and phone numbers, or even send a quick email introducing me to the potential candidates, I would be very grateful. I am contacting several District Assistant Superintendents in Harris County and would like to include middle school principals who have established a culture of student achievement from your district in this study.

Thanks in advance for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Christina Gfell
Doctoral Candidate
UMass Global in Organizational Leadership

Alignment of Research and Data Collection

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Sinek's infinite mindset framework are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. A further purpose of this study was to understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

Research question	Variable	Definition	Interview question
How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of advance a just cause is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?	Advance a just cause	A just cause is a vision of an idealized, aspirational future, something bigger than ourselves and the organization. It connects to and reflects the values, emotions, and a sense of purpose of the followers, motivating them to make sacrifices to achieve it. (Carse, 1986; Finnigan & Stewart, 2009; Mascareño et al., 2019; Noghiu 2020; Sinek, 2019).	1. Please share how your organization ensures priorities are connected to the organization's vision and aspirations. 　● Probe: Please share an example of how this occurs in your organization? 2. How does your organization connect values and sense of purpose to advance the organization's just cause? 　● Probe: How do you know your people are motivated and committed to achieving the just cause?
How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of build trusting teams is embedded in their organization to inspire extraordinary results?	Build trusting teams	A trusting team is a unit where individuals work together to know each other at a deep level and care about and value one another, while creating a high-performing team environment that includes active listening, vulnerability, integrity, and	3. What practices does your organization use to create a trusting and mutually supportive team environment? 　● Probe: When and how are these practices employed? 4. How does your organization promote a psychologically safe space that fosters trust? 　● Probes: What does a psychologically safe space look like in your organization?

		personal accountability in a psychologically safe space (Fehr, 2018; Lencioni, 2002; Sinek, 2019).	
How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of study your worthy rival is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?	Study your worthy rival	Worthy rivals are successful industry leaders who perform as well as or better than a leader or their organization. Leaders or organizations are inspired to study these players and improve based on the strengths and abilities identified in them (Millennial Executive, 2021; Sinek, 2019).	5. How does your organization learn from other successful leaders or organizations? • Probe: Think about a leader or an organization who you admire, how did you go about learning about what makes them successful? 6. How do people in your organization learn from successful people who hold the same/similar positions? • Probe: How do you as a leader support this practice?
How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of preparing for existential flexibility is embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?	Preparing for existential flexibility	Existential flexibility is a leader's ability to anticipate changing conditions and initiate a potentially risky strategic disruption to set the organization on a new path necessary to achieve the idealized future. (Avolio, 2005; Dhiman, 2011; Goleman, 2005; Owen, 2015; Sinek, 2019).	7. How does your organization identify new opportunities to achieve the organization's vision? • Probes: How are people encouraged to develop ideas to adapt to changing conditions? 8. Tell me about the time that staying on the same path was not going to fulfill your organization's just cause? Probes: • How did the organization identify the need to change? • How did the organization address the concerns about the potential risks? • How did making the changes affect your organization's outcomes?
How do exemplary leaders perceive the practice of demonstrating the courage to lead is	Demonstrating the courage to lead	Courage to lead is the ability to stand up to pressures or norms that do not align with organizational or individual goals	9. How does your organization stay aligned with its values and goals when pressured to take a different path? • Probe: Please describe a specific experience. 10. How does your organization model the willingness to take risks? • Probe: Please provide an example.

embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results?		and values and is characterized by the willingness to take risks for sustained success in an unknown, idealized future. (Lassiter, 2017; Sinek, 2019)	
What are the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset?	Supports and barriers	An infinite mindset is a leader's desire to inspire their organization to continually learn and grow to achieve profound results that extend into the future without limits. A leader with an infinite mindset follows five essential practices: advance a just cause, build trusting teams, study worthy rivals, prepare for existential flexibility, and demonstrate the courage to lead (Carse, 1986; Dweck, 2007; Sinek, 2019).	11. What supports exist in your organization that foster the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices? • Probe: Please give me more details. 12. What barriers exist in your organization that hinder the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices? • Probe: Please give some examples of barriers that impeded your organization.

APPENDIX J

Thematic Infinite Mindset Interview

My name is Christina Gfell and I am a doctoral candidate at University of Massachusetts Global in the area of organizational leadership. I am a part of a team conducting research to explore and describe how exemplary leaders perceive the practices of Simon Sinek's infinite mindset framework (i.e., just cause, trusting teams, worthy rivals, existential flexibility, and courage to lead) are embedded in their organization to inspire the achievement of extraordinary results. We are seeking to better understand the organizational supports and barriers exemplary leaders perceive affect the development of an infinite mindset.

I want to thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview on infinite mindset. The information you give, along with the others, hopefully will provide a clear picture of how exemplary leaders achieve extraordinary results. I sent the definitions related to the variables of the framework to you prior to this interview to help you understand the aims of the study and the concepts related to the interview questions I will be asking.

The questions I will be asking are the same for everyone participating in the study. The reason for this is to try to guarantee, as much as possible, that my interviews with all participating principals will be conducted in the same manner.

Informed Consent

I would like to remind you that any information that is obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All of the data will be reported without reference to any individual(s) or any institution(s). For ease of our discussion and accuracy I will record our conversation as indicated in the Informed Consent sent to you via email. I will have the recording transcribed to a Word document and will send it to you via electronic mail so that you can check to make sure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and ideas. The digital recording will be erased.

Did you receive the Informed Consent and UMass Global Bill of Rights I sent you via email? Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document? Do you consent to move forward with the interview?

We have scheduled an hour for the interview. At any point during the interview, you may ask that I skip a particular question or stop the interview altogether. Do you have any questions before we begin? Okay, let's get started, and thanks so much for your time. First, I have some confidential demographic questions to ask you. The input gained from these questions helps to better understand the background of the participants and to provide context to the final results.

Interview Questions
1. Please share how your organization ensures priorities are connected to the organization's vision and aspirations.
   - Probe: Please share an example of how this occurs in your organization?

2. How does your organization connect values and sense of purpose to advance the organization's just cause?

- Probe: How do you know your people are motivated and committed to achieving the just cause?

3. What practices does your organization use to create a trusting and mutually supportive team environment?
   - Probe: When and how are these practices employed?

4. How does your organization promote a psychologically safe space that fosters trust?
   - Probe: What does a psychologically safe space look like in your organization?

5. How does your organization learn from other successful leaders or organizations?
   - Probe: Think about a leader or an organization who you admire, how did you go about learning about what makes them successful?

6. How do people in your organization learn from successful people who hold the same/similar positions?
   - Probe: How do you as a leader support this practice?

7. How does your organization identify new opportunities to achieve the organization's vision?
   - Probe: How are people encouraged to develop ideas to adapt to changing conditions?

8. Tell me about the time that staying on the same path was not going to fulfill your organization's just cause?
   Probes:
   - How did the organization identify the need to change?
   - How did the organization address the concerns about the potential risks?
   - How did making the changes affect your organization's outcomes?

9. How does your organization stay aligned with its values and goals when pressured to take a different path?
   - Probe: Please describe a specific experience.

10. How does your organization model the willingness to take risks?
    - Probe: Please provide an example.

11. What supports exist in your organization that foster the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices?
    - Probe: Please give me more details.

12. What barriers exist in your organization that hinder the embedding of Infinite Mindset practices?
    - Probe: Please give some examples of barriers that impeded your organization.

Thank you very much for your time. If you would like, when the results of our research are known, we will send you a copy of our findings.