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## Perceived Preparation in Prospective Career Ready Students Attending a Rural High School in South Carolina

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PERCEIVED PREPARATION IN PROSPECTIVE CAREER READY STUDENTS  
ATTENDING A RURAL HIGH SCHOOL IN SOUTH CAROLINA

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Educational Leadership

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by  
Tina Faulkner  
May 2020

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Accepted by:  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of the resources and opportunities available to rural students that contribute to their career readiness particularly essential soft skills. The study was designed to identify critical factors that shape workplace skills of prospective career ready students in a rural high school to inform programs and practices focused on preparing students for the workplace. I analyzed WIN data (the assessment in South Carolina to determine career readiness) from the spring 2018 administration to describe student-level results by readiness levels and demographics. Using a descriptive qualitative design, I interviewed community stakeholders in local workforce development to explore their perceptions of workforce readiness.

In this study, rural community stakeholders expressed soft skills such as communication, and personal responsibility as critical skills needed in local workplaces. Furthermore that schools assist students in acquiring these skills by holding them accountable for expectations such as attendance, being on time, appropriate dress and wearing identification badges. Overwhelmingly, these community stakeholders cited workplace experience as the most critical factor in preparing graduates for local employment. Relatedly, study participants reported that graduates who are familiar with their work tend to experience contentment in the workplace which encourages the growth of consistent workforces in rural areas.

The primary significance of this study is to educational leaders seeking to ensure career readiness in South Carolina. By revealing the perceptions of stakeholders,

educators can gain insight into the critical factors of career readiness. This research can influence educational practices by serving as a guide for project-based learning, collaborative work groups, on-site work experiences, technology integration, creating and developing ideas and products, and interpersonal skills. For scholarship and research, this study serves as a basis for further research to give a voice to the perceptions of graduates who met career ready measures during their first year of work. The findings from this study can inform policymakers seeking to support and expand current career pathways for South Carolina graduates.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my baby boy who is now 15, but was only 10 when I started this journey. Every step of the way he has supported me and maintained the patience that only love can reveal. He served as my sounding board and my best supporter throughout this entire process. Thank you, Carter. You never complained or acted selfish, but always said, “Momma you cannot quit now.”

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER ONE

### OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

#### **Introduction**

“Growing up country” is what the locals call living in Laurens, South Carolina. That is, if you are on the Hickory Tavern or Gray Court side of the only high school in the district. Growing up country means yearly parades for Christmas and baseball season, fishing off the dam at Boyd’s Mill Lake, and learning how to clean fish, deer and other wildlife. Growing up country is learning how to crust chicken houses and operate bulldozers, along with recognizing the seasonal sights, smells, and sounds year after year.

I began teaching in Laurens in 1987 at the same high school from which I graduated. Until I began teaching, it was my belief that all students had parents who were engaged in their educational endeavors. Actually, I believed that all students had the advantages that my brother and I had growing up. It was not long before I realized most students were not in social or economic positions that could be compared to mine. It was shocking to discover the lack of essential soft skills, like difficulty with interpersonal relations that many of my students displayed.

My passion for career readiness began in 1987 when I graded my first test. I taught eleventh grade American history. As a first-year teacher, I taught what was labeled as “technologically prepared” students. These students were labeled as such because they were expected to leave high school and go directly into the workforce with little or no post-secondary education. Most of these students were also enrolled in Career and Technology Education (CATE) courses as well. It was a common belief amongst students

that core classes were required, but the CATE courses were desired. In other words, most of my students put little effort into my required social studies class because they were learning a trade such as machining, automotive mechanics, construction or electricity in the CATE program.

When I graded my first test in American History, I was still living at home with my parents. I pulled out the red pen, and it was as if someone took that same pen and let the air out of my soul. Grading the multiple choice and fill in the blank answers was not overly exciting, but the discussion questions were total disasters. I let out a sigh so Daddy would inquire about my disgust, and he asked what was wrong, just as I had predicted. I replied, “These students did not study or listen to one thing I taught them for this test.”

Then Daddy, in his laid-back way said, “Well if you are teaching them content and not skills, you are wasting your time and theirs.” He continued by saying, “They can read about history in a book, but can they write about it and apply the lessons learned from it to everyday life?” This was significant because Daddy dropped out of school as soon as he was of age and started working in a cotton mill in the late 1950s. He later put everything he and Momma had acquired together up for collateral to start a landscaping business which proved to be very successful and substantiated a comfortable life for our family of four. In many ways, he was like the CATE students I was teaching.

Daddy’s comment was more profound than I could imagine at the time. For many rural students today, in addition to regional and season activities, “growing up country” means a lack of clarity about their futures. After the seasons change and the school years accumulate, what comes next for these students? School leaders must think strategically

about how to ensure students are ready for the challenges of the local workplace. As students develop their connections to the community, education leaders must partner, support, and rely on educational partners and students themselves as students develop forms of social capital for what comes after graduation. This study was designed to investigate perceptions of readily available resources available to rural students in a South Carolina high School that prepared them for workplace success, in hopes that students like my Daddy can be prepared for what they enjoy and at which they excel.

### **Overview of Study**

At the end of every school year in South Carolina, graduating students receive high school diplomas, and with credentials in hand, they set out to conquer the world. Some plan to go to college or technical school, and others plan to go to work. However, the skills needed in post-secondary life today may require more than a high school education. Jimenez and Sargrad (2018) reported that most jobs in the United States today require at least a high school diploma. Additionally, *South Carolina Oversight Committee's Guide to the 2018 SC Report Cards* reported, "A high school diploma is important, but not sufficient today. It's about being prepared for what's next on a student's journey" (p. 9).

However, research on the post-secondary readiness of high school graduates primarily focuses on college and career readiness rather than on the specific preparation of high school graduates who will matriculate directly into the work force after high school (Morton, Ramirez, Meece, Demetriou, & Panter, 2018; Parsley & Barton, 2015). Students in rural areas may be forced to enter a workplace of convenience rather than a

career of choice. Research is clear that fewer rural students enroll in post-secondary education (Agger, Meece, & Byun 2018; Lapan, Tucker, Kim, & Kosciulek, 2003; Schafft, 2016), and coupled with geographical isolation (Agger, Meece, & Byun, 2018), these students often gain employment in local businesses that might not relate to their profession of choice. Schmitt-Wilson, Downey and Beck (2018) reported that educational attainment for rural students must be studied in context and that regional and occupational education cannot be understood in isolation. Additionally, they found that some rural students prefer to stay in communities that require certificates or associate degrees for most jobs (Schmitt-Wilson et al., 2018).

In a study conducted by Daniels (2016) of a Southeastern high school career center which failed to meet the state college and career readiness benchmarks, students felt they were not prepared for the workplace. Specifically, they felt that they could benefit more from “project-based learning, collaborative work groups, on-site work experiences, technology integration, creating and developing ideas and products, and interpersonal skills” in career programs (Daniels, 2016, p. 84). This research sets the stage for creating opportunities for building workplace skills during the school years which may be critical for developing career ready graduates. Career readiness indicates a choice of employment. Rural students may enter the workplace directly out of high school; thus, they need critical workplace skills for on-the-job training that might lead into a career choice later in life.

The lack of research on the connection of education and workforce development is especially pronounced in rural areas where fewer students attend college than their

urban peers (Lapan et al., 2003; Schafft, 2016). Agger et al., (2018) reported that rural youth continue to have lower enrollment in and completion of college than urban and suburban high school graduates because obstacles such as poverty and geographic isolation often deter them from pursuing post-secondary education. Therefore, these students must be prepared to enter the workplace directly upon graduation from high school, but may not be afforded the resources to ensure success.

Rajewski, Wicklein, and Schell (1995) wrote about several themes that “highlight the need for greater attention to the career development and occupational choice process experienced by rural adolescents,” (p. 92). These themes included lack of resources and employment opportunities, and a desire to remain closer to home communities and family (Rajewski et al., 1995). Community leaders must capitalize on this desire of rural youth.

Another pressing issue in rural areas is how to support students who do not have the resources to leave, but do not want to stay in these areas. Therefore, it is important for school leaders to partner with community businesses to provide opportunities for rural students to find their sense of purpose (Schafft, 2016). Students often become rooted in local businesses; thus, becoming trusted members of the community through their commitments to local business owners. Petrin, Farmer, Meece, and Byun (2011) reported that helping students find connections to community, not only helps them in school, but may also help them develop skills needed to be productive in a community workforce.

With the enactment of The Every Student Succeeds Law (ESSA) in 2016, the expectation from the United States’ government is that all high school graduates will be college and career ready no matter their demographics or social circumstances

(Castellano, Richardson, Sundell, & Stone, 2017). Nevertheless, ESSA provisions permit state and local leaders to develop educational policy that meets the needs of their students (The White House, Office of the Secretary of Education, 2017). Therefore, for rural students, resources can be aligned to facilitate career readiness needs, and meet the federal and state mandates to offer a personalized education for each student based on their workplace aspirations.

To facilitate the federal vision of college and career readiness, the South Carolina Association of School Administrators Superintendents' Roundtable developed *The Profile of the South Carolina Graduate*, which supports the expectation that South Carolina high school graduates will be college and career ready, by having “world class skill” (Young, Hoffman, & Chung, 2017, p. 11) in creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and teamwork, communication, information, media and technology, and a knowing of how to learn. These graduates will also possess “life and career characteristics, like integrity, self-direction, global perspective, perseverance, work ethic, and interpersonal skills” (Young et al., 2017, p. 11). This foundation for post-secondary success is a blueprint for incorporating critical factors into local education that influence the preparation of career ready graduates.

Although a single blueprint for college and career readiness exists for educators in *The Profile of the South Carolina Graduate*, accountability measures for students and schools indicate separate paths for college readiness and career readiness. College readiness is measured by cut scores on college entrance exams such as ACT, SAT, and Advanced Placement course work. Additionally, students are college ready if they take at



least six hours of dual enrollment for high school and college credit with a final grade of at least C (South Carolina Department of Education [SC DOE], 2018).

To measure career readiness, SC DOE (2018) described the Ready to Work (R2W) as a career readiness assessment administered to all 11th grade students to determine student achievement in three vital subjects: Applied Mathematics, Reading for Information, and Locating Information. R2W also includes an Essential Soft Skills (ESS) measure that provides information about a student's skills in the following five areas: cooperating with others, conflict negotiation and resolution, problem solving and decision making, observing critically, and assuming responsibility for learning. The ESS assessment focuses on skills such as solving problems, setting goals, making decisions, and self-direction. These skills play a vital role in workplace success (SC DOE, 2018).

In reference to skills, recent graduates often enter a workplace more advanced in the use of technology than tenured employees; thus, it is vital for these students to have the interpersonal skills to collaborate with employees from different generations and levels of experience. Bolton et al., (2013) reported “service industries traditionally rely on younger workers to fill their customer-facing positions” (p. 247). Additionally, “These digital natives, who are either students or relatively recent entrants to the workforce, are often described as technologically savvy and the most visually sophisticated of any generation” (Bolton et al., 2013, p. 248). This workplace evolution requires graduates to be able to direct themselves and make decisions while learning the culture of the workplace. It is almost as if education has taken a back seat to workplace readiness. Education simply opens the door to the workplace, but it is the ESS that ensure success

for both the organization and the individual worker. Although ESS is crucial for effective career readiness, very little research exists on what local business leaders expect with regards to ESS in their employees.

For high school data staff such as registrars and those who work in research and testing, it is difficult to monitor what enhances career preparation, and yet these staff are required to accurately report the successes and failures of state and local programs designed to enhance student preparation. Students in elementary and middle school can be monitored through high school, but post-secondary education is characterized by student enrollment in higher educational institutions all over the world; thus making it difficult, if not impossible, to know what works in preparing students for success after high school. Businesses can progress monitor through feedback on goods and services; however, for high schools and colleges this feedback is often difficult to obtain, thereby hindering the evolution of curriculum, instruction and pedagogy to ensure workplace readiness for students. In my own experience as an educational leader, we hired several teachers from the same local college one year. All of these new teachers proved to be very sound teachers in the classroom, which piqued my curiosity about the training program used at this particular college. As school leaders, we should be able to implement training opportunities for students that emit vivid results to local businesses similar to the way these newly hired teachers stood out in our school. School district staff should be able to track our high school graduates through partnerships with local businesses to ensure they are exposed to the training and experience to graduate ready for the workplace.

This type of reciprocal relationship between businesses and schools is particularly necessary in rural areas where students are more likely to enter the workforce directly out of high school (Agger et al., 2018; Lapan et al., 2003; Schafft, 2016). It is difficult for school leaders to measure students' readiness to solve problems, make decisions and self-direct in relation to business expectations which hinders local economic development, and undermines the fidelity of awarding graduates' "career ready" status. Thus, meeting the criterion of career readiness by SC DOE (2018) measures may be a false positive for rural high schools that are not truly meeting the needs of local businesses with regards to ESS.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the spring of 2017, an assessment of ready to work skills and soft skills was administered to students in their third year of high school in South Carolina. This was the first administration with an added soft skills assessment component. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of key community stakeholders on the types of social capital available to these high school graduates in their workplace preparation. Specifically, my research addressed the influence of Coleman's (1988) types of social capital including reciprocal relationships, information systems and social norms and expectations on the workplace readiness of rural graduates. School leaders and business owners must understand the impact of these nuances on the preparation of high school graduates for the local workforce. The research question for this study was: What are the perceptions of key community stakeholders of the critical factors that contribute to success in the workplace? If rural community goals include revitalizing and retaining the

brightest high school graduates, we must understand how key community stakeholders perceive opportunities and experiences in rural communities and how they connect them to workforce development in these areas (Schafft, 2016).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of the resources and opportunities available to rural students that contribute to their ESS to ensure workplace readiness. This study identified, through the perceptions of key community stakeholders including local workforce developers, business managers and career and technical instructors, the critical factors that shape workplace skills of prospective career ready rural high school students. This research informs workforce preparation programs and practices. Gaining insight from business managers as well as state and local workforce developers, who work to create economic prosperity through a trained workforce that meets area needs, I provide multiple perspectives on career readiness in rural areas.

I set the stage for research by categorizing South Carolina Career Ready Assessment test scores, administered to students in their third year of high school, by readiness levels and demographics. Next, I used qualitative research methods grounded in Coleman's (1988) social capital theory to investigate the opportunities and resources available to these students in a rural, South Carolina high school as they transition into the workforce. Finally, I analyzed critical factors that contributed to career readiness in rural students, and laid a foundation for building collaborative partnerships between community stakeholders and local, rural high schools.

To meet these goals, the following question guided my research: What are the perceptions of key community stakeholders of the critical factors that contribute to success in the workplace? This study was designed to inform educational leaders and community stakeholders about the instructional practices, programs, and policies that help rural high school students successfully prepare for the workplace. This is an area in need of further study due to the direct matriculation of many rural students into the workforce upon graduation from high school, as evidence by Schafft (2016):

Questions remain regarding the extent to which schooling might equip young people with the skills to think and act critically, pragmatically, and collaboratively within a world that presents increasingly complex challenges that are not merely economic, but are also social, civic, environmental, and ethical (p. 150).

Despite these questions, a literature search yielded no studies explicitly focused on rural student workplace readiness; therefore, this study was both timely and relevant. There is a critical need for rural school districts to recognize and distribute resources to align student preparation with state accountability measures within the framework of *The Profile of the South Carolina Graduate*.

### **Research Significance**

School leaders, policymakers and researchers must define the necessary competencies to help students transition into post-secondary opportunities (Young et al., 2017). The primary significance of this study was to inform educational leaders seeking to ensure career readiness in South Carolina. I presented the information by categorizing 2017-2018 WIN scores from a rural high school. To provide a realistic scenario of rural

work-related opportunities, I deleted the data from special education students and students who did not attend middle school in the focus school district. I layered the scores from highest to lowest based on demographic location. This allowed me to display the diversity of performance within a single rural school district.

From a sampling of key community stakeholders' reflective interviews, educators gain insights into critical factors that develop career readiness. Glesne (2016) defined reflection as "giving careful thought to some act, action, interaction, process, and so on in order to gain insight, understanding, and/or plan for the future" (p. 300). This research synthesizes these reflective components to serve as a guide for school district leaders, policymakers and researchers to develop plans, policies, and practices that improve rural career readiness.

### **Significance for Practice and Educational Leaders**

Soulé and Warrick (2015) reported 21<sup>st</sup> century learning consists of the acquisition of content and skills with themes interwoven across the curriculum rather than taught in isolation. Additionally, scholars advocate for a competency-based approach to infusing content and skills through personalized learning and project-based curriculum (Daniels, 2016; Soulé & Warrick, 2015). Therefore, this research will influence educational practices by serving as a guide for project-based learning, collaborative work groups, on-site work experiences, technology integration, creating and developing ideas and products, and interpersonal skills. By developing these types of pedagogy, practitioners may be more confident students are exposed to the skills needed to be career

ready upon graduation. Furthermore, these teaching strategies are likely to reflect the community norms and expectations (Budge, 2006; Schafft, 2016).

My study highlighting the perceptions of community business managers and local workforce developers has the potential to help local educators from elementary school through high school create practices within the parameters of social capital that serve to influence career readiness upon graduation. Building upon community norms and expectations, school leaders may use this research as a guide to build appropriate social capital within the school environment to help students become better equipped to succeed in their career choices. For example, “partnerships between local institutions and rural high schools can increase the amount of accurate, relevant information that school faculty and staff can transmit to their students” (Morton et al., 2018, p. 170).

Rather than focusing on a lack of resources in rural areas, it is important for school leaders to recognize the assets that students have outside of school and identify ways to incorporate these types of social capital in designing courses, programs and experiences that will increase the likelihood that students graduate career ready. My study focused on the assets already in place that will help students. Further research on the perceptions of local business leaders who hire career ready graduates will also be helpful for informing school practices. Coleman (1988) advocated information channels provide knowledge that can be the basis of action. These business owners can provide valuable feedback to school leaders to prompt educational alignment with community expectations.

## **Significance for Scholarship and Research**

To increase the likelihood that rural students graduate career ready, further research is needed to analyze the perspectives of career ready graduates in the workplace. My study, conducted with key community stakeholders, provides critical information for researchers seeking to understand this topic. Research on rural workforce development at the school level does not exist, except in local pockets related to isolated rural areas. Therefore, my research contributes to a major gap in this field.

In this study, I identified key resources for giving students a sense of belonging which will address the loss of so many of the brightest graduates by helping scholars understand how to keep students in their local communities to avoid “brain drain” (Biddle & Hall, 2017). Morton et al. (2018) suggested that rural schools interested in preparing students for college should give them access to preparatory resources and relevant social capital beginning in their first year of high school (p. 171). This same suggestion rings true with career preparation, yet there is limited research to date on this topic. Thus, further research is needed to give a voice to the perceptions of key community stakeholders on the status of workforce preparation in rural areas.

## **Significance for Policy and Policymakers**

The opinions or needs of the community leaders often guide local policies. These leaders may be business leaders, wealthy patrons, established families or simply those who are outspoken. Policy may not be what is best for the whole, but for the selfish needs or wants of those in control. Janssen and Helbig (2018) advocated “policy-making is aimed at solving societal problems by outlining and implementing laws and rules that can



achieve certain goals” (p. S101). These goals should be what is best for the entire community, not just a segment of the population with power.

A prominent problem for rural areas is the loss of those graduates who may make the quality of life better within these tight areas because of their influence and unique skills. Furthermore, that graduates who want to stay in these places of familiarity may not be able to afford to stay. The goals of school leaders must include preparing students for local businesses. Citizen reflection is vital to community improvement. This study gave voice to citizen reflection to provide those who influence policy making with perceived experiences. Stakeholder perception may open the door for collaboration concerning the allocating of educational resources for community needs.

Currently, there are four criteria by which students in South Carolina high schools meet the objectives for career readiness under the school report card accountability measure. My study informs policymakers seeking to support and expand current career pathways for South Carolina graduates. This additional measure of career accountability might be a local credential designed by school district leaders to certify that students from local high schools have completed a project-based learning portfolio based on local business expectations. A more indirect result of the significance of this study for policy may be the creation of a transition program to be completed by students who move from school to work right out of high school.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is Coleman's (1988) social capital model. Specifically, I investigated the productive activity resulting from social capital in rural communities as it pertains to the preparation of high school graduates in workplace readiness. Dika and Singh (2002) reported on the social capital model, noting "the concept has captured the attention of educational researchers and policymakers aiming to improve America's schools" (p. 31). Furthermore, that social capital has a positive effect on educational attainment. In this study, I employed methods that examine the relationship of social network resources and the attainment of workplace skills in rural communities based on Coleman's (1998) model.

Assuming social capital has a positive effect on educational attainment, I apply Coleman's (1988) theory that reciprocal relationships, information systems, and social norms and expectations are forms of such social capital. Coleman (1988) asserted the function of social capital is the value to which it is used as a resource to achieve the interests of the participants. In this study, the participants are key community stakeholders in a rural area.

In this research, I examined how rural local workforce developers, business managers and CATE instructors perceive community social capital as a resource for becoming workplace ready. Morton et al., 2018 completed a research study about the perceptions of rural graduates on attending college. He cited information theorizing the use of ideas, skills and human ability to investigate and understand systems. These authors claimed, "Coleman's social capital theory is based upon principles of sociology

and economics, as it seeks to use the economic concepts of rational action and human capital to explore and understand social systems and social organization” (Morton et al., 2018, p. 158). I seek to expose the rational actions of community stakeholders to explore and understand the value of such actions in preparing rural high school graduates to be successful in the local workplace. In other words, I aim to understand, through the perceptions of key community stakeholders, what the possibilities are for community experiences to transfer into preparation for the workplace.

One form of social capital referenced in Coleman (1988) is based on reciprocal relationships. The power source of this type of social capital is trustworthiness on the part of both participants. The underlying activity of this social capital is the creation of obligations amongst the actors. In my study, I identified the rural high school staff and the local workplace employers as the actors in reciprocal relationships.

I also explored information systems (Coleman, 1988) as another form of social capital available in rural high schools. Morton et al. (2018) described the function of information systems as social capital that provides “information or knowledge that serve as a basis for action” (p. 158). This information serves as a foundation upon which community leaders can build organizations or systems of continuous improvement for workplace preparation. The prompt for action begins with the dissemination of information. This dissemination of information must take place in vital locations such as social media platforms, school parent nights, and guidance programs to facilitate the movement from information to action. The process of moving from information to continuous improvement is cyclical. The cycle begins with workplace and college

information about opportunities and possibilities. Next, connections of recipients (students) to outcomes (degrees, certifications, and skills) via transition coordinators such as counselors, teachers, program coordinators, college staff, and business leaders must happen. For this research, I investigated the information systems available to prospective career-ready rural high school graduates, and how key community stakeholders perceive the influence and connections of these resources on the development of workplace skills.

Lastly, I analyzed data related to social capital referred to as social norms and expectations by Coleman (1988). Coleman, 1988 stated “a norm of this sort, reinforced by social support, status, honors, and other rewards, is the social capital that builds young nations” (p. S104). Morton et al. (2018) described this form of social capital as a weak form of action, but one that has a double function. This double function serves to both prompt action and invoke restraint when experiences arise that differ from the community norms. Because these functions are opposites, Morton et al., 2018 perceived it as less effective than other forms of social capital.

### **Social capital and absorbing social norms and expectations.**

As a young child, I was taught the art of phone manners. In my house there were two phones. The black phone was a business phone and served as the major means of communication and planning for Hughes Brothers Landscaping. The brown phone was the family phone. The rule was, to always answer the black phone with a pleasant greeting, beginning with the word “good,” and depending on the time of day, ending with “afternoon” or “evening.” The next sentence was to serve as an introduction to include first and last name. For example, “This is Tina Faulkner.” Before the caller spoke, we

were to ask how we could help them. When the brown phone rang we could answer with a simple hello or let it ring and not answer at all.

This is an example of what Coleman (1988) described as a social structure people are subject to as they grow up in a community. In this case, I absorbed these rules in the most common form of social capital within this structure, my parents. Most people are exposed to this type of social capital early in life which often helps students transition throughout their lives from one phase to another. As students become less reliant on parents, they begin to experience social capital in the form of reciprocal or give and take agreements which can be legal or understood.

Related to my study, a prompt to action will be determined by the perceptions of key stakeholders associated with the reasons graduates must work collaboratively and possess team building traits that are essential to workplace success. By contrast, the norms that influence constraints may serve to explain servant leadership in the workplace, but will certainly explain the ability of some employees to function as part of a team rather than as isolated workers. Social norms and expectations are internalized from community social supports, and serve to prompt action and constraint. In this study, I investigated how key community stakeholders perceive the role of social norms and expectations in preparation for work success particularly how these opposite actions work in tandem to help develop essential soft skills.

An example from my own experience with social norms in my community is the lack of tolerance for public profanity. It is rare to hear profanity at any social event in my community whether it be the local Dollar General store, a school game or a community

gathering. However, just five miles away in what my friends and I refer to as town, it is not unusual to hear profane words within the normal course of conversation. Often, it appears as if others do not hear the use of language that would elicit extreme looks of disgust or a stern verbal warning in my community. Another norm enforced in my community is an unwritten dress code. It is not at all rare for young ladies to be reminded that dress is important for success. Often, one of the women with roots in the area will approach a young female to remind her that the way one dresses tells a story to the public about her character. Nevertheless, the town norms do not appear as strict even though it is just a few miles away.

I used the framework of the social capital model theorized by Coleman (1988) to examine a single, rural school district to explain the varied workplace skills possessed by students who attend the same high school. To explain this phenomenon, I collected data from the perceptions of key community stakeholders as they described their experiences and thoughts. To bind these perceptual experiences, I framed the research question to gather data on reciprocal relationships, communication systems and social norms and expectations within each demographic that feeds into the high school.

### **Research Question**

I examined the perceptions of key community stakeholders' thoughts on critical workplace success factors, experiences learning essential soft skills, and assistance needed to prepare for their career of choice. I used the following question to frame my study: What are the perceptions of key community stakeholders of the critical factors that contribute to success in the workplace?

In an effort to trace the preparation of these prospective rural career ready students, I used a qualitative descriptive design (Sandalowski, 2000). In preparation for exploring work place readiness with participants, I used quantitative data from student scores on the WIN assessment to identify students who scored in the proficient range. I then categorized the scores from highest to lowest, and identified the middle school for each student. Identifying middle schools, helped me to make mental notes of some of the opportunities afforded to each student. An example might be that students who attended a middle school in town have more of an advantage in the development of athletic skills because they can walk to the YMCA, and play recreation sports sponsored by the city. This analysis provided a means of describing the context for learning for students who were tested. Then, I interviewed key community stakeholders consisting of local workforce developers, business managers and CATE instructors. In this, I was able to describe differences between what was evaluated and what is expected.

The outcome of this study provides information about how rural communities can create social capital to increase the likelihood that rural high school graduates possess vital skills for workplace success. The results of this study also offer educational leaders alternative ways to provide resources for preparing students to be workforce-ready and possess a sense of place; thus, fostering the growth of rural communities while reducing rural “brain drain” or the loss of a viable workforce (Biddle & Hall, 2017).

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was the uniqueness of and differences between the schools that feed into the focus high school. The high school in this study receives

students from four different middle schools. Two of the schools are kindergarten through grade eight schools. A characteristic of these schools is that students are exposed to the same staff and facility (building) for ten years prior to entering high school. This may provide students with a sense of comfort that leads to self-advocacy in familiar surroundings. This sense of confidence may not exist in high school which diminishes the ability for others to see student potential; thus, leading to inaccurate conclusions related to student achievement.

Another limitation of this study is that area differences are taken into consideration as a comparison point. In other words, I focused on four communities based on the middle school attended by each student whose scores were included in the final data set. Comparatively, socioeconomic status may also be a determining factor in the experiences of students; therefore, the focus group of students might experience very different opportunities growing up in particular communities. Gorski (2015) suggested that people from low socioeconomic backgrounds have common life experiences that are “social conditions” not “cultural” (p. 52).

As a result, it is important to understand that while these students may have the same aspirations as those from a different social class, they may not have the same opportunities to pursue these aspirations. Gorski (2016) was adamant the “culture of poverty” makes no sense. Rather, that poverty is a “social condition” that creates “barriers and inequities” these less fortunate community members must attempt to overcome (pp. 52-53). Thus, in this research, the data may not represent the differences in the experiences and opportunities of the privileged versus the less privileged.



## **Delimitations**

A delimitation of this study was the methodology chosen for the qualitative phase of data collection. Rather than collecting data from focus groups whose members represent several aspects of the various communities, I conducted in-depth interviews with a representation of key community stakeholders. This means of data collection provided the opportunity to analyze the personal perspectives of the participants without adding peer pressure or embellishment to their recollections that can occur in focus groups. Furthermore, the data collected from workforce developers may be geared toward future endeavors verses present opportunities. These developers often see opportunity in plans rather than reality.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Literature Review**

Existing literature on workplace preparation ranges from reforms designed to solve work related problems during the Industrial Revolution to equipping students with skills to navigate employment opportunities that exist in city areas (DeYoung, 1987). Recently, studies in education have become more focused on human needs such as equalizing opportunities for minorities and other marginalized groups in schools; nevertheless, existing literature is about urban schools (Schmit-Wilson, Downey, & Beck, 2018). In this review of literature, I connect my research on career preparation in rural areas to the economic, political and social aspects of building and sustaining viable workforces in rural areas.

I grounded my research in literature that identifies the unique characteristics of rurality including economic resources, political influence and educational outcomes. Although, I attempted to synthesize the literature to describe rural living, it was difficult to generalize the rural living experience because I believe each community has its own identifiers that make it home to those who live there. These identifiers might consist of natural resources such as fertile farmland, natural geographic features such as mountains; or small businesses that sell homemade products. In this review, I aimed to provide evidence that what signifies home to rural dwellers may also provide sustainability for the community as resources for workplace development.

To add to existing research on workforce development, I synthesized the literature from economic, political and social perspectives. First, I examined the literature through

an economic lens and traced how the economic shift in rural areas may have taken away a sense of place for rural dwellers. Next, I provided evidence that educational policies fail to foster growth and sustainability in rural communities. Expressly, how these policies restrict the rebirth of thriving rural economies and community. Finally, I suggested a plan for schools and businesses to operate in tandem to foster rural workforce development through a dedication to home that may lead to the revitalization of shared characteristics such as fellowship and common attitudes that characterize community living. I ended this chapter with an in-depth description of my theoretical framework on social capital and how it can be used to organize workforce development.

My initial search for literature yielded articles connected to the declining economies of rural areas, and the changing purpose of education through policy and leadership. A more focused look at the literature connected the challenges and advantages of education in rural areas to prepare rural high school graduates for success in work. Nevertheless, few studies exist that focus on rural career preparation exclusively, especially the development of ESS in rural students. Research is clear that education in rural areas must be restructured to reflect the community norms and values; thus increasing the likelihood that these communities will have a place in the global economic sector while maintaining their uniqueness and local stability (Budge, 2006; Maxwell, Locke, & Scheurich, 2014; Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013; Shafft & Jackson, 2010).

## **Rural Economics**

In this section, I summarized rural economics, and identified intricacies that symbolize these place-based networks. In regard to rural economics, the literature is not clear whether a lack of workplace experiences in education has caused a change in rural economics or vice versa. Within existing research, the loss of rural opportunities for work has evolved into a need for more work-based education in rural high schools is the implication (Budge, 2001; Schafft, 2016).

Early research on rural areas projected with the reality of declining economies due to changes in agriculture and extractive industries like logging, it is important for researchers and school leaders to look at the education of students to improve society (Budge, 2006). If rural graduates are going to improve society, they must connect real life to the educational experience and see purpose in what they are learning and doing. Relevant education for rural graduates is often determined by social expectations based on the resources and knowledge base of community members (Johnson & Howley, 2015). Schools can provide these real-world experiences through field trips, work-based learning opportunities and internships.

Small community businesses that serve the national or global sector are common in rural areas, and youngsters grow up with dreams of joining these business families (Johnson & Howley, 2015). These dreams may become reality through relevant experiences that connect school and community. Local schools are obvious launching points for building systems that prepare students to benefit the local economy with relevant knowledge and skills. Corbett and Forsey (2017) asserted, "Education is

positioned as a principal driver for rural economic development” (p. 434). Assuming education is a principal driver for rural economic development, it is imperative that school leaders be involved in planning for the future (Schafft, 2016).

Connecting schools and businesses may not be enough to build a viable workforce in rural areas. Schafft (2016) suggested that including educational policies and practices in rural development plans could validate education and re-establish rural areas as places graduates want to stay and make careers. This implies that plans for rural area growth must include a look at how and where schools operate to fulfill the growth goals.

Grassroots or ground up revitalization of rural areas including collaboration between school and community leaders that attracts homefolk may also provide a workforce that supports the national sector. Schmitt-Wilson, Downey and Beck (2018) concluded education and the continued work to support meaningful educational attainment for all students will “contribute to the ongoing vitality and success of our nation’s rural communities and support the long-term health of our nation” (p. 11). This indicates strong rural economic systems promote successful national economic systems. “At the community level, entrepreneurs create new jobs, increase local incomes and wealth, and connect the community to the larger, global economy” (Henderson, 2002, p. 46).

Wilcox, Angelis, Baker and Lawson (2014) reported that seasonal wages and service jobs yielding low pay have replaced steady paying jobs in rural areas; thus, leading to a loss of the capital needed to start businesses that might sustain rural graduates at home. Therefore, it is important to motivate students to remain in rural

communities after graduation that they might become business leaders who support local economies, as well as provide goods and services that connect to national and global economic sectors. Schafft (2016) argued that rethinking the purpose of rural education is critical and should foster practices that will revitalize these communities.

Economic development depends upon local knowledge as opposed to the quick changes prescribed by policy makers (Schafft, 2016). An example of policy that may not benefit rural areas as much as urban areas is in high school sports classifications. Many rural high schools compete against other schools based on student enrollment. However, other factors make it an unbalanced system. Because students often live miles away from their high schools in rural areas, it is impossible to participate in all of the activities unless transportation is provided. Nevertheless, classification is based on enrollment rather than demographics. As school leaders work in unison with community members to build attractive and sustainable economies, it is imperative to examine the role of politics in these areas to understand the effects on workforce development.

### **Rural Politics**

In this section, I provided evidence that policies enacted at the national and state levels may not benefit rural areas, and may actually hinder the growth of these areas in some ways. Although researchers have taken notice of dwindling career opportunities in rural areas, and the need for restructured education systems, the reality is that many policies create barriers to workforce development in rural areas.

As early as 2006, Budge determined policy makers view rural communities in terms of the national economy rather than viewing them as places where people live, and

as expendable when they can no longer compete in and contribute to the national economy. This determination implies certain policies may make it difficult for small community businesses to thrive and provide necessities for the area residents. Thus, leaving businesses to wither away if not connected to the larger economic sector.

Henderson (2002) reported that policy makers do not consider the scarcity of high growth businesses in rural areas nor do they consider the capacity of these businesses to create a catalyst for economic development locally and globally. These high growth businesses have the capacity to expand into different sectors of the economy such as local welding shops that may build trailers for large equipment companies and for local construction crews; thus, providing services across economic sectors.

Not only does policy contain a lack of support for rural area businesses but for educational systems as well. Research supports a restructuring of these educational systems to provide students opportunities to participate in and revitalize local economies; however, policies enacted by school leaders are not always considerate of the unique needs and situations within rural areas (Schafft, 2010; Schafft 2016).

Schafft (2016) refers to the “peripheralization” of rural education as the practice of leaving rural needs out of decision making in education and causing adverse effects on people and places in the rural sector (p. 138). Therefore, because rural needs are slightly considered when allocating resources and creating equity, rural graduates may face difficulty in terms of making a living in these ill prepared areas. The reality, nevertheless, is that policies often dictate school curriculum that is geared to national and global needs rather than the craft of community businesses (Howley & Howley, 2010). An example of

this are federal grants that earmark funds for student opportunities such as college visits without considering local learning experiences such as paid internships.

Howley and Howley (2010) expressed this globalization “undermines the local commons from which local community is developed, creating conditions that make the social exclusion of already marginalized groups just that much more likely, further abetting the destruction of community” (p. 35). This marginalization may be the fate of a family owned restaurant that provides local cuisine; however, business policies make it impossible for these small restaurant owners to meet national or international requirements to stay in business.

To reverse this trend, policy makers must consider the role that education has in preparing students to live local lives that benefit all levels of society. Nevertheless, “thinking globally and acting locally in ways that value rural places is not easy in a policy environment that seldom views community development as a traditional or essential role of schooling” (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Furthermore, that educational policy does not assist the rural schools to prepare students for their own unique business needs (Biddle & Hall, 2017). Relatedly, Johnson and Howley (2015) reported that there is an “ignorance of rural realities,” and that programs designed to serve rural schools most often fall short of the expectations (p. 235).

These rural realities often have to do with distance and isolation. For example, coordinators of after school programs designed to enhance student achievement may fail to consider the distance of travel for student pick up. Even when transportation is considered in these programs, the distance between homes is often so vast that the



student's ride home takes more time than the academic enhancement. To overcome this ignorance of reality, rural areas must depend on school leadership, and these leaders should be rooted in the culture of the areas they serve.

### **Rural Educational Leadership**

In this section, I synthesized literature to illustrate the characteristics that rural school leaders must possess to transform education for workplace training. Schafft (2010) proposed that education in rural areas should prepare students to “live lives that are local and global, to understand local phenomena as connected to larger regional-, national-, and global-level processes” (p. 286), and to know the implications politically, socially and economically that living locally can produce. Schafft (2016) asserted “By providing skills and education to cohorts of young people, schools help to create a competitive workforce that represents a strong asset to local businesses” (p. 145). Although Schafft (2016) expressed the importance of connecting schooling to local for economic purposes, he does not provide examples of how to create this feeder system; thus, his findings are merely theoretical rather than action-based.

If rural communities are to survive with purpose, leadership in these communities must influence political decisions as much as they do the local neighborhood (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). This means community leaders including school leaders must sway politics in such a way to enhance rural opportunities for workplace development through education. By influencing political decisions, school leaders may create more equitable experiences for students, and ensure resources that are vital for school improvement.

In reality, rural school leaders must launch efforts to structure education in a way that supports economic development. This means tracking student interests and creating experiences to motivate these interests into careers. Additionally, natural student talents such as art and musical inclinations and abilities must be fostered by opportunities for these students to experience work simulations in which these talents are used. An example of this might be in a local department store where art is used to create an inviting background for luring customers.

Schafft's (2010; 2016) call for educational reform in turn requires school leaders who understand their communities and share a sense of place with the local stakeholders (Budge 2006; Harmon & Schafft 2009). This allows school leaders to connect with community leaders to create opportunities that grow students into viable workforces with local flair and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, these leaders, grounded in community familiarity, may influence policies at the federal and state levels to trickle down to local school districts allowing autonomy within communities to do what is best for local economic development while working in tandem with the global economic sector.

In order to bring about these changes in rural education, transformative leadership is imperative. Transformative leaders critique inequity and foster greater individual achievement that leads to a life well-lived with others (Shields, 2010). These leaders also connect education to social contexts (Shields, 2010). Meaning these leaders bring about an educational metamorphosis that reflects societal needs in real time. During war times, factories are often converted to produce goods that support the war effort. For example, a car manufacturing plant can easily begin producing military vehicles in times of war.

As a result, our schools must be able to transform to meet the social contexts in which they exist. Transformational school leaders have the ability to change educational practices in rural areas in ways that lead to overall student achievement within a local context, especially for students whose postsecondary plans are to enter the workforce after graduation; thus, fulfilling the needs of society (Sheilds, 2010). Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, and Brown (2014) described transformational leaders as those who create a common vision and inspire collaboration by which the vision is carried out; additionally, that “transformational leaders use their shared vision to create a supportive school climate in order to solicit change and manage school reform” (pp. 448-449). These rural transformational leaders must understand the science of teaching and learning as well as the workforce needs of the community.

In order for rural education to support a local workforce, change leadership must exist in each level of education. In the American education system today, the school principal is expected to be a curriculum and instructional leader who works to produce successful “college and career ready students” (Glatthorn, Jailall, & Jailall, 2016, p. 4). Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) summarized the essence of community expectations in their literature review outlining the challenges faced by rural principals, “Leadership in rural schools is multifaceted, place-conscious, and relationship-dependent; the needs and priorities of students, parents and community members require a leader who is knowledgeable about educational policies, yet receptive to the distinctive needs, perceptions, and culture of educational stakeholders of that rural community” (p. 7). School principals must be part of the rural culture and know the traditions that are deeply

rooted in the communities they serve. In some cases, changing the color of the high school football jerseys can create conflict for a high school principal and changing the car line in elementary schools can cause a great divide between the school administration and the community.

Thus, it is important for school leaders to maintain relationships with stakeholders in order to enact changes in education that support community values and expectations. Local leaders must educate students within the vision of the community. It is amid a backdrop of economic development and social preservation that school leaders must re-shape schools to deliver instruction, through available resources, that will promote the sustainability of rural communities. School leaders who value place, have connections to local business leaders, and have the desire to see students succeed are valuable assets in building partnerships that have the potential to influence economic and social development in these areas.

Furthermore, to create structured pathways for career readiness in conjunction with community visions and expectations (Budge, 2001; Schafft, 2016), school leaders must consider the physical and mental maturity of students, and the transformation of current curriculum to include activities, content, and interventions that prepare students for transitions in life (Lane, Oakes, Carter, & Messenger, 2015). In practice, this requires school leaders to build academic and skills-based scaffolds within curriculum and instruction. These tiers include both factual knowledge, and skill practice. Also a work-based education system that relies on community stakeholders to provide the venues and

expertise to establish standards and competencies as well as build rubrics for measuring workforce readiness.

### **Rural Educational Barriers**

In this section, I explain what rural students often perceive as barriers to education. In order to make positive changes to the educational systems in rural areas, we must understand the challenges that rural students face. Ironically, academic achievement in rural areas may be the same as urban areas when students follow the same policies and guidelines. In a critical analysis on federal education policy in rural schools, Johnson and Howley (2015) determined that studies conducted within the same parameters found no difference in the student achievement levels in rural schools than in the student achievement of other schools. However, there were variances in rural outcomes associated with socioeconomic status, ethnicity and disabilities (Johnson and Howley, 2015).

With regard to socioeconomics, rural students are more likely to come from under resourced schools with lower expectations for rigor than their urban counterparts (Morton et.al. 2018). Additionally, Morton et al. (2018) cited literature indicating several reasons rural students may not be educationally prepared upon graduation, including “academic preparation; family income; parent education levels; social norms, and expectations; and geographical isolation” (p. 156). In many rural areas, students may not be academically prepared because they are not able to take advantage of ancillary programs such as after school tutoring, and sports. This may be the result of geographical isolation which makes it difficult for parents to afford transportation for these activities.

With regard to ethnicity, Pini and Bhopal (2017) expressed the overwhelming “whiteness” of rural areas, apparent in textbooks, and staff which often marginalizes other ethnic groups in rural areas (p. 194). This may make the non-white populations feel less valued by the community. It also gives the impression that other cultures are not welcomed in the community which may lead to more outflow of graduates; thus continuing to deplete the workforce in these rural areas.

These rural students may face cultural isolation, joined with poor academic preparation, social stigmas, family influence, and geographical isolation which work against workforce readiness in these areas. It is likely these students enter the workforce before or immediately following graduation in hopes of improving their lives. With their entry into the workforce, comes the possibility that the business leaders will sponsor their postsecondary training in job skills that will help them leave the common workforce or be promoted to develop their careers.

Solutions to educational challenges are difficult to apply in rural areas due to barriers such as geographic isolation. Budge (2006) maintained “Questions of relevancy (of education to students’ lives) were linked, leaders thought, to factors of isolation that severely limited the quality and quantity of experiences students needed to prepare for their future” (p. 4). Due to the distance between businesses and schools in rural areas, students are not afforded as many real-life experiences outside of their schools and homes.

Giroux, Jah, and Eloundou-Enyegue (2010) listed five scenarios of educational and employment disadvantages for youth in rural areas. In one scenario, rural children are

characterized as marginalized because they identify as rural which brings with it a stigma that they only know how to work on a farm. Another scenario described family ties as a disadvantage for rural youth, especially in educational attainment. The final three scenarios were described as segregation due to school quality and social connections; poor personal characteristics; and the lack of privilege and personal connections during hard economic times. Despite these barriers, rural students have unique advantages that may only be found in these isolated areas.

### **Rural Educational Advantages**

In this section, I listed the advantages that exist for the workplace preparation of rural students. To revitalize rural areas, community leaders must find ways to convince graduates to remain in these areas. In an illustrative list of advantages in rural schools, Johnson and Howley (2015) expressed that community is relevant to education and that the connections to the history and environment not only allow educators to reap gains in academics, but may also benefit social improvements for the community as a whole; additionally, that educators in rural areas tend to return to the community to serve in the schools they attended growing up. Manzo and Perkins (2006) asserted that social capital and place attachments can be community assets and that the lack of either can hinder community development.

Morton et al. (2018) cited literature which indicated strong community ties and social capital are abundant in rural areas. Because of these close ties in rural communities, the relationships that yield available social capital are forged. For example, a cattle farmer may supply the local butcher with meat for the community supermarket;

thus creating social capital in the form of reciprocal relationships. Furthermore, community youth centers or Churches may generate relationships that provide information systems and establish norms and sanctions as a form of social capital that can be used to prepare the local workforce. School leaders can use these forms of social capital as resources to help educate students for working in rural areas.

Community engagement is viewed as becoming a useful tool for building a more equitable and effective educational system (Bukoski, Lewis, Carpenter, Berry, & Sanders, 2015). For an educational system to be effective, it must be an organization that prepares students for the future. Howley and Howley (2010) asserted “in community, humans remain together despite their differences” (p. 36). This is important because people in rural communities can depend on each other in a mutual way to help build economies that support generations of graduates who want to remain at home.

An attribute of rural residents as reported by Howley and Howley (2010) is their ability to provide for themselves no matter their circumstances, and that even though there are differences in members of communities they tend to remain together in reciprocal relationships that benefit the area. Therefore, school leaders must tap into all available resources to prepare students to live as productive community members with a global perspective. By giving students knowledge of the community, school leaders can instill a sense of pride and belonging within the community which will help graduates identify with place (Schafft, 2016).



## **A Sense of Place**

Another characteristic of people who live in rural areas is an attachment to place (Bauch, 2001; Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Schafft, 2016). This sense of place can be fostered throughout the school years by providing students the opportunity to complete community projects, take local field trips, and complete local internships. Relatedly, a sense of place can be an advantage for students. Bauch (2001) and Schafft (2010) reported little to no research has been done to calculate the number of schools that use the community as a resource for school curriculum nor how these collaborations benefit students.

Bauch (2001) maintained an advantage for rural students is that their schools are set in the community which “values a sense of place, and offers a unique set of conditions for building the social capital important for helping students succeed in school” (p. 204-205). This type of advantage for rural students may include opportunities for farming or horticulture which requires acreage that does not exist in urban areas. Woolcock (1998) stated that physical capital is no good unless put into the hands of capable people who cooperate, trust and commit to a common objective. This common objective for members of rural communities may be their sense of place. This sense of place is what they share with generations before and after them. Examples of this are community swimming pools that serve as social spots for students in the summer, the best fishing spots, field parties, and the best hunting land. These are all markers that can become common threads to foster workforce development through a sense of pride and attachment to home.

It is timely for educational leaders to advocate for policies that are more conducive to the provision of resources for rural needs, and for the building of partnerships with business and other community stakeholders to overcome the detriments faced by rural students in preparing for work after high school. It is critical for rural students who are predicted to enter the workforce without post-secondary preparation to possess the skills to survive in the workplace. These survival skills may be fostered by the social capital that exists within rural areas which takes the forms of reciprocal relationships, information systems and community norms and expectations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research question for this study was: what are the perceptions of key community stakeholders of the critical factors that contribute to success in the workplace? As a result, a goal of this study was to identify assets that exist in rural areas that may serve as resources to prepare high school students for the workplace. I used the Theory of Social Capital to frame this research (Coleman, 1988). According to Coleman (1988) social capital exists in intangible resources such as interpersonal relationships as well as in social institutions such as schools. Although the social capital theory commonly frames studies of school partnerships (e.g., Bauch, 2001; Valli, Stefanski, & Jacobson, 2018), there are no studies to date which examine the rural key stakeholders' perspectives on the different forms of social capital available in their communities that support career readiness. For this study, I focused on three forms of social capital that exist in relationships which are necessary to produce action that cannot be accomplished by individuals (Coleman, 1988).

To build viable workforces in rural areas, there must exist relationships that establish reciprocity, information systems, and expectations. I analyzed the data collected in this study by identifying these forms of social capital in the preparation of high school graduates for the workplace. A common example of social capital exists in government. Political leaders are elected by constituents to create better local conditions. In this relationship, voters elect a representative who reciprocates by promoting statutes and policies that serve the voters. These elected officials also serve as information systems to their constituents about laws and policies. Furthermore, boundaries are established in this form of social capital through the norms and expectations of the local community which guide the representative's stance on political issues.

In this research, I aimed to identify forms of social capital between school and community leaders that build a rural workforce. I believe schools, businesses and government must create a network of reciprocity, information systems, and expectations in the preparation of a workforce for the revitalization of rural economies. Kryst, Kotok, and Hagedorn (2018) cited research indicating that communities, individuals and schools play the most prominent roles in shaping the post-secondary aspirations of rural youth; therefore, these actors must operate in tandem to prepare these youth for local success.

Morton et al. (2018) reported that each form of social capital aids individuals in “navigating the dominant culture of their society” (p. 158). This idea of navigation implies that students may maintain their individualism when living in a community, but through social capital they learn to live in harmony with others within their local setting.

Examples of this are apparent on most sports teams where each player has a position to play, and with different skill sets, they must work together to build a winning team.

In theory, social capital combines action which can be rational or purposive with social contexts to account for individual actions and for the development of social organizations (Coleman, 1988). In practice, action is taken by community stakeholders and educators for the purpose of creating a workforce of individuals who are capable of sustaining an economic balance both locally and globally.

### **Social Capital as Reciprocal Relationships**

One form of social capital is defined by “obligations, expectations and trustworthiness of structures” (Coleman, 1988, p. S102). This form of social capital as enacted in a rural community could include the relationship of child daycare providers to businesses and schools. In rural communities, these daycare providers are trusted each day with non-school age children and students who report after school. To work with parents, these facilities maintain hours that are conducive to the local businesses. Furthermore, these providers work with the local schools to provide transportation for special programs, and enrichment opportunities for school aged children after school. Reciprocally, the daycare providers often hire high school students to work during non-school hours so their regular employees are afforded vacation. This form of social capital is characterized by reciprocity. If one individual or group does something for another, there is an expectation for one entity and an obligation on the part of the other.

At the age of 16, I was able to put my phone skills into practice for a paycheck. I went to work for my dad’s business accountant. This is where I learned the role of

reciprocal relationships in preparing students for the world of work. I started work in the summer, and it did not take long for me to realize that I would be walking about a half mile down the town square to get refreshing cold drinks for everyone from the local drugstore. At age 16, I thought I was entitled to someone else getting the drinks! I quickly discovered that I must earn my tenure within the firm. That I was a top ten student at the local high school meant nothing to the 55-year-old accountant or his 45-year-old assistant. My role was to fetch supplies, keep the office clean and greet the public with a smile. Needless to say, that was a learning curve for me. I was familiar with studying, making good grades and receiving academic letters. Eventually, I learned to stay quiet, listen, and observe people and events to absorb the advantages of this particular form of social capital.

As students enter high school, they sometimes go to work like I did. The opportunity to learn vital workplace skills are so prominent during these years. It is almost like having a permit verses a driver's license. The opportunity to work permits the student to develop vital interpersonal skills through observation and interaction; thus, increasing the likelihood of a successful career. This type of social capital is described as reciprocal because these jobs are often part of work-based learning through which businesses partner with local high schools. As part of the partnership, the business fulfills a career ready component for the high school evaluation with the state, and the high school curriculum allows for students to be trained for the workplace.

## **Social Capital as Information Systems**

Social capital is also generated through information systems within social relationships (Coleman, 1988). According to Morton et al. (2018), these information systems are produced when an individual or entity disseminates information and it is received by another individual or group. A local farmer will develop new and innovative ways to improve farming and then share with an intern these practices which in turn fosters a sense of place and pride for the intern as well as provides a consistent system for community farming. Another type of informational system exists in schools where information is passed from teacher to student. Teachers not only share content, but also model social behavior which may serve as indirect information systems.

Unfortunately, I had little opportunity to experience social capital in the form of information systems. The only information I received on colleges was from friends and teachers who had attended college for job trainings or certifications. In our present education system, students have a more extensive opportunity to visit colleges and receive comprehensive information from both local and out-of-state schools. Programs such as Gear Up, and other federal programs are structured to create experiences for students to receive information.

## **Social Capital as Norms and Expectations**

The last forms of social capital described by Coleman (1988) are norms and effective sanctions. This refers to what everyone within a community does, and what drives the tranquility of the locale. In other words, it is the norms and sanctions or expectations in local settings that keep the peace or allow members to be accepted

because they know how others will react. School teachers often hand down norms and sanctions through interactions with the students they teach from one year to the next. Ironically, students from one school year may act as information systems for norms and sanctions passed to underclassmen. Additionally, community members instill norms and sanctions into generations of students through local facilities such as the YMCA or recreational league sports. Coaches of recreational league sports commonly establish norms of behavior, and appearance for their players. They also deliver sanctions such as requiring players to sit the bench for missing practice or misbehavior.

Morton et al. (2018) described norms as “ideas, practices or beliefs that appear to be common or expected among a specific group of individuals” (p. 158). These norms are usually what members of a specific community expect to see members exhibit in public forums such as sporting events, religious gatherings or other community functions, and might include being courteous, and refraining from profanity or other offensive actions. Effective sanctions refer to consequences for breaking social expectations such as expulsion from events or ostracism.

Additionally, Coleman (1988) explained that norms are effective, and exist because of sanctions which may be internal or external on the individual. This means people may worry or fret internally over having acted against a social norm or they may actually be punished by expulsion from a social event for acting contrary to the norm.

### **Conclusion**

Valli, Stefanski, and Jacobson (2018) reported social capital related to schools helps students succeed academically, and that trusting relationships within social

networks can explain the differential impact of schools that are otherwise similar (p. 33). While all schools are expected to prepare students academically and socially, Butera and Costello (2010) maintained that rural schools are very different from each other, and are linked to the community in such a way that school staff must be mindful of the local norms and expectations to be successful in forming partnerships that improve student achievement. Furthermore, successful student learning takes place when there is a shared mission among home, school and community. This successful learning may be based upon what is most important in these rural communities.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research study was to understand key community stakeholders' perceptions of rural graduates' preparation for the workplace, and to identify resources in place, as well as resources that are needed to prepare career-ready students. I analyzed critical factors that contribute to career readiness in rural high school graduates, and laid a foundation for building collaborative partnerships between community stakeholders and local, rural high schools. I presented the methodology that measured my research question in six sections: (a) research design, (b) site selection, (c) participant selection (d) instrumentation, (e) data collection, and (f) data analysis.

#### **Research Design**

For this research, I used a qualitative descriptive study design. Sandalowski (2000) maintained descriptive studies can take on traits of other, more structured studies, but is a valuable method by itself. This research design allowed me to present the facts as they appeared in the data upon which other researchers will likely agree “even if they may not feature the same facts in their descriptions” (Sandalowski, 2000, p. 335). Furthermore, Sandalowski (2000) advocated qualitative descriptive studies as a straightforward way to answer questions relevant to practitioners and policy makers (p. 337). To present a picture of the diversity of workforce preparation within one rural district, I first analyzed and organized the results of the 2017-2018 WIN assessment used by South Carolina to measure career readiness in a rural high school, Following that, I

captured data to explain the diversity among graduates within the same rural school district by interviewing key community stakeholders, and making informal observations about the resources available to these students to prepare them for the workplace. The initial data stratification of assessment scores by levels and demographics provided a general snapshot of the research problem, and I used the subsequent qualitative data to examine the participants' perceptions regarding workplace preparation.

Using a qualitative descriptive design allowed me to present the facts of complex situations such as experiences that enhance career readiness in rural graduates in everyday language, as I sought to describe how social capital in rural areas can be a resource in preparing high school graduates for the local workforce. Sandelowski (2000) reported a qualitative descriptive design allows the researcher to “offer a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events” (p. 336). By interviewing community stakeholders in a rural school district, I was able to report the data analysis in language that could convince others who experience the same phenomena to agree on accuracy (Sandelowski, 2000). The objective of this study was to capture the actions created by social capital that may lead to preparation for the workplace within a rural school district in Laurens, South Carolina.

The results of this study demonstrated how types of social capital in rural areas serve as resources to prepare students for workplace readiness. To ensure external validity, I used the theory of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Yin (2009) proposed using theory to know whether the findings are generalizable in other studies. By categorizing

data within Colman's (1988) theory, I am confident the study can be replicated by other rural school districts and communities with similar types of social capital available.

I interviewed workforce developers primarily to gain an understanding of regional and local plans for workforce development in rural areas, and gain information about the local businesses with which to consult and seek partnerships. Next, I gained an understanding of local business expectations by interviewing business managers who hire students and graduates from the focus high school without requiring more than a high school diploma. In the final phase of data collection, I interviewed CATE teachers from the focus high school to give voice to their perspectives on workplace readiness for rural graduates. Simultaneously, I observed CATE classes to capture the everyday events that go into preparation for the workplace within the focus school, and attended community meetings to develop my own perspective concerning the plans for this rural area.

At the end of the study, I analyzed and triangulated data from various key community stakeholders, CATE observations and community meetings to answer what resources, or lack of resources, for workplace preparation may explain the 2017-2018 WIN scores from Laurens District 55 High School (Yin, 2009). Figure one represents the sequence of data collection and integration of key stakeholder perceptions and observations to present a picture of workforce development in the rural school district focused in this study.

Figure 1

*Qualitative Descriptive Design*



*Note.* This approach was best for my study because it allowed me to elaborate on and present facts about the quantitative data (WIN scores) by collecting a myriad of qualitative data from diverse sources, and observe school and community events to look for these factors in action.

**Site selection.**

The site I selected for my study was Laurens District 55 High School in Laurens, South Carolina<sup>1</sup> as a matter of convenience and because the National Center for

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<sup>1</sup> This is the actual name of the school listed by name after obtaining superintendent and principal permission.

Educational Statistics (NCES) categorizes it as a fringe rural school (See Appendix C). NCES is part of the United States Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences that serves as the primary agency for collecting, analyzing, and publishing statistics on public schools for use in school financing. The school is considered fringe rural because it is within five miles of an urbanized area (NCES, 2019). This type of school setting was essential to my study in order to identify social capital unique only to this rural area, and to expose the barriers and advantages of preparing workforces capable of revitalizing rural areas as well as contributing to national and global economic growth.

Laurens High School is where I currently serve as principal; therefore, retrieving and analyzing school data was feasible and supported my goal of making data-based decisions for continuous school growth and improvement. Laurens District 55 superintendent, Dr. Stephen Peters, granted permission to conduct this study to include data from Laurens District 55 High School. His approval supported the idea that in the American education system today, the school principal is expected to be a curriculum and instructional leader who works to produce successful "college and career ready students" (Glatthorn et al., 2016, p. 4). With this in mind, as a school leader, I plan to embed experiences in the curriculum that prepare students to be college and career ready.

Laurens District 55 High School is one of nine schools in Laurens School District 55. It is the only high school in the district, and one of only two high schools in the county. This rural high school serves 1,476 students in grades nine through twelve. The school opened in 1972 and was the first and only consolidated, comprehensive high school in Laurens, South Carolina. This high school is fed by four unique middle schools

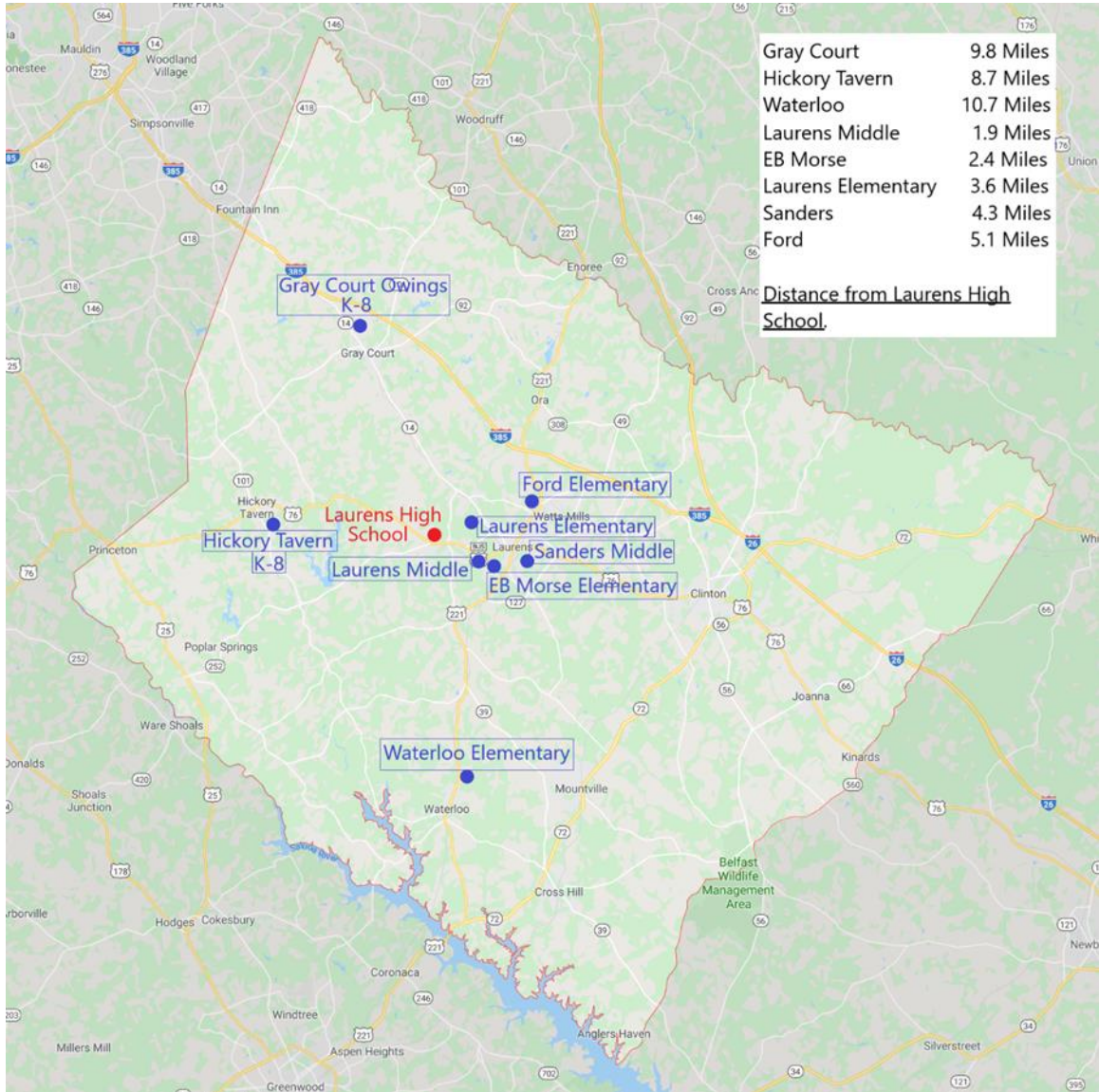
which give it an exceptional distinction. Two of these feeder schools are K – 8 rural schools (Hickory Tavern and Gray Court-Owings), and at least half of the freshman class comes from these schools. The students in these K – 8 schools have never transitioned from one school to another; therefore, students and parents express concerns about the experience of leaving these community schools to converge with the other students within the district. The other feeder schools (Laurens Middle and Sanders Middle) are in town and are attended by students who come from three different elementary schools in the city of Laurens. These feeder schools are distinct in culture, and rooted in their sense of place which creates an interesting and challenging freshman academy within the high school setting.

To paint a picture of student experiences prior to entering high school in Laurens District 55, I share my interpretation of the feeder schools. The students from Hickory Tavern stick together through thick and thin. These students are very proud of their community and are often from generations of family name who have lived in the area for years. If one of them has problems, the others step in to help. Many of these students have been in school together since kindergarten, and they enter ninth grade as family. The students from Gray Court also start school together in kindergarten, but Gray Court is a more transient school and community than Hickory Tavern; therefore, they do not seem to share the same deep-rooted sense of pride in their community. The other two schools are city schools and are more divided by race than the other two schools. Laurens Middle School students often attend the same churches and grow up playing recreation league sports together, and Sanders School is an old neighborhood school in the black

community. The students from Laurens Middle are more like Gray Court in their sense of place, and Sanders students are very proud of their roots much like Hickory Tavern students. Figure 2 provides a visual of where the district schools are located within the county. Additionally, Appendix D depicts a flow chart of the feeder system in Laurens District 55.

Figure 2

Map of Laurens County



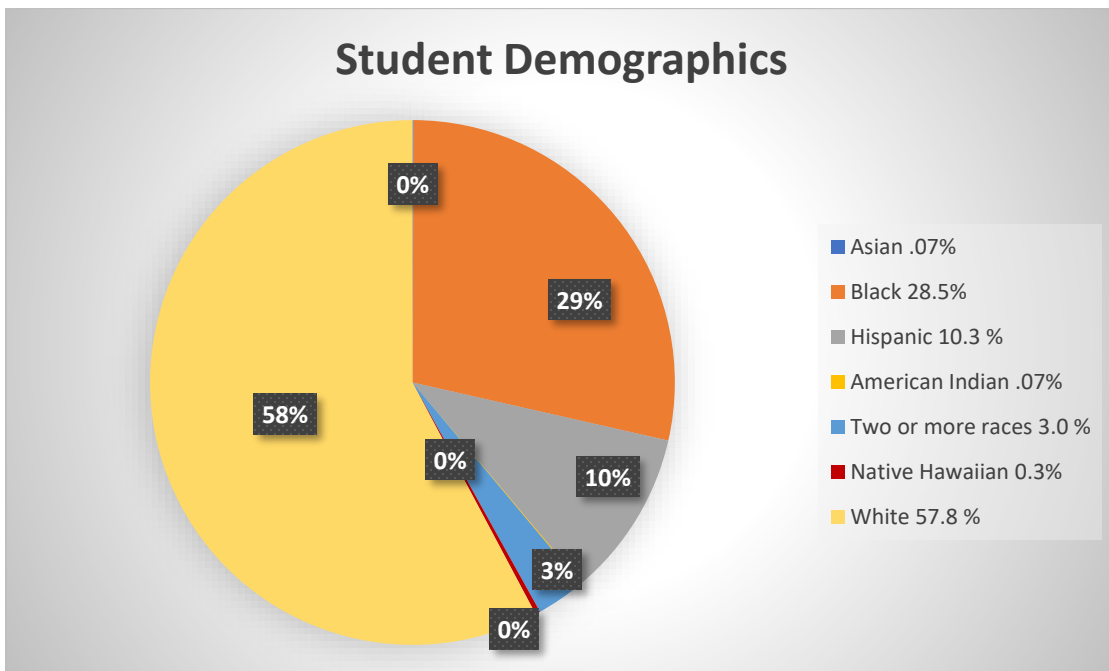
Demographically, the student body of Laurens District 55 High School consists of: .07% Asian; 28.5% Black; 10.3% Hispanic; .07% American Indian; 3.0% two or more races; 0.3% Native Hawaiian; and 57.8% White. Figure 3 illustrates the demographics of



the school. Additionally, 15.2% of the student body has Individualized Education or 504 plans. An individualized education plan is for students with disabilities, and a 504 plan provides a range of accommodations to help students with physical or mental handicaps. The number of staff range from 90-100 depending upon the needs of students with special services.

Figure 3

*Student Demographics*



*Note.* n=percentages.

Table 1

*Academic Achievement and Graduation*

Academic Achievement and Graduation (Our School Scores are Below the State in all categories)		
Test	School Level 2018-2019	State Level 2018-2019
English End of Course Assessment - Scoring C or Higher	50.10% (200 out of 399 students tested)	53.90% (30649 out of 56817 students tested)
Algebra End of Course Assessment - Scoring C or Higher	54.90% (219 out of 399 students tested)	60.50% (34239 out of 56619 students tested)
Biology End of Course Assessment - Scoring C or Higher	51.50% (209 out of 406 students tested)	59.50% (33879 out of 56955 students tested)
US History and the Constitution End of Course Assessment - Scoring C or Higher	39.10% (135 out of 345 students tested)	48.90% (24495 out of 50089 students tested)
Percent of English Language Learners who met progress toward proficiency target	32.00% District 38.90%	48.60%
On-Time Graduation Rate	79.60%	81.00%
School Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate	79.6%	81.0%
Additional Relevant Data (Our school has lost ground in all areas except the percent of students retained)	Our School	Change from Last Year
Annual <u>Dropout Rate</u>	5.1	Up from 4.6
<u>Dropout Recovery Rate</u>	3.9	Down from 5.3
Diploma earners who are college ready	37%	
Diploma earners who are career ready	59.2%	
Number of seniors who have completed FAFSA forms	217	Down from 237
Percent of seniors completing college applications	55.2	Down from 66.0
Percent of students retained	2.7	Down from 3.0
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	10.4%	
Percentage of Student Scoring "Committed" on Student Engagement Survey (Survey participation Rate = 46.1%)	51.5%	Cognitive 51.6%, Behavioral 48.9% Emotional 54.00%

*Note.* Table 1 from the Laurens District 55 Twilight Narrative 2018

Table 1 displays data that depicts the performance of subgroups on state measured standards at Laurens District 55 High School compared to other schools in the state of South Carolina. The information displayed indicates students scored below the state average on all end of course assessments and on measures of graduation rate during the 2018-2019 school year. These data also indicate the school has lost ground on key indicators of student success such as Dropout and Dropout Recovery rates, College and Career Readiness, and student attendance.

Although student performance on state achievement measures is lagging, students have opportunities to obtain basic skills and knowledge for local workplaces at this focus school. Many of the Career and Technology programs at Laurens High School offer work-based certificates such as Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certifications which ensure students have basic knowledge of safety and skills on the job. Additionally, some of these classes offer dual enrollment opportunities that allow students to earn both high school and college credits.

### **Selection of Participants**

The target population for this study were stakeholders who lived in Laurens, South Carolina and had connections to Laurens High School. These connections were community-based because all either worked or lived in the area. These community stakeholders consisted of local workforce developers who prepare workers to meet the demands of employers, community business managers who hire students from the focus high school in this study; and CATE teachers who work at the high school to prepare students for career readiness upon graduation.

To select the participants, I used a variety of techniques. One process for choosing participants in this study was convenience sampling, which was based on the timing of the data collection and the availability of participants (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

Lunenburg and Irby (2008) referred to sampling based on the researcher's knowledge of the sample as purposive sampling which I also used in the selection of participants.

Because I have lived and worked in the rural community featured in this study, I have knowledge of the school to work networks within the area which allowed me to identify participants with purpose such as local workforce developers who disclosed businesses that help build a stable community for local and global prosperity. More specifically these participants were selected by intensity sampling because they permitted me to study different levels of my research topic (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008).

I started the process of sampling with the workforce developers suggested by the Career Development Facilitator (CDF) for work-based learning at the focus high school. Their expertise allowed me to add an accurate report of the social capital currently available to rural students as well as social capital that is planned for the future in these areas. By interviewing a workforce developer from the regional level, I was able to tie my findings to state measures of career readiness in South Carolina. I sought suggestions from this CDF because of her involvement in work-based learning which requires her to interact with stakeholders who are interested in becoming part of the local workforce or train the local workforce. The workforce developers suggested business managers who rely on local high school graduates to fill their entry level positions, and the final

interviews were conducted with CATE instructors whose positions signify workforce preparation.

To select the specific participants for this study, I used snowball sampling which began with the Work-based Career Development Facilitator (CDF) who suggested regional and local workforce advisors. These workforce advisors helped forge a list of business managers who employ graduates with skills for building stable rural economies. Based on suggestions from business managers, I observed CATE classes and interviewed CATE teachers to gain information from the foundations of purposeful workforce development. Although students have different experiences growing up, high school is usually the first training for workplace readiness. Table 2 depicts the selected participants’ pseudonyms, as well as their job title or area of expertise. Table 3 provides observation data descriptions and Table 4 is a summary of community meeting data.

Table 2

*Participants (n=19)*

PW1	Regional Workforce Developer	PB7	Industry
PW2	County Workforce Developer	PC1	Welding
PW3	Economic Development/Continuing Education Division	PC2	Auto Technology
PW4	School based Career Development Facilitator	PC3	Business
PB1	City Municipal Services	PC4	Agriculture
PB2	City Municipal Services	PC5	Horticulture
PB3	Construction	PC6	Computer Science
PB4	Manufacturing	PC7	Building Construction
PB5	Banking	PC8	Health Science
PB6	Industry		

*Note.* This table provides a snapshot of the positions held by the participants in this study.

Table 3

*Observation Descriptions (n=6)*

O1	Digital Electronics Class
O2	Health Science Clinical Studies Class
O3	Business Class
O4	Welding Class
O5	Building Construction Class
O6	Automotive Class

*Note.* This table provides a snapshot of the observations conducted for this study.

Table 4

*Community Meeting Descriptions (n=4)*

O7	ZF Transmissions: Teacher Link Presentation
O8	Community Leaders Meeting: Laurens County Economic Development Strategy
O9	Google Glass and Artificial Intelligence Presentation to local manufacturers
O10	Welding Advisory Meeting

*Note.* This table provides a snapshot of the community meetings referenced in this study.

## INSTRUMENTATION

### **Statement of Position: Researcher as Instrument**

I believe “knowledge is experienced in direct relationships with concrete objects and events” (Bredo, 2006, p. 6). I consider myself a vested practitioner and an emerging scholar. Kram, Wasserman, and Yip (2012) ascertained that, “scholar-practitioners enact identities which are closely associated with generating new knowledge and improving practice though differing theoretical perspectives” (p. 305). As a teacher, my ontological stance aligned more closely with the positivist paradigm purpose of viewing instructional methods or theories as successes or failures. Accordingly, Mack (2010) asserted that the purpose of research from a positivist paradigm perspective specifically proved or disproved a hypothesis.

As an administrator, my epistemological perspective has moved to a constructivist paradigm because I witness many students interpret meaning from intrinsic and extrinsic experiences (Mack, 2010, p. 7). From a research standpoint, I am more confident analyzing qualitative data that draws on a naturalistic methodology that aims for an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and their attached meanings (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 323). However, my interests are moving rapidly more toward the critical paradigm, where I strive to understand or account for social behaviors, and further attempt to change the behaviors (Mack, 2010, p. 9). Nevertheless, as a constructivist, I identify with and construct my own knowledge from the experiences of others in relation to my own (Flint, 2016, p. 40). It was with the lens of a constructivist that I gathered the data for this study. I threaded my own high school experiences into the study and used interview, observational, and community event data to give meaning to my workforce preparation in hopes that this meaning might transform into intentional practice for rural community stakeholders.

I am the principal at the site I have chosen for research. This is my second year serving in this capacity. For two years prior, I was a principal in one of the kindergarten through grade eight schools that feed into the high school which serves as the focus of this study. Conducting unbiased and valid research in my current setting was feasible because the students whose scores set the stage for this research took the WIN test before my appointment as their principal, and these students graduated prior to the completion of this study. Furthermore, the other stakeholders in this study are community partners with my school; therefore, they have the same goals for our rural area.

## **Data Collection**

My research was conducted during the spring of 2020 and included data from Laurens District 55 High School in Laurens, South Carolina as well as from other key community stakeholders. All participants in this study were adults. Data sources for this research included WIN scores from the 2017-2018 assessment at Laurens High School. The analysis of these data provided a comparison of the performance of students from different areas of a rural community and revealed critical factors that influence the career readiness of rural high school students in South Carolina.

To establish the context for my qualitative study, I began the data collection by gathering and stratifying 2017-2018 WIN scores according to levels of achievement and demographics. All special education students were removed from the original data set, as were students who did not attend one of the four middle schools in the focus district. These subgroups were eliminated because they may have been exposed to different factors or influences during their workplace preparation than other students who grew up in the focus school district. The stratification of scores and organization of demographics provided a synopsis of career readiness according to state standards in Laurens School District 55. Next, I conducted interviews and informal observational data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Throughout this phase of data collection, I made informal observations and used memos to describe environment, events, and participants' reactions to these factors (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

During data collection, I conducted one-hour interviews with a total of 18 participants to gain in-depth understanding of experiences and resources that are factors



in workplace preparation in rural areas. I recorded the interviews and transcribed them or sent to an outside source for transcription. I kept participant names confidential by assigning a pseudonym to each one except those participants who granted permission to use their names, and kept data in a password protected database.

To conduct interviews, I used a semi structured interview guide that allowed me leeway to insert my own personality into the process without leading the participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 40). I developed an interview protocol (see Appendix A) on the platform of perceived opportunities and events that are critical in the development of career ready skills for rural high school students. The questions were aimed at extracting the perceptions of key community stakeholders on what social capital is available within the community to prepare students for workforce success. Additionally, I asked about social capital in the forms of reciprocal relationships, information systems, and social norms and expectations within the rural community setting.

### **Data Analysis**

As a means of depicting student workplace readiness in terms of the state assessment, I grouped WIN scores by where students attended middle school, and identified levels of career readiness. Then I compared readiness levels across the four feeder middle schools by percentages as displayed in Figure 4. Next, I showed levels of readiness throughout the district in Figure 5. The final quantitative analysis was a breakdown of students who passed and those who failed the ESS portion of the WIN assessment. The analysis of this data presented a picture of how the state assessment for

South Carolina Career readiness ranks students in the rural high school which was the focus of this research.

Then, I explored the experiences and perspectives of participants regarding student workplace readiness by analyzing interview data and field notes from informal observations. To code the interview data, I used *in vivo* coding to give voice to the participants. This type of inductive coding allowed me to use the language of the participants to code the data with words or phrases of the interviewee, and document emerging themes or concepts within the data (Miles et. al, 2014). Then I categorized these data codes within types of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Subsequently, I used descriptive coding for the observation data to note examples of social capital available to rural students. Descriptive coding allowed me to use single words as labels to summarize the topic of a passage of qualitative data (Miles et al., 2014). Relatedly, these single word codes were deductively categorized within the Theory of Social Capital (Coleman, 1988).

After deductively categorizing the *in vivo* and descriptive codes by types of social capital, I organized them into a conceptually clustered matrix (Appendix E) for the purpose of providing a summation of concepts and themes at a glance (Miles et al., 2014). This type matrix is helpful when clear themes emerge from the initial analysis, and this step allowed me to look for patterns that appeared across the data (Miles et al., 2014). Pattern matching allows a researcher to use low levels of precision to allow for some “interpretive discretion on the part of the investigator” (p. 141). I predicted patterns based on the three types of social capital from Coleman’s (1988) framework would emerge in these data. These skill sets included the ability to collaborate and form partnerships

through trustworthiness which is vital for reciprocal relationships; the presentation of information in such a way that potential employees may absorb and understand the knowledge and skills; and the consistency of community norms and expectations so that career ready graduates transfer this culture into the workplace.

To ensure construct validity, I relied on what Yin (2009) referred to as “theoretical propositions” from my research objectives and design to identify evidence from the data that I used to inform the categories of social capital (p. 130). To further ensure reliability, I gained feedback from informal conversations with participants that allowed me to confirm emergent themes from the data (Miles et al., 2014).

In the final analysis, I built descriptions for the thematic categories, under the theoretical framework of social capital (Coleman, 1988). This added to the existing knowledge of critical factors and experiences of prospective career ready, rural high school students. I reported these findings under my theoretical framework of social capital. Beginning with reciprocal relationships, I described those organizations and individuals who provided guidance or coaching in reference to what the participants perceive are factors in workplace preparation. I included specific quotes from the interviewees that reflect the connections to work preparation. I presented the themes that emerged from the interview and observational data to provide school and community leaders with types of preparation that may be embedded in school experiences to lend support to the career preparation of rural students. The summary of my report included a comprehensive list of patterns that matched across the three types of social capital to

serve as a basic foundation for workplace preparation in rural, South Carolina high schools.

### **Trustworthiness**

To increase the trustworthiness of this study, I shared the interpretive process with the study participants as a process of “member checking” (Glesne, 2016, p. 212). I also shared data interpretation with colleagues to further strengthen validity. Throughout data collection and analysis, I collaborated with a colleague who helped me interpret and correlate the data from stakeholders. By checking with the others involved in the study, I was sure my interpretations were valid. Glesne (2016) stressed enlisting the help of others and knowing the controls and boundaries set by the researcher and those beyond the control of the researcher. My assumptions in this research were that career ready rural students are prepared through reciprocal relationships with community members or organizations; via information systems which naturally exist in rural communities such as social gatherings, school events, and religious centers; and through community norms and expectations. Additionally, that certain demographic areas within one rural school district may offer different opportunities and experiences for these students. Checking my interpretations with the participants confirmed validity and added credibility to my conclusions. By gaining multiple perspectives on career readiness and matching patterns across the data to hypothesized patterns within the theory of social capital, I was able to triangulate the data (Creswell, 2013; Kern, 2018) for a comprehensive understanding of the critical factors of workplace readiness within a rural school setting.

## **Researcher Positionality**

As a high school principal, I believe school leaders who embed critical workplace skills such as soft skills in school culture have a positive influence on career ready graduates. Being career ready means students are ready for life. Soft skills are cited as abilities and attitudes that are necessary to navigate surroundings and work with others to be productive, and consist of, “social skills, communication skills, higher-order thinking, self-control, and positive self-concept” (Lippman, Ryberg, Carney, & Moore, 2015, p. 1). Hitt and Tucker (2016) conducted a study to unify existing frameworks and develop a set of principal practices to inform the work of researchers and practitioners concerning the effect of principals on student achievement. From the study, researchers concluded principals begin to develop others once their visions are implemented and their teachers become engaged. Therefore, leaders who have a positive influence on student achievement build a school environment that both demonstrates a concern for the people in the organization and helps stakeholders achieve personal and organizational goals such as those needed for career readiness. As a school leader, and community stakeholder, it is my vision to create a network of skill providers that complement the school pedagogy by delivering the critical components of career readiness preparation in school.

I became the principal of my school after spending 28 years in this same high school setting then moving to a kindergarten through eighth grade school for two years. Relatedly, the kindergarten through eighth grade school in which I served is one of the feeder schools for my current school. Since career readiness has emerged as a goal for South Carolina graduates, I was, and continue to be, interested in the factors that

influence students to develop the skills needed in the workplace throughout the school years.

I believe successful workplace skills can be taught through social encounters, embedded in school curriculum and rooted in social norms so students absorb the foundations for career readiness. Lombardi, Conley, Seburn, & Downs (2013) used the competency theory in which the novice watches an expert's approach to problem solving and is then coached by the expert. As principal of a high school, I want to give students every opportunity to both observe and perform under the coaching of experts to acquire and practice the skills needed to be successful in the workplace. Often, these opportunities involve more coaching than school staff can provide. Therefore, it is imperative for me to tap into all the resources available for rural students.

That said, students are developing social capital beyond education to prepare for workplace success. Education opens the door, but it may be the essential soft skills, absorbed from various experiences and opportunities, that create success for students. How is workplace readiness fostered for individuals in rural communities? What are the roles of reciprocal community relationships, community messages, and social norms and expectations in students' workplace preparation and readiness? To answer these questions, it is essential to understand the existing measures of career readiness in South Carolina high schools.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

This research amplifies the voice of key stakeholders in a rural community in South Carolina related to workplace preparation for local jobs. To capture these data, participants were asked to cite skills, experiences and assistance needed to prepare rural graduates for local employment. Additionally, participants were asked their thoughts pertaining to contentment in the workplace. In this section, I present the findings organized by themes reported across the data. Within each theme, I report the perceptions of local business managers as key stakeholders who drive the preparation of rural graduates for the workplace. Relatedly, I reported the perceptions of workforce developers and CATE teachers as key stakeholders who prepare rural graduates. Within these themes, I weaved observational data to provide an account of current practices aligned to the perceptions of key community stakeholders, and other data related to community plans for enhancing local work opportunities. By capturing this critical data from stakeholders at different levels of workforce preparation, I introduced a comprehensive view of preparation within this rural school district.

To present the findings, I used a backward by design approach beginning with the final results of the state measure of workforce readiness in South Carolina, the WIN assessment. By displaying the results of this assessment for the focus school district, I displayed a research problem, then analyzed interview and observational data to describe the critical factors that may shape these scores.

## **A Measure of Rural Performance**

To determine which of the students from the focus high school scored in the career ready range on the 2017-2018 WIN Assessment, as outlined in Table 5, I categorized student names within the score report according to which Laurens District 55 middle school each one attended. I presented the score levels of each middle school in Figure 4. Once the scores were layered by school, I looked at the soft skills portion of the assessment. Of the students in the final data set, 52% passed the ready to work portion and 48% failed.

In this case, 17 students from the final data set scored in the silver range which indicated they were workplace ready by school accountability measures, but these same students failed the essential soft skills portion of the assessment. This is significant for rural businesses because these students may not have the skills needed to succeed in the workplace.

Assessment data for this study represents the average population of graduates. To maintain consistency, 25 special education students were removed from the data, and one student was removed because his scores were incorrectly reported from a different high school. Additionally, 39 students were deleted from the data because they did not attend one of the middle schools that feed into the focus high school. The final WIN data set for this study consisted of 274 students as can be seen in Table 5.



Table 5

*Feeder School WIN Data Set*

Feeder School	Number of Students
Gray Court Owings Middle School	51
Hickory Tavern Middle School	51
Laurens Middle School	106
Sanders Middle School	66

*Note.* Total sample set of 274 students

Students are considered career ready in South Carolina if they score a four (silver), five (gold) or six (platinum) on the WIN assessment. Accordingly, the students who meet these criteria are considered to be career ready graduates in South Carolina under all measures of school accountability (South Carolina Oversight Committee, Accountability Manual, 2018, p. 38). There were 131 students from the final data set in this study whose scores indicated they are not career ready by South Carolina accountability standards. Conversely, there were 143 students in the final data set who met the career ready expectation.

The Ready to Work (ESS) portion of the exam is reported only as a pass or fail score. The ESS portion of the assessment was given for the first time during the 2017-2018 spring administration. From the final data set, 177 students passed the ESS (Ready to Work) portion of the assessment and 121 failed. The students who scored gold and platinum all passed the Ready to Work assessment. However, of the 125 students who

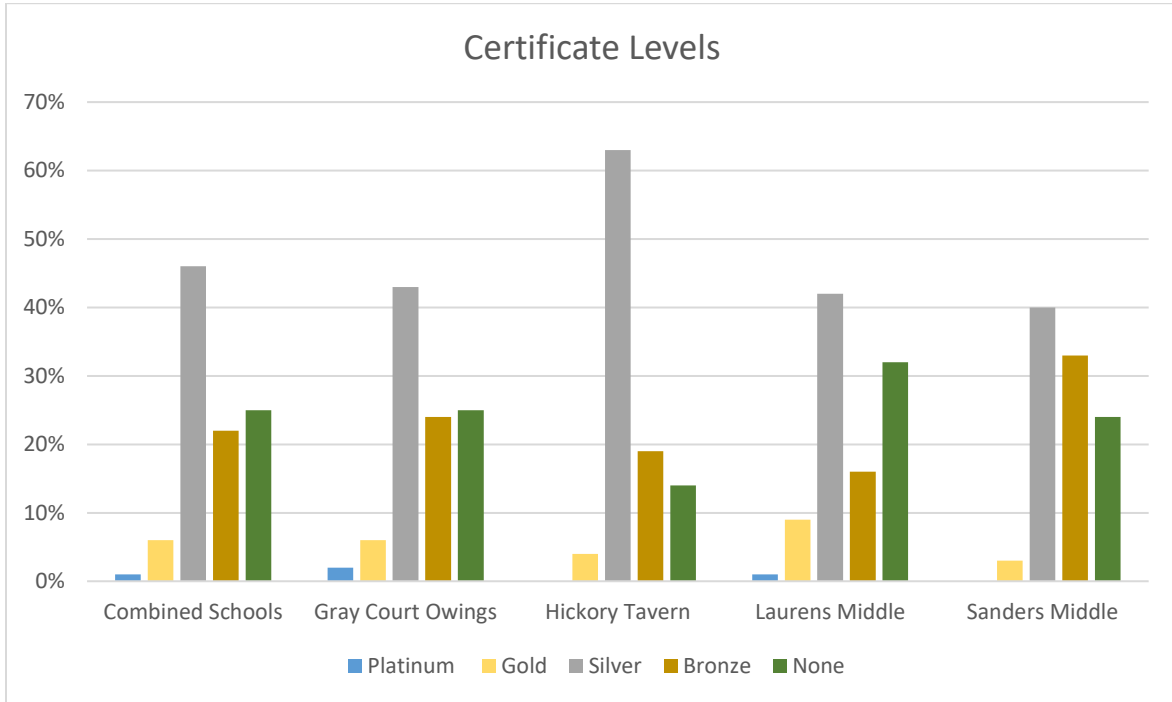
scored 4 (silver), 17 of them failed the soft skills portion of the assessment. Figure 4 provides a synopsis of the certificate levels within the final data set.

The WIN data for this rural school tells us that a little less than half the students who took the exam did not score high enough to meet the career ready standards for South Carolina. According to research cited in Chapter two of this study, many rural students leave high school and work locally. In a small, one high school community, such as the one featured in this study, this ratio may indicate that a significant portion of the existing workforce is ill prepared to meet the demands of local businesses. This in turn hinders the local economy which may affect national and global economic sectors. Furthermore, that a portion of the students who met the career ready score did not adequately meet the soft skills portion of the assessment indicates career readiness may not ensure workplace success.

For this study, these WIN data served as evidence related to the student performance in a typical rural community. While these scores were exclusive to this cohort of graduates, social capital exists within all rural communities that may influence workforce development beyond the prediction of these state assessment scores. The interview and observational findings reported in subsequent sections of this study were thematically reported as they related to the critical factors that contribute to workplace success; thus, these data may serve as more accurate predictors of workplace readiness in rural communities.

Figure 4

*Certificate Level Results*



**Findings from Interview and Observational Data**

Findings from this study focused on the perceptions of key community stakeholders related to the critical factors that contribute to success in the workplace for rural high school graduates. The participants in this study described their perceptions and gave their thoughts on workplace preparation representing four emergent themes from the data obtained: (a) skills needed to enter the local workforce workplace ready; (b) experiences needed to support local workforce readiness; (c) assistance needed from community stakeholders to ensure workplace readiness; and (d) critical factors that contribute to employee contentment in the workplace (See Appendix G).

## **Perceptions of the Critical Factors Needed for Workplace Success**

### *Soft skills*

Within their interviews, participants were asked to describe the most important skills needed by high school graduates entering the workplace. The purpose of this question was to extract a foundation upon which school curriculum may adapt to local workplace needs in regard to basic skills that all businesses require. As anticipated, each business or career representative cited skills pertinent to their own industry such as welding in service industries and OSHA certification in manufacturing industries. Nevertheless, two themes emerged from the data concerning soft skills and technical skills.

Analysis of the interview data revealed seven of the nineteen participants cited soft skills as important for success in the workplace. This was the most commonly cited skill needed amongst local businesses to predict workplace success, contentment in the daily job, and overall productivity within the business. Within the theme of soft skills, several descriptors were mentioned.

Regarding soft skills, participants described communication, professionalism, self-motivation, flexibility, and teamwork as vital to workplace success. PB3 was the president of a construction firm in a nearby town. His firm has traditionally hired many of the students from the welding program at the high school featured in this study. PB3 believed communication and soft skills are most important for success and that these skills may be identified and fostered by school staff:

Students need to show commitment that they are willing to be able to do the right things in life. They need to exhibit this in school first. Teachers can tell what students have the drive to do the right things.

So beyond the skills to do the work tasks, this quote exemplifies some employers' concerns about students' abilities to function in the workplace.

Relatedly, business participant six (PB6) who works as a lead test engineer in a nearby research facility stated, "They come into the workforce with no knowledge of how to interact with employers and colleagues. The education system needs to recognize the value of these skills for every single student in their care." This perception indicates our current system of teacher presentation and independent work in schools may hinder rather than support a viable workforce.

Nevertheless, in the observational data collected from CATE classes for this study, students were working in teams and collaborating on processes and methods. In the welding class, students were in teams for physical support such as holding metal and measuring as well as for collaboration on ideas. This information is profound for educators as we move more toward a personalized learning model of education in South Carolina for all courses including math, science, English and social studies (core classes). The wishes of businesses as expressed by employers seem to emphasize team over individualized work skills. Personalized learning indicates an individual path for mastery rather than mastery based on collaboration and interaction with others.

Workforce Developer participant one (PW1) works regionally, and stated, "Communication is huge, both verbal and written." Also noted is the need for graduates

to have articulation skills to help with communication. PW1 maintained, workforce ready graduates can “clearly articulate ideas to others and their interpretation of other’s ideas.”

This articulation of ideas leads to accurate communication.

In relation to communication and problem solving through collaboration and teamwork, technical college workforce advisor (PW3) indicated “If you can give me somebody with a good attitude, aptitude, and can work with people, we will take them. We can train them the technical skills.” PB4 (a training and apprenticeship supervisor for a local manufacturing company that provides opportunities in surrounding schools, including the high school featured in this study) stated:

Important that while in school they have team environments. Where they realize that everyone won’t always agree and they have to come to an agreement to find a solution. How do you prioritize? I ask those questions during the interview process for apprentices. Have you worked with a diverse group of people on a project? Your role? Did you have disagreements? The school can create those scenarios. Sometimes they have great answers about those projects they worked on in school. They describe the makeup of the team; different races, different cultures. Talk about difficulty communicating and how they overcome that.

This finding is significant for the featured high school in this study because it is a comprehensive high school where workplace preparation is an essential part of school curriculum.

To support this expectation, students enrolled in the CATE classes are exposed to the dynamics expressed by PB4 as evidenced in the observational data collected for this

study. During each observation, students were grouped by twos or threes in order to meet their project goals. In welding there were multiple groupings. The students who were building a pig trough in welding were in a group of two, and the group building the boat ramp was a group of three. The boat ramp builders explained that one student must hold the heavy raw materials, one checks measurements and leveling and one actually performs the welding task. In the observation, I noticed that each student was able to perform each task, but the projects were team efforts. In the health science and business classes, the student groups consisted of two to three students who changed tasks according to completion. In these observations, students were simply serving as props to help the task master practice his or her content or skill.

Another skill cited by the school level workforce developer as a soft skill needed in the workplace (PW4) was communication. PW4 relayed, “Industry says they can teach students technical skills all day long, but they need them to come in with soft skills.” This finding indicates educators who are focusing on skills that require memorized knowledge or mechanized skills such as using a particular tool could better focus on relationships and interactions that require the teacher to coach and guide personal awareness, and other life skills while using specific content as part of a holistic approach to education.

Another soft skill cited in this study, was having a sense of personal responsibility. The county workforce advisor (PW2) was adamant that, “Our industries say they can teach somebody to do anything as long as they are willing to learn, show up, dress appropriately and pass a drug test.” PW2 also commented, “I don’t care if you are going to Duke or McDonalds, you have to show up on time.” Given this mindset,

students graduate without the most basic workplace skills including personal responsibility.

PC8 is a health science instructor who formerly worked as a nurse. When asked about skills needed in the workplace, PC8 replied, “They need to understand the importance of showing up on time, dressed, being adaptable and prepared. The place of employment will train the student on the business end.” With regards to soft skills, PC5 (a former landscape business owner and current horticulture teacher) exclaimed:

No matter how advanced we get technologically, students will still need to be able to look people in the eye, shake hands correctly, and be able to carry on a professional conversation, and present themselves in a professional manner. They also need to be on time and not be absent unless absolutely necessary.

Additionally, PC5 responded, “I believe we are setting students up for failure by our extremely lenient attendance policy. In the real world, there is no attendance recovery and in most cases it is three strikes and you’re out on attendance.” PC8 stated, “They need to understand the importance of showing up on time, dressed, being adaptable and prepared. The place of employment will train the student on the business end.”

Regarding communication and personal responsibility, PC2, an auto mechanics teacher and former owner of a car repair shop, commented, “Academics are important, but communication, customer service, personal finance, and good employee skills are just as important if not more.” Soft skills are often cited by businesses as the most important skills needed for the workplace.



### *Technical Skills*

Another theme which emerged from the interview data as a skill needed for workplace success was technology and computer skills. Related to technical skills, PW2, a local workforce developer stated:

Any manufacturer will be doing more in five years with less people, but those people will need more technical skills (not just turning a wrench) like computer skills (CNC machine). It is automated, clean, robotics, computer programming type activities. An electric engine has 200 parts. So less parts, less people, but more technical skills. Basically, a computer on wheels.

This finding supports the use of one to one technology in schools. This is the practice of supplying each student with a computer for use at home and at school. The more students rely on technology to complete their work, the more proficient they are when they enter the workforce using computers and other technology.

Contrary to this notion; however, during observations collected for this study, I saw little computer use by students as they completed their tasks. The digital engineering class used a computer to access blueprints for assembling a circuit board, and the business class relied on computers and software to provide a template for visual displays. Other than these examples, students used hard copy checklists or blueprints to guide their projects. Few of the participants in this study cited basic academic knowledge as a skill vital for workplace success.

Another finding contrary to typical job training in educational settings was that participants did not name specific physical skills needed by graduates to be successful in

the workplace. School accountability measures tend to be based on academic scores and physical abilities such as writing. However, the data analysis from this study revealed two common themes related to skills needed by rural students to succeed in the workplace. The skills were soft skills and technological skills both of which are constantly evolving to a degree that they cannot be measured by assessments and checklists, but more accurately through relationships and project-based evaluations.

### *Work Experience*

Although their specific descriptors varied, when asked what critical experiences support high school students to be successful in the workplace, the participants responded overwhelmingly with different variations of work experiences as critical to success in this rural workplace. Business partners advocated work experience as important for preparing graduates for local jobs. PB3 stated,

In my opinion, school teaches kids the basics of a trade, but they don't learn the soft skills in high school. They learn them in OJT (on the job training). And I think some soft skills are taught at home by the parents. And I'll say some are taught in schools. Teachers help.

This finding indirectly supports the use of real-life scenarios and simulated workplace settings as part of the school curriculum to instill the components of ESS in the future workforce.

Observational data collected for this study indicated the development of ESS in students as they participate in groups to complete their assigned tasks. During one observation, I heard a student acknowledge another student's idea. In the building

construction class, I heard a student encourage another student to change a company symbol for fear of offending someone. These observations indicated that ESS may not be planned learning but incidental learning that stems from situational opportunities.

In relation to work experience, PB6 said:

My greatest experience growing up that prepared me for my career was simply working. At first it was working for my grandfather. He would give me a task to do and if an obstacle came about, he would wait for me to figure it out rather than hand me the answer. Later, it was working at the high school tending to the grounds, learning what it takes to be a worker and how to interact with other professionals, were some of the best skills I learned growing up. Now, those skills are used every day and it has helped me get hired at a good company and helped me advocate for a raise for other employees and myself.

PB7 who works at the same company as PB6 echoed, “I participated in Clemson’s co-operative education program, which let me work as an entry-level engineer. This experience provided valuable input in guiding my continuing education choices.” PB7 also advocated exposure to careers that are of interest to students is important for work preparation.

As soon as possible, the students should try to gain exposure to the careers that interest them. Summer jobs, shadow programs, STEM events, anything that lets them see and experience the field of interest to them. Learning early what you do or don’t want to do saves valuable time and money than changing majors in college.

Contrary to the popular belief that schools have mastered the teaching of core skills such as those in courses like English and math, PB5 (a bank manager) believes students should be held accountable for core course requirements that may be essential to workplace success. PB5 expressed:

My parents held me accountable for maintaining good grades in school. I had English teachers that taught me the mechanics of writing and good grammar. English teachers actually gave writing assignments and gave feedback that detailed what was not done properly and how to correct it. I do not feel that students are given enough writing assignments that are scrutinized in depth by their teachers with detailed guidance about what was done improperly and how to do it correctly going forward.

PB5 stressed the importance of feedback in the education system. Feedback was apparent in the CATE observations collected for this study. In each observation, the students looked to be confirmed in their work. In the welding class, I heard the teacher affirm the work, and instruct students to repeat the process to get the same results. As students built circuit boards in Digital Electronics, I saw students approach the teacher throughout the process seeking affirmation before moving to the next phase of the project. Feedback is also common in work settings, and According to PW1,

We need to replicate as much as possible. We tolerate because we need test scores, and need to be able to check boxes, but it's a disservice once they get beyond the school walls. As much as possible, mirror the expectations of work settings in the classroom.

Participants also cited modeling by instructors or workplace mentors is critical for preparing graduates for the workplace. Students should see skills modeled. During each of the observations collected for this study, I saw the instructor modeling at least one process for the students. In the health science class, the instructor modeled prior to the observation, but provided a checklist for the students during the guided practice segment. In the building construction class, the modeling was in the form of blueprints provided to each student with guided instructions from the teacher for reading and comprehending each symbol. In the business class, the teacher presented model layouts for the display pages to be designed by students. In the digital electronic class, the instructor followed the process of building a series one circuit board as he followed the blueprint displayed on the interactive board in the room.

Pertaining to experiences needed by students to be workplace ready by graduation, each group of participants cited different levels of workplace experience as critical to success in the workplace. CATE teachers advocated job shadowing, Workforce Developers suggested job fairs and internships while business partners pushed for apprenticeships.

### *Accountability*

When participants were asked what assistance students need from their community key stakeholders that may be critical to workplace success, a theme of accountability emerged within the data. Most of the participants referred to accountability in terms of expectations in school. PB2 (General Manager of a local service industry)

advocated teacher support, emphasizing that teachers need to push those students with drive in the right direction. PB5 stressed school support and accountability for students,

Educators can help students develop self-confidence and self-reliance by holding them accountable for doing good work and meeting deadlines. They can also help by providing mentoring and direction in educational and career opportunities. I also feel that engaging in classroom presentations helps students step outside of their comfort zones and get experience in speaking in front of others, which is essential in many careers, including banking.

PB5 implies that what schools are already doing may prepare students for success in the workplace. However, having students meet deadlines is something schools have backed away from in recent years.

A common belief is that students must master skills no matter how long it takes; thus, educators have relaxed deadlines in lieu of mastery. This business leader believes students learn to be self-reliant as a result of submitting good work on time which leads to success in the workplace. As this quote suggests, educators must look at holding students accountable as assistance to preparing them for workplace success.

Community collaboration as a form of assistance for workforce readiness takes the form of modeling, interaction, and consistent expectations. PW2 maintained,

They need somebody they are accountable to. Football team has the coach. A lot of those kids probably have soft skills because they have to get there on time.

There is somebody in every kid's life they look up to. For me it was coaches. The community must figure out who those people are.

PW2 indicated mentors who hold students accountable for expectations as a critical factor leading to workforce success. Although PW2 believed sports was an avenue by which students are held accountable, students in rural schools are not always afforded the opportunity to play sports. The only transportation available to students in the high school featured in this study is to and from actual games. Parents are accountable for getting their children from practice each day. With regard to modeling and expectations, PW1 asserted,

Have a handful of things to say these are our principles whether we are on the football field, in the third-grade classroom or in the cafeteria. So, from these kids that are K4 hearing that these are the four or five principles important to us- you know it's reinforced by your kindergarten teacher, it's reinforced by your third-grade teacher, your eighth grade, and so on. And it goes all the way up. It needs to be a district wide synergy because that's the way you combat whatever may or may not be going on at home.

The type of culture described by PW1 is more easily attained in a rural setting because many communities such as the one featured in this study have only one school district. This makes a district vision feasible that includes buy in from all district schools. Having students follow district principles from kindergarten to the workplace will help to ensure their readiness for work. An example of a principled venue in this study is described by PW2 related to his involvement in sports. PW2 cited sports as an avenue of assistance in workforce development:

I played golf, everybody laughs about it. You have to be honest, act a certain way, and learn how to work within the structure. Anything you correlate that fun with that structure helps it sink in. Anything you like doing with structure teaches you.

PW2 relayed information that may make school leaders re-think equity and inclusion.

Golf tends to be an exclusive sport in rural areas. Students have to travel to a nearby golf course to practice and they are often required to purchase their own golf clubs in order to participate.

In this quote, PW2 mentions honesty, acting a certain way and working within structure. This describes an ideal workplace setting as well. Nevertheless, golf is often a sport in which many average rural students are not privileged to participate due to travel and expenses. Often, educators teach honesty through testing. Students are taught not to look on their neighbor's papers, and not to plagiarize in their writing from a very early age. Nevertheless, PW2 insinuates honesty as a characteristic that may be instilled in students in another way through physical and social exertion as opposed to mental exhaustion and individualism. Perhaps school leaders should focus more on including all rural students in sports by providing transportation to and from practice even when the practice field is a local golf course.

### *Place Based Success*

Participants were asked to describe what critical factors exist for local employees to remain content in their work settings. In the most simplistic of descriptions, all participants cited familiarity and recognition as factors that sustain the workforce in rural



areas. PB1 stated the following in relation to environment, “I think in a rural area it’s like a tight knit family. The benefits, the closeness gives them contentment in their jobs.” PB2 related contentment to what graduates grew up doing and knowing,

If all their life they like to be around a water plant and do that sort of stuff. If they get that sort of job, they’ll do that type of work. I think it is different for rural kids. They want to be close to family. If they were offered a similar job in Greenville, they couldn’t care less about going to Greenville.

Relatedly, as part of my data collection for this research, I participated in a Lunch and Learn at Piedmont Technical College in Greenwood, South Carolina on January 9, 2020. It was set up by a regional workforce developer for the purpose of presenting a model called Teacher Link designed by ZF Transmissions for recruiting and training teachers to work at ZF in various positions during breaks from school. This presentation was made to other business managers as a first step to creating similar models in other businesses throughout counties in South Carolina.

Teacher Link is a workforce development tool. This recruitment idea could also be used in schools through business involvement in core classes. Through this program, ZF cultivates partnerships between schools and industry to educate the future workforce about careers in manufacturing. It is effective in aiding workforce development because the plant managers introduce teachers to the industry and these teachers are able to transfer experiences at ZF to the classroom and relate the curriculum to “real life” situations. Teachers then convey to students what to expect in advanced manufacturing

careers, what skills are needed to succeed, opportunities for advancement and the possibility of a bright future.

The Teacher Link concept holds true with core curriculum co-teaching. English, math, science and social studies teachers paired with local business employees who are experts in the field create a partnership through which teachers can make instruction more relevant to rural students and businesses can begin recruiting and developing their future workforce earlier than graduation. This helps market to high school students who may consider a career in local businesses. The ZF presenter stated, “It helps earn trust. Teachers who participate in Teacher Link program become our advocates and ambassadors in the schools and in the community.” Relatedly, PW3 declared,

Rural schools have advantages over city. More sense of community. Goes back to parents. High school plays a role in that but parents, grandparents, and family play a role in that too. Typically, the pace of life is more relaxed. I think the high school is building that sense of community and challenging going beyond book knowledge to problem solving and thinking.

PW3 indicated the advantage of rural schools is the sense of community which is rooted in family. If rural economic plans include a sustainable workforce, key stakeholders must capitalize on this sense of community and family ties. This may mean building facilities such as parks and recreation areas that appeal to young families as well senior facilities for aging parents.

The idea of relating to a sense of pride and family, rang true at a community meeting in which I participated during the data collection for this study. It was the

Laurens County Economic Development Strategic Plan Community Leaders Meeting.

The purpose of this meeting was to work on the county's vision and goals for the next five years. The leaders of this meeting relayed the modern definition of economic development is to increase the prosperity of a community so that all people and industry have an opportunity to thrive. Strategists reported,

Laurens is doing fine at the present. Jobs and wages have grown and unemployment is at a decrease. However, many people are leaving the county to go to work 70%. 30% of our county could work, but are not working. 20% of Laurens County residents live in poverty; therefore, community leaders must focus on building talent and prosperity, raise awareness for career opportunities, make investments in infrastructure and quality of life, cultivate collaboration starting with leadership, and inspire a greater sense of community pride.

The workshop goals for this meeting were to get insights into actions to achieve goals, identify areas of strength and find opportunities for growth. As the revitalization of rural areas becomes a top priority for economic growth in America, more areas may have these same goals for revitalization.

PW2 maintained employers of choice have an advantage in keeping employees from leaving,

At 4% we're at full employment. So, we're below 0 for all intents and purposes. Ten years ago, during a recession they (industries) could do what they wanted to because plenty of people looking for jobs. Now they've had to change their mind. We've had a hard time getting them to change their mindset. Paycheck doesn't

drive the decision anymore. Being an employer of choice means good work environment, benefits, no nose to the ground for 12 hour shifts, shift schedule, family environment.

These sentiments from PW2 might prompt school leaders to re-think school schedules. If, as PW2 states, paycheck does not drive contentment, but rather ease of scheduling creates contentment then school leaders must look at aligning their schedules to support or mimic local business schedules.

#### *Evidence of Social Capital*

As seen in Appendix G, the most commonly cited factor that contributes to success in the workplace is workplace experience. Key stakeholders reported that experience is critical for success in the workplace. Business stakeholders reported internships as important for developing rural workforces along with job shadowing and mentoring. Workforce developers reported, entry level manufacturing skills, and work-based learning opportunities are crucial for rural high school students to succeed in their local workplaces. Relatedly, CATE instructors expressed the need for a career center to mimic the workplace and allow more business offerings as beneficial for exposing students to factors of workplace success. Regardless of the different descriptors for workplace experience, the data is clear that workplace experience is the most critical factor that contributes to workplace success in the rural school district focused in this study.

Another common factor reported by key stakeholders was modeling. These participants believed students must be shown how to be successful. They expressed

modeling in the forms of family influences, mentors, and feedback. This feedback may come from public speaking, mock interviews and applications. Another factor stated by many of the stakeholders was the development of soft skills such as communication and team work. Several stakeholders believed these skills are acquired through sports and community support such as mentorships.

To serve as a summary for this research, Table 6 provides a visual of the most critical factors contributing to success in the workplace categorized by forms of social capital. Table 6 indicates skills, experiences, assistance and contentment in the workplace which lead to a successful workforce is fostered by three types of social capital (Coleman, 1988).

According to key community stakeholders in the rural school district researched in this study, workplace skills learned and practiced in workplace settings are critical for workplace success. Students may get experience through mock application processes, job shadowing, internships and apprenticeships. Additionally, students may be exposed in core classes to business math and English via co-teaching including a certified teacher and business partner. Students may obtain more skills by enrolling in more technical and business classes.

Additionally, norms may be absorbed through accountability. This refers to the simple act of enforcing policies and procedures and holding students accountable to meet expectations. To sustain a community driven workforce, key community stakeholders must build on place and community. By appealing to pride in place, the future workforces

in rural areas are more likely to thrive and expand to sustain the local community, drive the national economy, and enhance the global economy.

Table 6

*Forms of Social Capital*

<b>Reciprocal Relationships</b>	<b>Information Systems</b>	<b>Norms and Effective Sanctions</b>
Internships	Job shadowing	Mentoring
Work based learning	Manufacturing skills training	Modeling
Feedback	Career Center	Public Speaking
	Mock interviews	Communication
	Applications	Teamwork

*Note.* Critical Factors classified by forms of Social Capital (Coleman, 1988).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude this chapter on findings, I report that the observational data was in direct correlation with the requests of businesses for the most prevalent skills needed in the workplace. Since work experience was the number one reported career ready factor across this data, the observational data report spoke to the fact that students are receiving work experience within the school setting in CATE classes.

Additionally, these students are practicing communication, teamwork and a basic knowledge of physical skills such as measuring, leveling, welding, blueprint reading, and peer feedback. Furthermore, modeling is taking place in these workplace training classes. In each observation, the instructor modeled the skill and guided the practice using

checklists or peer feedback to formatively assess the projects or skills. The community meeting data served as a map to provide direction for future instruction to meet the demands of an ever-changing workplace.

In chapter five, I summarized and discussed these findings in light of how this information has the possibility to inform future collaboration among key stakeholders in rural communities.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

#### **Introduction**

In this section, I expanded on the findings, and provided an understanding of the influence these factors may have on community partnerships as well as local job training programs in rural areas. Additionally, I synthesized the findings and scope of this research to capture the perceptions of key community stakeholders related to the critical factors that contribute to success in the workplace. By expanding and synthesizing the findings from this study, I added to existing research on rural workforce development to include an emphasis on early training with local business mentors and other key community stakeholders.

#### **Summary of the Study**

In this study, Perceived Preparation in Prospective Career Ready Students Attending a Rural High School in South Carolina, the purpose was to investigate the perceptions of key community stakeholders, including local workforce developers, business managers, and career and technology instructors of the resources and opportunities available to rural students that contribute to their ESS to ensure workplace readiness. The problem addressed by this research was, that to revitalize and retain the brightest high school graduates, rural leaders must understand how key community stakeholders perceive opportunities and experiences in rural communities and how they connect them to workforce development in these areas (Schafft, 2016). To frame this study, I applied Coleman's (1988) theory that reciprocal relationships, information



systems, and social norms and expectations are forms of social capital that are used in rural communities to prepare the local workforce for success. The research question for this study was: What are the perceptions of key community stakeholders of the critical factors that contribute to success in the workplace?

To answer the research question, I relied on a qualitative descriptive design which allowed me the freedom to report the findings in a logical sequence without the confinement of a more structured design (Sandelowski, 2000). Within this design, I coded interview and observational data using words and phrases to capture the essence of the participant's words and the context of events. After coding the data, I searched for common factors across the data from all participants and observations. From these analyses, I reported the findings under four separate headings in chapter four to detail the critical factors for workplace development in rural areas according to key community stakeholder's perceptions. In the final report of the findings, I categorized the factors within the theoretical framework of the study.

From the findings, I created a picture of performance at the focus high school by reporting WIN scores from the 2017-2018 administration categorized by achievement levels. To report findings from interview, observational, and community event data, I used the following themes: (1) skills needed for workplace success in rural areas, (2) experiences believed to help students learn essential soft skills for success in the workplace, (3) assistance needed by students from educational leaders and community partners to become workforce ready, and (4) critical factors needed to create contentment in local, rural workplaces. Interview and observational analyses were reported in separate

sections to allow for matching the perceptions of stakeholders to actual performance in the classroom.

The study included 274 student scores to create a picture of performance in a one high school rural school district in South Carolina, 19 interviews from key community stakeholders in business, workforce development and CATE instructors, five CATE observations, and four community meeting observations. To select these participants, I used snowball sampling. Observations and community meeting data were gathered as a matter of convenience. This study included one research question: What are the perceptions of key community stakeholders of the critical factors that contribute to success in the workplace? To answer this question, data were obtained from community stakeholder's interviews and classroom observations. The data were coded, conceptually categorized, and cataloged within the theoretical framework of social capital (Coleman, 1988).

The most common factor cited by participants that contributes to success in the workplace is work experience. Business stakeholders advocated internships and apprenticeships. Workforce developers suggested job fairs, job shadowing, business show cases and work-based learning as avenues whereby students gain work experience. Finally, CATE instructors echoed many of the same experiences as business managers and workforce developers, but added that Career Centers are important for the simulation of workplace experiences. Many other factors such as accountability to expectations and soft skills were reported throughout the data as well. The observational data yielded evidence of workplace procedures in action. In each observational setting, students were

working as teams, and using knowledge and skills to master projects similar to workplace settings.

### **Discussion of Findings**

There were four major variables that answered the research question in this study. These variables included skills, experiences, assistance and contentment. This research answered the question: what are the perceptions of community stakeholders of the critical factors that contribute to success in the workplace? To answer the research question, stakeholders elaborated on the skills needed by graduates in the local workplace, experiences needed by graduates to obtain the needed skills, assistance needed from the community to obtain the skills and experiences, and what creates contentment in the local workplace that convinces graduates to remain in rural areas to work. In the sections below, I discussed the findings of this research compared to the literature and theoretical framework cited in chapter two of this study.

Although the literature search yielded no results related to factors that contribute to workforce readiness in rural areas, I examined literature related to rural areas categorized by economics, politics, educational leadership, educational barriers, educational advantages, and a sense of place. This research is framed under the theory of social capital (Coleman, 1988).

#### *Skills and Experiences*

In relation to rural economics, Johnson and Howley (2015) reported that the improvement of society by rural graduates will require real life connections and a knowledge of community members. In this research, it was evident that key stakeholders

value true work experiences for the graduates of Laurens High School. Work experience was sprinkled throughout the data from participants. Furthermore, these real-life work settings were apparent in the classroom observations from wiring circuit boards to welding boat ramps. The hands-on experiences were apparent in this research setting.

Additionally, Schafft (2016) suggested an inclusion of education leaders in rural economic development plans. This research included data from a community meeting where educators, including me, were part of building a five-year strategic plan for economic growth and development in Laurens County. Relatedly, a Welder's Advisory Meeting which I attended for data collection revealed plans for economic growth within the community as well as the need for trained welders to fill positions in surrounding businesses. Wilcox, Angelis, Baker and Lawson (2014), indicated that rural economies may decline due to the loss of steady paying jobs in rural areas; thus, there must be motivation to remain at home.

Data from this study indicated feeling a part of something, connecting to coworkers and being appreciated are important factors in creating workplace contentment. To revitalize rural economics, Schafft (2016) suggested rural residents re-think the purpose of education. That research suggested including local knowledge rather than quick political changes (Schafft, 2016). Local knowledge might include the history of the community through economic and social lenses. Participants in this study echoed the idea of local knowledge when they cited internships, apprenticeships and other workplace experiences as the most important factors that contribute to success in the workplace.

### *Assistance*

In regard to students showing commitment and teachers identifying drive in students for work, suffice to say that as an educator, I do not have a measuring stick for commitment and drive nor are these determinations I am required to report for accountability. Therefore, these crucial yet intangible characteristics may go unnoticed in the quiet, middle level achiever who may be what local businesses are looking for to foster growth in their companies.

As a leader in education, I need a model from local businesses to determine the level of drive and determination needed from students. This model might include what drive and determination looks like on a student's transcript or within a student portfolio. Does this drive and determination include a CATE Completer certification, an attendance record, and a tardy record (for examples)? Rather than inspecting what local businesses need for economic success, as a principal, I inspect student performance on academic exams that are used for school and teacher evaluation accountability; therefore, educators must be assisted by businesses to measure these qualities in students.

To get ready for internships, business managers advocated experiences where students work in teams. Conversely, we currently tend to stress written work and testing in schools because these are easily measured in educational settings, but according to these data, students must be able to speak and present information in order to be ready for the workplace. These findings indicate the need for school curriculum to include opportunities for students to present ideas to community organizations or panels of business leaders. Perhaps the Advisory meetings which are part of CATE teachers'

employment expectations might include a student presentation component where students (in groups) present their projects from design to finished product to these experts in the field.

Advisory meetings are held quarterly by CATE instructors and include local business managers in the pertinent field who offer advice for developing programs to meet the needs of local businesses. A student presentation component may easily be part of the preparation for Advisory meetings, and could be attended by business owners, school staff and workforce developers as part of a cyclical plan of improvement.

While these skills are commonly cited by business managers as vital for success, educators may fail in their endeavors to prepare students to be on time, and dress appropriately. In my experience, parents and community members tend to balk at implemented consequences for violating dress code, identification badge violations and tardy referrals. These violations often have progressive consequences which allow students many chances before effective consequences are implemented.

Our current system of education may be failing our business stakeholders by not emphasizing consequences for violating such policies as dress code, and attendance. Even when stressed by school leaders as career ready preparation, teachers tend to concentrate on curriculum and instruction rather than accountability because school staff are evaluated on the academic achievement of students rather than the post-secondary success of high school graduates. This research revealed the need for students to be held accountable for workplace expectations. Just as curriculum and instruction are a vital part of the school day, so should expectations such as timeliness, and appropriate dress.

### *Contentment*

Since research has suggested education is the driver of economic revitalization in rural areas through workforce development, school staff may help revitalize rural economies by spending more time on analyzing social maturity and less on using test scores to determine students' next steps. In our current world of available knowledge, school leaders must become life coaches for students who plan to enter the workforce right out of high school.

Educators spend inordinate amounts of time on academic knowledge such as math, English, science and social studies. The findings from this research supports the notion that education must change to meet social demands as stated in the introduction of this study. Students can locate information that was once believed to be knowledge by simply pressing a button on a phone or computer; thus, the need for teacher imparted knowledge has given way to teacher guidance and coaching for students that helps them prepare for success in life.

As educators in rural areas seek to prepare the largest number of students with the most skills possible to be successful in the workplace, the data from this rural community is significant for educational leaders because it stresses soft skills and technical skills over academic and physical skills as needed by all students entering the workplace after graduation.

These findings support Coleman's 1988 theory of social capital as a means by which we can prepare rural students for the workforce upon graduation. Educators can identify members of the community who are willing to mentor or train students in the

way PB6 was trained by his grandfather or his summer job on the school's campus. These experiences give students opportunities to interact with others and perform tasks in real life work settings to absorb valuable knowledge, physical skills and ESS to be more prepared to navigate the workplace upon graduation from high school. Furthermore, that students are able to complete internships with companies like the one experienced by PB7 not only works as a recruiting tool for the local businesses, but as a personal tool for students to determine their desired life path. PB7 stressed early opportunities for students which educators may take into account for middle school students.

In section two of the literature review, I discussed rural politics. The indication in literature is that policy does not support rural businesses or workforce development (Henderson, 2002; Schafft, 2010, 2016). In fact, Howley and Howley (2010) advocated policy actually undermines the growth of rural areas. Harmon and Schafft (2009) supported preparing rural students to live local lives that benefit a global society.

In my research, evidence that working in internships and apprenticeship programs prepare students for working in manufacturing businesses at home that may serve many economic sectors nationally and globally was apparent in the interview data and classroom observations. In order for community leaders to combat the detriment of policies on rural areas, it is important for key community leaders to work in tandem. Often, educational leadership is left out of economic planning. In the next section, I discussed the findings in this research related to rural educational leadership.

Schafft (2016) provided a theory that connecting schooling to local for economic purposes can help create a competitive workforce that aids local businesses. To move this



theory to action, the results of the research in this study indicate school leadership that can connect to the community and create partnerships between community leaders and school leaders. The most cited critical factor in this research for workplace success is workplace experience. Therefore, it suffices to say strong leadership from the school level is needed to create partnerships and develop trust with businesses that might afford students an opportunity to gain knowledge and skills in these local workplaces. These partnerships must also exist in advisory roles. As analyzed from the Welding Advisory Meeting, the experts in the welding field examine the classroom to offer advice on projects and equipment that might simulate the local welding requirements. To create these partnerships, the local school leaders must operate within the vision of the community. Regardless of good intentions, there are barriers to rural education that must be addressed.

In regard to rural barriers in education, the research in this study indicated soft skills are important in the workplace. These soft skills are often learned in the home. Morton et al. (2018) maintained isolation, family status, parental education as well as social expectations may account for the lack of academic preparedness in rural students. Although many of the participants in this study cited these same factors as experiences or assistance needed to develop work skills, there was also an indication that teachers can model these behaviors and facilitate more opportunities for students to work in teams and collaborate to build these soft skills.

Furthermore, that expectations may be set upon entry into school and maintained throughout the school years to instill workplace-valued behaviors in graduates. Contrary

to barriers for rural students, Manzo and Perkins (2006) maintained advantages exist for rural students in a sense of place.

Related to advantages for rural students, the participants in this study cited the work environment, co-worker respect and being recognized for accomplishments as critical factors for creating contentment in the workplace. Howley and Howley (2010) advocated for these same factors when they reported that people in communities stick together no matter their differences, and they somehow find the ability to make a living despite their circumstances.

Bauch (2001) reported that rural students succeed in school because of social capital in these communities which offers assistance to students. In this study, key stakeholders reported assistance in the forms of mentors and role models who hold students accountable for work. Also, that assistance be provided in the forms of workplace experiences from the business community.

A goal of this study was to identify resources within rural communities that can be used to revitalize these dying areas, and create a viable local workforce connected global economics. To meet this goal, workforce preparation is mostly a result of action created by social capital. This finding aligns with the previous scholarship cited above.

### **Social Capital In A Rural Community**

In this section, I discussed the findings from this study related to social capital. Coleman (1988) interceded that interpersonal relationships and social institutions are examples of social capital that exists in communities. The focus in this study was on three

particular forms of social capital based on relationships that produce action. These forms of social capital were reciprocal relationships, information systems and expectations.

In this research, the most critical factor in workplace preparation was workplace experience. For students to gain workplace experience, there must be a reciprocal connection between local businesses and high schools. For example, soft skills such as attendance and teamwork are taught in the local high schools, but businesses must reciprocate by allowing interns, apprentices and job shadows to be part of their businesses. Research indicated that communities, individuals and schools play the most prominent roles in shaping the aspirations of youth after high school.

Furthermore, advisory meetings, such as the one cited in my findings, are important channels of information for schools. In these meetings, the business community provides feedback to the school instructors to sustain and improve their programs; thus serving as information systems for success. Morton et al. (2018) reported that information systems are created when information is disseminated by a group or individual and received by another group or individual. Advisory councils in rural school settings serve this purpose in CATE programs.

Finally, norms and expectations are a form of social capital that is used to prepare the local workforce. In this research, many of the participants advocated soft skills such as time management, positive attitudes, and customer service as critical skills for workplace success. Butera and Costello (2010) warned that rural schools are very different and that student achievement may be linked to knowing the local norms which in turn improves academic performance.

In this study, participants mentioned expectations as a way to prepare students for the local workplace. One participant suggested that norms and expectations should be district wide and start in kindergarten so students are held to the same accountability system throughout school. By maintaining a system of expectations, district staff will model workplace expectations such as wearing identification badges, being on time, and dressing appropriately. Additionally, staff will hold students to the same standards with sanctions in place to ensure accountability to mimic workplace expectations.

To conclude the discussion on the findings section of chapter five, it is important to note that although rural literature does not exist on the perceptions of key stakeholders of critical factors in workplace development in rural areas, there is relevant scholarship. The existing literature on rural areas suggested the need for a restructuring of education in these areas to revitalize the economies and create communities that preserve the local flair yet connect to other economic sectors as well.

My research revealed a sense of urgency to connect education to local businesses by implementing and maintaining expectations for students throughout the school district, by relying on business managers and workforce developers to provide feedback in the form of information systems. Feedback may include advisory groups that evaluate student projects and advise on equipment purchases. These expectations can then guide the progress of creating a career ready education system to help retain the brightest student in rural areas. Finally, this study indicated a need for reciprocal relationships between school and business to provide student with valuable work experience prior to entering the workplace.

## **Implications for Practice**

Preparing rural high school graduates for the local workforce requires assistance from the community stakeholders to teach skills and provide experiences that lead to contentment in the workplace. In chapter one, I noted implications for this study related to educational leadership, future research and policy. In this section, I presented implications for rural businesses, workforce developers and educators. The findings of this research have far-reaching implications for persons or groups interested in rebuilding viable workforces in rural areas.

For business leaders, this study offers insight into their roles as drivers of workforce development. It provides evidence that businesses must be the information systems through which workforce developers and education leaders provide training opportunities for high school graduates who plan to stay local. Through information to workforce developers and school leaders, these business partners communicate the skills needed for success in local workplaces. This study revealed the perceptions of key stakeholders which were triangulated to determine which skills listed in this study should be the focus of workforce readiness. This research also gives business managers an idea of what is actually happening in work-based classrooms, and what CATE instructors believed are the skills needed to provide a vital workforce for local jobs.

This study will also be useful to workforce developers as they connect the businesses and schools to form reciprocal relationships that might foster a climate that provides work experiences to those local graduates who are attached to place and want to work local. Through community meetings and collaboration, these workforce connectors

can use the findings from this study to build reciprocal relationships between businesses and schools. These relationships will provide work experiences such as those cited in this study for building partnerships that lead to successful local workforces that compete globally.

Another important finding from this study relates to educators. The most cited skills, assistance and experiences in this study by all key community stakeholders is work experience. One way we can replicate work expectations is to start with authentic business requirements. Students can choose from local business applications to practice completing written applications. The school and business staff could choose a few of the best applications to award student tours in their chosen facilities. The next step could be an authentic interview with the business of choice for a job shadowing opportunity then students could obtain work references for an internship from which they might be chosen for an apprenticeship which may lead to full-time employment. While mock interviews are common in schools, they are generic and students may not relate. Just like class work must have real life meaning for students, so should job simulation.

All key stakeholders believed providing students with workplace experience is the key to building sustainable workforces in rural areas. From this finding, educators and school leaders can provide instruction and curriculum in non-traditional ways to enhance the career readiness of students. For example, the engineers from a local manufacturing company may provide math instruction for school to work students. More models such as the ZF Manufacturing Teacher Link model might be forged between schools and businesses so instructors experience what they are expected to teach.

While each of the aforementioned opportunities currently exist in schools, and are organized by Career Development Facilitators (CDFs), perhaps rural school districts might change the role of CDFs from school-based coordinators to district counselors who are assigned students with whom they follow from grade five through graduation to serve as workforce developers and life coaches. These district counselors focus on students rather than programs and scaffold job experiences so meaningful work experience takes place starting with career fairs moving to job shadowing then internships and apprenticeships that are all connected and build on the other as well as fulfill the aspirations of individual students.

It is important for schools in rural areas to expose students to local business communities to create a sense of belonging for these students. The more students are associated with the community, the more they become attached and rooted in their home. These experiences may keep the brightest rural students at home to become entrepreneurs or business partners. High school leaders must partner with businesses not only through internships, but through instruction. For example, local business engineers could co-teach with certified math teachers within the school schedule to help train local students for their businesses. Consequently, allowing these co-teachers to recruit future employees from core classes as well as from CATE classes.

Furthermore, schools could run like a local superstore which is open 24 hours a day, and people shop when they are able to shop. More blended instruction using teacher video presentations and competency-based software programs might take the place of the

core curriculum requirements. School staff could serve as facilitators like librarians who guide students to the books and research they need.

Workplace experience begins with accountability. Many of the participants in this study cited participating in sports as a way to hold students accountable. Nevertheless, in rural areas, students often live many miles away from their schools which hinders their ability to obtain reliable transportation to and from practice each day. With the suggestion that sports teaches students accountability which may transfer into a work setting, it suffices to note that grants and general funds may be set aside for transportation to and from practices just as transportation is provided for academic tutoring or enhancement after school.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The goal of this study was to investigate the perceptions of key community stakeholders related to the workplace readiness of rural high school graduates. Data was collected from three sectors of community stakeholders, and triangulated with data from observations and community meetings. The first limitation was that most manufacturers will not allow students to enter their facilities until they are 18 years of age, thus placing students in work-place settings is difficult during high school. Another limitation to this study is that small, privately-owned business managers were not interviewed.

Nevertheless, there was representation from the major employees within the rural area focused in the study. By studying only the commercial faction of job placement, as a researcher, I cannot explain the perceptions of the unique one-of-a-kind businesses that



exist in rural areas; thus future research may include the outlier businesses to explain a more recognizable place connection for rural graduates.

Another avenue for future research is to include student perspectives in the study, particularly students who experience the workplace through apprenticeships and internships or students who did not score in the career ready range. Maybe action-based research, including a preparation class for internships with data collection throughout the process including classroom observations, workplace observations, and interview data from students, would be warranted. Future research into the first year of work for local high school graduates may complete the action-based study to glean information from experiences rather than mere perceptions. A final recommendation for future research is to replicate this study in other rural areas within the region and beyond.

### **Conclusions**

To provide context and set the stage for this study, I started this work by introducing readers to my own perception of the focus school as it currently exists. As a key community stakeholder who has lived in the Laurens area my entire life and worked in the school district for 32 years, I am able to observe the ritual of freshman induction each year at Laurens High School. From experience, I realize students at Laurens High School never seem to lose their sense of place, and never become bonded into a group to represent the only high school in the district- a high school into which the diverse communities within the district were forced in 1972.

It has been 47 years since Laurens District 55 consolidated four distinct cultures into one school, but the student connections most often remain in the small areas from

which the students come. As I continue to work at Laurens High School, I realize with each new school year, students enter the ninth grade with four distinct identities related to their middle schools and communities. As educators, we can use the pride students have in their communities to help them set goals to improve these areas by attaining education or training to foster community growth.

Schmitt-Wilson, Downey and Beck (2018) cited research on educational attainment for rural students which included overlooked areas such as the social supports, rural identities, unique opportunities, and commitment to place and rural lifestyles. Furthermore, these authors reported rural students come from close-knit communities and social networks that provide the social capital to help them attain their post-secondary goals. These findings may likely have both case specific findings and implications for other rural high schools around South Carolina because each rural community has its own unique forms of social capital including reciprocal relationships, information channels as well as social norms and expectations (Bauch, 2001; Coleman, 1988).

An underlying argument in this research was that educators bestow career ready credentials on non-workplace ready graduates. Of the 125 students who scored 4 (silver), 17 of them failed the soft skills portion of the assessment. These 17 students may support the argument that the measures used to determine career readiness may send a false positive to businesses by indicating graduates are career ready when they may not be workplace ready or possess the vital skills to be successful working with others and responding to supervision.

As the principal drivers for workforce development in rural areas, business managers serve as information systems according to the theory of social capital (Coleman, 1988). In this capacity, the business managers must inform the workforce developers of their needs as well as partner with the local schools to provide information within the training ground for potential employees. Apprenticeship programs and dual enrollment provide opportunity for reciprocal relationships to form which is another component of the theory. An example of this is when businesses provide equipment, training and work opportunities for students with the expectation that these employees will have the academic, physical and soft skills to be productive and successful in the workplace. When businesses are connected to high school instructors through programs designed by workforce developers, students are accustomed to the norms and sanctions expected in the workplace such as being on time, wearing identification badges and other personal responsibilities. Furthermore, the tighter school and business partnerships become, the earlier educators will need to recognize the talents and interests of students earlier than grade 8 Individualized Graduation Plans (IGPs).

Workforce developers named work-based experiences as critical for preparing a local rural workforce. These developers must be the catalyst for connecting the expertise of business to the needs of rural schools. This reciprocal relationship may not be as simple as putting students into the workplace, but may be as complicated as getting teaching credentials for seasoned employees from local companies to become educator for part of the school day. Particularly in math, science and English where work-based lessons are the focus of the curriculum. This concept could be specific to trade such as

math taught in the welding class or English taught in business classes. Furthermore, that teachers learn the art of business. Partnerships must exist with local businesses that give instructors hands on experiences in the crafts they teach. More business must recruit and train teachers who in turn recruit and train students in classroom settings.

Laurens District 55 High School (LDHS) is a place I love; a place I have loved since 1972 when I was in second grade at Hickory Tavern School. I remember my dad referring to the structure as a honeycomb, and I could hardly wait to walk those halls. I graduated from LDHS in 1982 with my professional goal to return in four years to teach United States History. It took a little longer than four years for various reasons. For example, I struggled with taking the National Teachers Exam in social studies as a history major. Nevertheless, my longest wait was for an opening. You see, LDHS was a place everyone wanted to work in 1986. This was because of the culture.

LDHS was a community of educators and learners. It was a place where teachers of like subjects worked in sections of the honeycomb and they planned together, shared resources and shared the common bond of content expertise. Through togetherness, we built trust, had conflict, achieved buy-in, held each other accountable and created a finished product capable of anything. LDHS is a place where stakeholders can thrive and grow when teams are the vehicle by which success is moved.

When I first began teaching at LDHS, teachers sat in Commons at the end of each grading period and passed report cards around for each teacher to add comments and post grades. It was amazing comradery. Healthy discussions about students took place and grade level teams were naturally established. With the onset of computer-based grade

reporting, this type of relational knowledge of students is no longer a natural phenomenon. It is important for staff to connect the performance and knowledge of students to build a culture that invites everyone into the organization.

Additionally, students at LDHS have lost choice. In the 1980s, students chose a track to enter. The choices from highest to lowest were honors, Academic, Practical and technical preparation. The honors and academic tracks were for college bound students. The practical track for students who planned to attend two-year institutions and the technical preparation was for those who planned to join the workforce right out of high school. I will admit here that the grown folks did not focus on the best curriculums or instructional methods to match each level of readiness.

Consequently, some students became frustrated in the core classes even though they thrived in the Career and Technology classes. Should choice return as an option for students, it is my hope that curriculums will partner to deliver core content in tandem with real-life experience. An example is when an English class requires students to read and analyze literature. Culturally, students should know about *Romeo and Juliet*, but the student who is preparing for work after high school does not need to know about writing style and such, but more about relationships and how to face tremendous conflict just as the main characters of the story were forced to do.

As I conclude this study, I return for a moment to my own perceptions of career readiness and provide one final thought. Perhaps the best experience we could provide for preparing students for any workplace, and life in general is to let them fail and learn from their mistakes.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Interview Protocols

Hello, I am a doctoral student from Clemson University. My name is Tina Faulkner and I am researching the perspectives of career ready students in a rural high school. Thank you very much for expressing interest in participating in this study. The title of my study is, “Perceived Preparation in Prospective Career Ready Students Attending a Rural High School in South Carolina.” I have invited you to participate in this study to ask your thoughts about experiences and resources in rural workforce development. The interview will last approximately 90 minutes, and will be recorded to ensure we accurately capture the conversation.

It is important that you feel comfortable sharing your experiences; I will not include any information in my study that can be used to identify you. I have provided an informed consent document that gives you more details on your involvement and how we will use and protect your information.

Thank you very much.

#### Interview Protocol

1. What high school did you attend?
2. What was your favorite thing about high school?
3. Tell me about your community or neighborhood.
4. What do you do at your job?
5. If you could do any job today what would it be and why?

6. What are some experiences that help students learn Essential Soft Skills to prepare for the workplace?
7. What assistance do students need from educational leaders and community partners to become career ready before entering the workforce?
8. In five years, what do you think high school graduates will need to be successful in jobs or careers?
9. What is the most important skill today needed by high school graduates, and why?
10. Do you think most high school graduates today possess the skills you just mentioned, and why or why not?
11. Who or what do you believe would help students obtain these important skills prior to graduating from high school?
12. Do you think most rural high school graduates stay local or leave their communities to obtain jobs?
13. From your perspective, what kinds of business settings do most high school graduates today prefer?
14. What creates contentment in the workplace?
15. Do you generally see adequate preparation in rural high school graduates prior to job placement?
16. How do you think most people find out about available jobs?
17. What might or should be available to students in high school to help them determine what they want to do after high school?

18. What were some experiences or opportunities you had growing up that prepared you for your career?
19. What else do you think I should know about career preparation in rural high schools?
20. Do you have any questions for me?



## Appendix B

### Definition of Terms

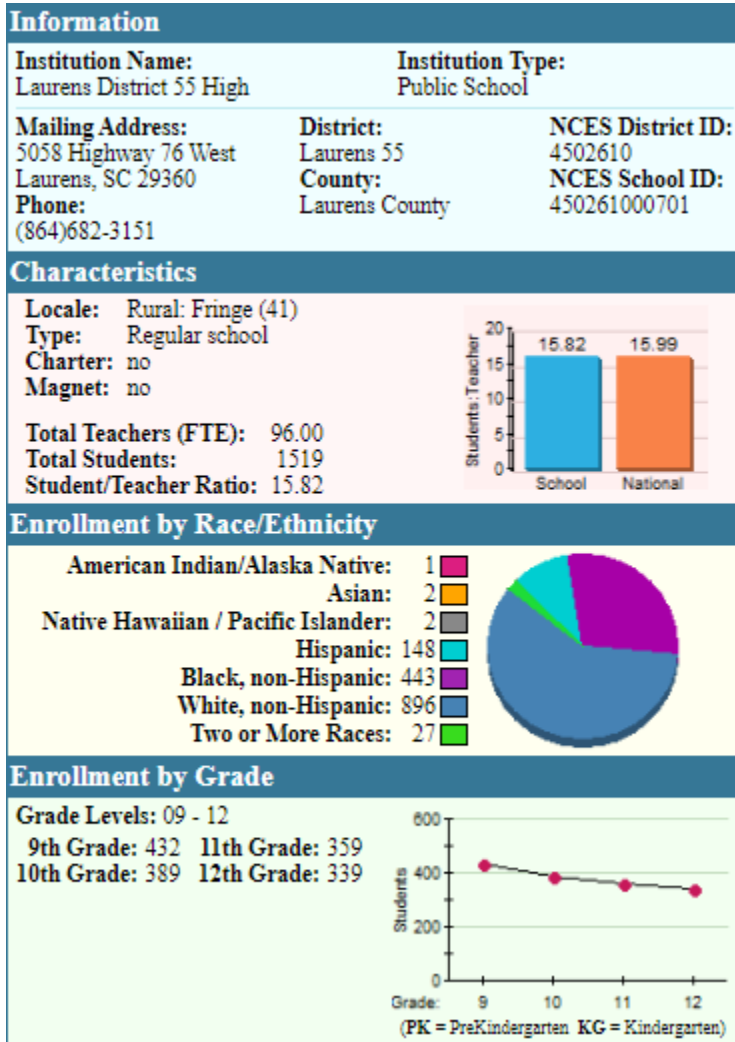
- *South Carolina Education Oversight Committee*: an independent, nonpartisan group made up of 18 educators, business people, and elected officials who have been appointed by the legislature and governor to enact the South Carolina Education Accountability Act of 1998.
- *College and Career Ready*: South Carolina has not adopted or made available a definition of college and career readiness.
- *The Profile of the South Carolina Graduate*: adopted and approved by the South Carolina Association of School Administrators (SCASA), the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce, the South Carolina Council on Competitiveness, the Education Oversight Committee (EOC), the State Board of Education (SBE), and the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) in an effort to identify the knowledge, skills, and characteristics a high school graduate should possess in order to be prepared for success as they enter college or pursue a career. The profile is intended to guide all that is done in support of college- and career-readiness.
- *South Carolina Manufacturing Certification Program*: an industry-recognized credential is awarded upon successfully completing the Safety, Quality Practices and Measurement, Manufacturing Processes and Production, and Maintenance Awareness assessments. In addition, hands-on simulation training, Snap-on Meter Certification, Snap-on Hand Tool Certification, Snap-on Electrical Safety

Certification and a Six Sigma Yellow Belt Certification to reinforce the manufacturing skills taught in the classroom.

- *Dual enrollment*: refers to students being enrolled—concurrently—in two distinct academic programs or educational institutions. The term is most prevalently used in reference to high school students taking college courses while they are still enrolled in a secondary school.
- *Essential Soft Skills (ESS)*: These are skills believed by employers to be essential for success. They include leadership, time management, teamwork, communication, problem solving and critical thinking.
- *Individualized Graduation Plans (IGPs)*: These are individualized student plans which are created in grade eight for the purpose of mapping out their high school schedules to meet the career goals of students. The plans are reviewed every year, and modified based on the needs of the students.
- *Resiliency*: the ability to personally direct one’s own life in the present and in the future.
- *Stratified Random Sample*: a method of sampling that involves a division of population into smaller groups based on common attributes from which random participants are chosen.

## Appendix C

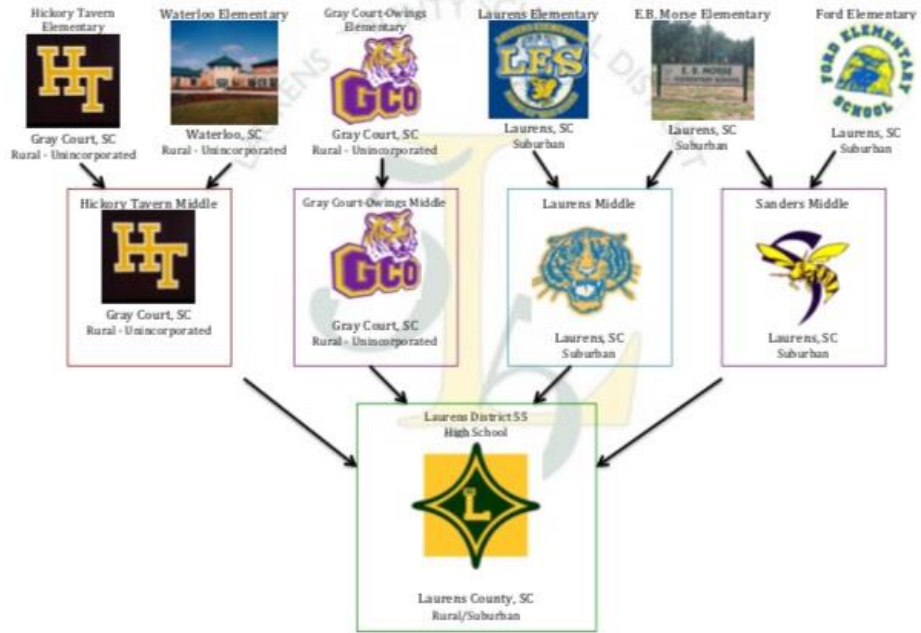
### Laurens District 55 High School Characteristics 2019



NCES (n.d.)

Appendix D

School Flow Chart



Appendix E

Description Tables

CATE Observation Table

O1	Digital Electronics Class
O2	Health Science Class
O3	Business Class
O4	Welding Class
O5	Auto Mechanics Class
O6	Building Construction Class

Community Meeting Description Table

O7	Thursday 1-9-20 Teacher Link presentation by ZF Transmissions to Greenwood Businesses and school district representatives.
O8	Monday 1-13-20 Digital Electricity Class at the focus high school.
O9	Tuesday 1-14-20 Health Science Clinical Study Class at the focus high school.
O10	Wednesday 1-15-20 The Laurens County Development Corporation: <b>Community Leaders Meeting</b> as part of our strategic planning process. Economic development programs are stronger and more successful when guided by a unified vision for the community's economic future.

Appendix F

Data Codes

SN	Skills needed for workplace readiness in rural areas
ESS	Experiences that promote the development of essential soft skills for rural workplaces
AN	Assistance needed from community stakeholders to promote workforce ready graduates in rural areas
CC	Creating contentment for workforce ready graduates in rural workplaces

Appendix G

Conceptually Clustered Matrix for Key Community Stakeholders

Frequency of themes from all participants:

Skills needed	Experiences needed	Assistance needed	Contentment	Critical factors across the data
Technical/ computer skills-5	Working in teams-7	Complete applications-1	Environment-3	Workplace experience-24
Soft skills-7	Playing sports-4	Mock interviews-1	Knowing what they want to do ahead of time-1	Modeling- 8
Basic finance-2	Public Speaking-3	Community support-6	Seeing success-2	Soft skills-7
Communication-6	Working parents-6	Opportunities to see what is available-4	Goals and projects without micromanagement-1	Working in teams-7
Written skills-2	Job Shadowing-5	Mentoring-2	Co-worker respect-4	Communication 6
Public speaking-2	Mock interviews, resumes and applications-1	Insight into potential career options-1	Being recognized-6	Working parents-6
Welding-2	Counseling-1	Role models-3	Connections 3	Community Support-6
Auto Mechanics-2	Leadership roles-1	Interaction 1	Making a contribution 2	Being recognized-6
Basics (math, science, reading and writing)-3	Tutoring/Mentoring others-1	Expectations 3	Pay 2	Job Shadowing-5
Motivation-1	Volunteering -1	Workplace experiences-24	Benefits 1	Playing sports-4
Transferable skills (technology literacy, organization, flexibility, adaptability, teamwork, and communication)-1	Long term projects-1	High quality teachers 1	Schedule 1	Seeing opportunities-4
Professionalism-3	Modeling 8	Dual enrollment 1	Positivity 3	Getting respect-4
Analytical skills-1	Having expectations 3		Boss 2	
Non-verbal communication-1	English class 1		Sense of place 1	
Work independently-1	Theoretical religion class 1			
Basic Discipline-1	Allow them to make mistakes 1			
Perseverance-1	Presentations 1			

Basic life skills-1	Middle School dual enrollment 1	Public speaking class 1		
Problem solving 3	Accountability for being on time and attendance-1	Sports 1		
Teamwork/collaboration 4	Elementary and middle schools teaching the same expectations-1	OSHA 10 Training-1		
Entry Level manufacturing skills 2	Career days-1	Content -1		
Personal responsibility 1	A career center-2	Soft skills-1		
A willingness to learn 1	CATE classes-1	Leaders that let them know expectations-1		
A good attitude 3		Setting early expectations-1		
Thinking skills 1				
Experience 2				
Area Knowledge-1				
On time Dependable-5				
Responsibility-4				



## Appendix H

### Conceptually Clustered Matrix for School and Community Observations

CATE observations:

	O1: Digital Electronics class	O2: Health Science class	O3: Business class	O4: Welding Class	O5: Building Construction Class	Common themes across the observations
	Task-To build a series one circuit board.	Task-To administer a bedpan to a patient.	Task-Checking pages in a document for completeness.	Tasks- Building a boat ramp and a pig's trough	Task- Quoting a job and reading symbols on a blueprint	
Skills needed for workplace success	Teamwork  Follow directions	Teamwork  Soft skills  Follow directions	Follow directions  Creativity	Different forms for welding  Blueprint reading  Safety  Teamwork	Organization  Creativity  Blueprint reading  Teamwork	Teamwork-5  Follow directions/read blueprints-5
ESS experiences needed to develop workplace skills for success	Computer skills  Teamwork  Modeling	Mock simulation	Computer skills  Practice with specific software	Non critical practice  Modeling for blueprint reading and welding	Blueprint reading  Drawing to scale  Reading various construction symbols	Teamwork and modeling
Assistance needed from community to promote	Modeling  Tangible resources	Modeling  Tangible resources	Resources	Projects  Internships  Mentoring	Materials	Resources-5  Feedback-3

workforce readiness						
Creating contentment in the workplace	Ready resources Instructor feedback	The opportunity to practice Having a checklist	Instructor/supervisor feedback	Teams Instructor feedback	Seeking partner input Instructor feedback	Instructor feedback-5

Community meeting observations:

	O6: ZF Presentation of Teacher Link  Purpose: ZF Manufacturing presented their program their model for employing teachers.	O7: Community Leaders Meeting: Laurens County Economic Development Strategy  Purpose: A step in the process of creating a common economic vision for Laurens County.	O8: Google Glass and Artificial Intelligence Presentation  Purpose: To present a product to industry to increase productivity.	O9: Universal Technical Institute Presentation  Purpose: To recruit students	O10: Welding Advisory Meeting for Laurens High School  Purpose: to collaborate with businesses about their needs from welders
Skills needed for workplace success	Manufacturing base  Knowledge of the metric system	Manufacturing	Computer skills	Learned at the institute	Soft skills
ESS experiences needed to develop workplace skills for success	Apprenticeships	N/A	Basic knowledge of the job.	Learned at the institute	Teamwork

Assistance needed from community to promote workforce readiness	Teachers who are knowledgeable	School and business partnerships	N/A	Learned at the institute	Business partnerships
Creating contentment in the workplace	Target the kids who have no idea what they want to do and strive to get them interested in something.	Combine economics, talent and livability.	Puts all that is needed at the fingertips of the user	Learned at the institute	Knowledge of chosen field

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