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EXPLORING THE ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND LEADERSHIP STYLES

OF RURAL SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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Abstract

Rural schools face challenges that differ from those faced by urban and suburban schools. Many are isolated, located in poor areas, understaffed, and subject to resource scarcity. In addition to these challenges, rural school leaders are often assigned or assume additional roles and responsibilities as school principals. My goal was use Northouse's (2016) leadership theory to perform a qualitative comparative case study on eight rural school principals in districts in southwestern Wisconsin to explore their roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles. The study found that rural school principals incur multiple, non-traditional, and unfamiliar roles and responsibilities. The study also found that rural school principals employ different leadership styles that support their process, generate influence, persuade and influence groups, and work to achieve common goals. The study gave voice to eight rural school principals, whose experiences showed the nuances of leading a rural school. Recommendations included investment in staffing and professional development training for incoming rural principals. Resistance to change and technology in rural schools both warranted future study considerations.

Keywords: Rural, principal, rural principal roles, rural principal responsibilities, leadership

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To Sommer for her patience.
To my parents for their encouragement.
And to my sister for her support.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Despite the increased population observed in some rural areas (Tuters, 2015), rural

schools tend to be small (Jimerson, 2005). Rural schools often suffer from poverty (Dulgerian,

2016) and have many students who belong to minority groups (Jimerson, 2005; Klocko & Justis,

2019; Tuters, 2015). The rural context in and of itself poses additional unique challenges for

rural school principals (Du Plessis, 2017). In the United States, about one-third of schools are

located within rural communities, and about 24% of students are identified as rural (Preston &

Barnes, 2017). Reduced funding and fewer resources generally (Howley, Rhodes, & Beall, 2009)

make working in rural schools less attractive to teachers and administrators (Lamkin, 2006).

Additionally, rural school principals regularly encounter several fiscal and infrastructural

challenges (Klocko & Justis, 2019).

In addition to these challenges, rural school leaders often assume additional duties, roles,

and responsibilities that may include but are not limited to working as a superintendent or a

principal at other schools as well as other in-classroom instructional duties. In some cases,

principals may spend more time instructing and teaching than their urban school counterparts

(Starr & White, 2008). Beyond their teaching and administrative duties, rural school principals

may feel obligated or expected to enter the community and establish relationships (Klocko &

Justis, 2009). Many principals feel pressured to be active members of the community and to be

visible, accessible, approachable, and conversant in and understanding of their community's

value system (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Hence, rural school principals must balance the political,

social, and personal interests of parents and community leaders (Klocko & Justis, 2019). It has

also been suggested that rural school principals are generally expected to serve as role models and participate in local events (Klocko & Justis, 2019).

Despite these challenges and additional roles and responsibilities, rural school principals are expected to attain and ensure student academic achievement as outlined in the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (United States Department of Education, n.d.). These standards "incorporate interventions that show evidence of effectiveness in student growth and learning in school improvement plans" (Andreoli, Klar, Huggis, & Buskey, 2019, p. 5). Meeting academic achievement standards is designed to be challenging and thus could be unattainable for many rural schools (Jimerson, 2005).

Rural schools suffer from poverty, inadequate access to health-care services, increasing class sizes, teacher shortages, and reduced access to broadband services (Walker, 2017). Administrative staff such as receptionists and registrars often work on a part-time basis (Starr & White, 2008) or are nonexistent. Rural schools generally tend to be understaffed because of their recruitment challenges and low salaries (Habegger, 2008; Howley et al., 2009). For a rural school principal, help is not always on the way, and many do not have the luxury of delegating responsibilities to other staff members (Starr & White, 2008).

Some rural school principals must assume teaching responsibilities (Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013). Principals who also teach gain the experience of providing firsthand instructional advice and guidance to the teaching staff (Preston & Barnes, 2017). These principals accumulate instructional leadership experience, present themselves as role models, and position themselves for opportunities to lead training and professional development workshops (Preston & Barnes, 2017). In some cases, assuming these roles and responsibilities is crucial for the school to continue functioning.

Statement of the Problem

Several researchers have suggested that rural school principals often assume roles and responsibilities that are not traditionally associated with urban and suburban school principals (Preston et al., 2013). For example, rural school principals might spend up to 60% of their time on managerial tasks (Du Plessis, 2017). In some schools, they serve as school managers, develop and prepare schedules, supervise the staff, call substitutes, analyze academic standards, and evaluate teachers (Du Plessis, 2017). They may also conduct in-classroom teaching (Preston et al., 2013) or serve as a superintendent (Canales, Tejada-Delgado, & Slate, 2008). It is not unusual for principals to be volunteers, change agents, or instructional specialists (Preston et al., 2013). They are often teachers and educational leaders who also assume critical roles that extend into the community (Ewington et al., 2008). Rural school principals often become overwhelmed by the myriad roles and responsibilities that they must assume (Starr & White, 2008).

Many of these roles and responsibilities differ from those of urban and suburban school principals (Morrow, 2012), yet rural students are expected to achieve the same national academic standards (Du Plessis, 2017). Research suggests that school leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its impact on student academic achievement (Morrow, 2012). The demands of rural schools create unconventional circumstances (Starr & White, 2008) and place additional burdens on school principals, which may detract from student academic achievement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to explore the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals, how they perceived these roles and responsibilities, and their leadership styles. Rural schools often face challenges such as fiscal constraints, small staff, geographic isolation, and poverty (Jimerson, 2005; Nelson, 2019). However, rural school

students are required to achieve the same academic standards as urban and suburban schools

(Klocko & Justis, 2019). Therefore, it was worth exploring how rural school leaders perceived

their roles and responsibilities as well as their leadership styles. Generally, there is a lack of

research focused on understanding whether the multiple roles and responsibilities of rural school

principals detract from academic achievement (Du Plessis, 2017; Preston & Barnes, 2017;

Nelson, 2019), especially given the distinct nature of rural schools (Nelson, 2019).

Research Questions

Northouse's (2016) leadership theory guides the following research questions:

1. How do rural school principals perceive their roles and responsibilities?
2. How do rural school principals perceive their leadership styles?

Conceptual Framework

In this study, Northouse's (2016) leadership theory was used as the conceptual

framework. Exploring the leadership styles of principals is key to understanding how they

perceive their roles and responsibilities. School leadership is critical to student academic success

(Preston & Barnes, 2017). Leadership, as defined by Northouse, is the process by which an

individual influences a group of others toward a common goal (p. 6). Leadership is comprised of

four components: process, influence, the group to be influenced, and meeting common goals

established by the leader and a group (Northouse, 2016).

Process is neither a characteristic nor a trait; instead, it is a transaction between the leader

and the followers. Ultimately, leadership is interactive and is available to everyone, not just the

leader (Northouse, 2016). Research has indicated that successful rural school principals

demonstrate qualities that promote collaboration and trust among small staffs, with the ultimate

focus on academic achievement (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Influence is essential to leadership (Northouse, 2016). Principals must generally use influence to persuade school members, such as the staff, administrators, and teachers, "to accept their vision and policies and to motivate them to work and implement them" (Pisapia & Pang, 2013, p. 27). According to Northouse (2016), there is no leadership without influence. Primarily, influence is about how the leader affects the followers (Northouse, 2016). Influential rural leaders understand the community's value system, endorse the school's vision, articulate a plan to attain that vision, and encourage change (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Real leadership is achieved when principals lead through groups (Northouse, 2016). Preston and Barnes (2017) found that successful rural school principals develop relationships with the staff members, parents, students, and community stakeholders. Ultimately, principals must influence the group to accomplish organizational goals, such as student academic achievement.

An emphasis on common goals provides leaders with opportunities to focus their efforts on a mutual purpose (Northouse, 2016). Leaders introduce and demonstrate behaviors that involve ethics and include cooperativeness. Northouse's (2016) four components provide an appropriate analytical lens for this research, since principals are central to establishing process, wielding influence, associating with and leading groups, and shaping and defining organizational goals.

Assumptions

Several assumptions were made in this study. The first assumption was that each principal was primarily focused on student academic achievement. The second assumption was that principals were willing to assume roles and/or responsibilities that positively impacted student academic achievement. The third assumption was that principals would understand the

possible ramifications of assuming additional roles and responsibilities. Some additional roles and responsibilities may distract principals from their primary responsibilities, thus jeopardizing learning outcomes. To some extent, nontraditional roles and responsibilities may occur during, after, and possibly outside school. Some principals may feel compelled to assume these roles and responsibilities because they are the last line of defense or because of the expectations set by the school administrators. The fourth assumption was that rural school principals were as committed to student academic achievement as their urban and suburban counterparts and believed that being a rural school principal did not equate with devaluing student academic achievement. Hence, I assumed that rural school principals could balance their roles and responsibilities and that they would demonstrate competent leadership skills, ensuring student academic achievement. Further, I assumed that these principals possessed the necessary skills and had the professional experience commensurate with the demands of the position.

This study also contained assumptions about design and participants. First, it was assumed that each principal would be a willing participant and would provide honest answers, information, and data representative of their experiences. Second, it was assumed that each participant would understand their roles and responsibilities as a principal. This understanding is essential to leading the school and attaining student academic achievement. Finally, it was assumed that each participant would value leadership and understand its importance as a school principal.

Limitations

Several limitations exist in this study. Because I explored the experiences of eight principals from rural school districts in the Midwest, particularly southwestern Wisconsin, the findings reflect the experiences of these participants and are not necessarily representative of

other rural schools throughout the state or country. Therefore, the findings of this study cannot be generalized; that is, the results should not be extended to the entire population. Instead, readers should approach the results from a transferability perspective, allowing for a personal connection with the data that includes their own experiences (Colorado State University, n.d.).

Scope

The aim of this qualitative comparative case study was to explore how rural school principals perceived their roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles. The sample comprised eight rural school principals who had served as a principal for at least one year. These criteria ensured that each participant had some understanding of their roles and responsibilities as well as their leadership styles as principals.

The primary means of data collection was semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each participant was interviewed for 45–60 minutes via a web-based platform. The interview questions were vetted by a current rural school principal, who was not a participant in the study. This ensured that the questions were appropriate and relevant and provided the necessary information to answer the research questions. Data analysis was performed simultaneously with data collection. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and provided to each participant for accuracy. Each was coded to identify themes and categories. The themes as presented in a table in chapter 4 are provided for discussion (Du Plessis, 2017).

Triangulation was used to ensure credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), verifying actions and words by cross-checking the interviews. Triangulation served to clarify the data collected through multiple lenses (Du Plessis, 2017). I cross-checked each completed interview, with one exception, to ensure accuracy. I maintained detailed records and provide a rich description to help readers understand the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach should ensure

credibility and reliability. I hereby declare no conflicts of interest or any ethical issues in this study. I am not currently an educator, nor am I interested in becoming a principal in any of the school districts in which I conducted the study.

Rationale and Significance

This study may help further the understanding that rural schools are unique and different from their urban and suburban counterparts (Nelson, 2019), with an emphasis on exploring how rural school leaders perceive their roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles. Schools with adequate funding and staff generally have a good chance of attaining academic standards, which is often not the case in rural schools (Nelson, 2019; Ewington et al., 2008). Many rural schools are beset by poverty, limited staffing (Dulgerian, 2016), and underfunding (Habegger, 2008; Jimerson, 2005; Klocko & Justis, 2019), making it challenging to attain academic standards. In some districts, principals assume other roles and responsibilities (Starr & White, 2008) besides their traditional ones. Juggling multiple nontraditional roles and responsibilities may distract such principals from their primary focus on student academic achievement.

Increased understanding of this problem may encourage rural school leaders at all levels to consider policy and/or programmatic changes or modifications, such as hiring (Monk, 2007), training (Versland, 2013), and professional development (Preston et al., 2013). It may also encourage rural school principals to reevaluate their leadership approaches and include actions that involve more staff empowerment and delegation of tasks to subordinates. In addition, such increased understanding may encourage them to decline to take on additional roles and responsibilities more often, which may help them focus more on student academic achievement. Further research on this subject may contribute to county policy considerations. Additional research can help better prepare potential rural school principal candidates for some of the

nuanced expectations, such as their role in the community, that they may encounter or experience. Exploring these roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles may better position and equip rural school principals as leaders of their schools.

Definition of Terms

This section introduces key terms and concepts. These definitions set the baseline for understanding how these terms are used throughout the study.

Leadership: A process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2016).

Responsibilities: The key and critical actions that principals execute in relation to vision, climate, cultivation, improving instruction, and management (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Roles: Actions related to ensuring that instructions are in line with state standards, continuous improvement at school, instruction design for student success, developing partnerships with parents and the community, and nurturing a climate in which everyone is valued (Habegger, 2008).

Student academic achievement: The notion of a student meeting or exceeding their grade-level standards (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017).

Rural: An area populated by at least 2,500 but no more than 50,000 residents (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016).

Conclusion

The goal of this qualitative comparative case study was to explore how rural school principals perceive their roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles. Some of these roles and responsibilities are unique and different from those assumed by urban and suburban school

principals. Rural school principals operate in environments that are considered challenging, professionally isolated, underfunded, underpopulated, and remote, presenting distinct obstacles (Nelson, 2019). These principals are, however, required to achieve the same national academic achievement standards. Another component to explore was understanding leadership styles, which can reveal how student academic achievement is linked to effective leadership (Du Plessis, 2017). In this study, I intended to highlight principal leadership and the impact that different roles and responsibilities had on rural school principals' focus on academic achievement. This study may potentially enable school leaders and administrators to take steps toward addressing the challenges revealed by the findings.

The remainder of the document is structured as follows. Chapter 2 is a literature review that introduces relevant research on the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals and the study's conceptual framework. Chapter 3 describes the study's methodology as well as the data collection and analysis approaches. Chapter 4 discusses the emergent themes and subthemes from the data collected during the interviews. Chapter 5 presents an interpretation of the findings and implications, outlines suggestions for future studies and recommendations, and concludes the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although rural schools have characteristics similar to those of urban and suburban schools (Burdwick-Will & Logan, 2017), they are generally different (Logan & Burdwick-Will, 2017). Rural geographic isolation, budget constraints, and strong community bonds and preservation of values and beliefs are a few of the challenges that face rural schools. By extension, rural school principals take on these challenges by virtue of their positions. The aim of this literature review was to analyze and synthesize the literature aimed at exploring, examining, and understanding some of the challenges associated with rural schools and rural school leadership. This chapter first provides an overview that details how this literature review was performed and then discusses some of the broader themes identified in the literature reviewed. The chapter culminates with a review of the study's conceptual framework and then closes with a conclusion.

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to explore the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals and how they perceived these roles and responsibilities as well as their leadership styles. Rural schools generally face challenges such as fiscal constraints, small staffs, geographic isolation, and poverty (Jimerson, 2005). However, rural school principals are required to achieve the same academic standards as those of urban and suburban schools (Klocko & Justis, 2019). Rural school principals often assume additional responsibilities that are not required from their urban and suburban counterparts. Given these challenges as well as the roles and responsibilities of such principals and the requirement to achieve academic standards, it was worth exploring how rural school principals perceived their

roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles. During the literature review, three main themes emerged from the literature: effective leadership, challenges faced by rural school leaders, and the roles and responsibilities of rural school leaders.

All literature review documents were accessed through the University of New England's library services search engine. Keywords included "rural*," "principal*," "rural principal*," "rural principal roles*," "rural principal responsibilities*," "leadership*," "rural school leadership*," and "challenges facing rural schools*." These keywords were entered into the search engine, and the results were scanned for titles pertinent to the study. Peer-reviewed journal articles, other articles, books, and dissertations were tagged for review. Those that seemed relevant were saved for further interrogation. Next, each article was scanned, honing in on the keywords, headings, and subheadings. Relevant articles were read in depth and used to contribute to the literature review. The topics that appeared most often and assisted in fleshing out the purpose of the study were selected. No delimiting time frame with respect to publication dates was used. Notably, I did not want to prevent any valuable information from being accessed and potentially used, which proved prudent because there were gaps in the research which are addressed throughout the literature review discussion. More than 70 articles were accessed, but not all were included in the literature review.

Effective Leadership

Effective leadership was a prevalent theme throughout the review. Effective leadership refers to the attributes, actions, and skills demonstrated by rural school leaders that contribute to successful schools, such as staff collaboration, capacity building, and power sharing (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Effective leadership helps drive academic achievement, which is perceived through the actions of principals. This includes recruitment of qualified teachers, motivation,

vision and goal setting, appropriate resource procurement and allocation, organizational development, and support of learning and instruction (Rice, 2010). Cathriner (2003) suggested that effective principals demonstrate five behaviors: "define the mission, manage curriculum and instruction, supervise instruction, monitor student progress, and promote instructional climate" (p. 27). Cathriner also asserted that rural school principals must perceive the school as a community resource and that the community must perceive the school as a community resource. Resource sharing is among the vital interactions between schools and communities (Cathriner, 2003). Establishing networks between the school and the community leads to positive changes and outcomes, with student achievement being one of the most important among such outcomes (Cathriner, 2003). These efforts, according to Cathriner, culminate in a learning community. Ashton and Duncan (2012) suggested that effective leadership is "grounded in healthy relationships" (p. 24).

Canales et al. (2008) surveyed 206 teachers, 35 school board presidents, and 37 superintendents and principals regarding their views on effective leadership behaviors demonstrated by school leaders, many of whom have dual roles and responsibilities as superintendents and principals in rural school districts. The results showed that representation, tolerance of freedom, and consideration are the most prevalent leadership behaviors (Canales et al., 2008). According to Canales et al., "representation is the leader's ability to speak and act as the representative of the group" (p. 6). Tolerance of freedom "refers to the leader allowing followers scope for initiative, decision, and action" (Canales et al., p. 6). The findings suggest that administrator preparation programs could be improved. Rural school leaders must possess leadership skills and behaviors, especially when considering the double-edged nature of their roles (Canales et al., 2008). These programs could help potential rural school principals

understand the nature and expectations of rural school principalship. Further, rural school principals should be able to handle stress and possess coping mechanisms and strategies. This notion reinforces another topic observed throughout the literature review: professional development programs. Understanding effective leadership behaviors allows school leaders to develop programs that address leadership deficiencies. Hence, Canales et al. recommended that leaders with dual roles should prioritize their time and receive time management, stress management, self-evaluation, and self-awareness training. Budgets should include funding for separate positions for principals and superintendents (Canales et al., 2008), and rural school leaders should have a network of mentor and peer support groups.

Preston et al. (2013) discussed effective leadership demonstrated by rural school leaders, positing that effective leadership contributes to student academic achievement. They also addressed the roles and responsibilities that have become more prevalent for rural school principals, who usually find themselves involved with or in, though not limited to, instructional leadership. The researchers emphasized that the environment in which rural school principals operate if the goal is to achieve effective leadership. They also found that rural and urban school principals face uniquely different challenges, a finding that has been outlined in similar studies. In one example, it was suggested that if a rural school candidate wants to be a principal, they should have affiliation with the community (Preston et al., 2013). The literature review also indicated that principals should be available 24 hours a day, even disclosing that rural school principalship is more than just a job and is in fact considered a lifestyle. Principals who recognize that rural schools represent the community in terms of wealth, prosperity, and identity are more likely to be successful (Preston et al., 2013).

Despite the scarcity of studies conducted on rural school leaders (Cathriner, 2003), it has been observed that effective leadership is critical for successful schools (Mathis, 2014). When it comes to academic achievement, instructional teaching is slightly more important than effective leadership (Morrow, 2012). Rural school leaders must understand the actions needed to promote and foster an effective and successful climate. This includes strong values, vision, learning, relationships, and support (Pashiardis, Savvides, Lytra, & Angelidou, 2011). Principals also need to be prepared to "shape the school culture, set clear expectations, if they want to be effective, share leadership with others to create productive learning environments for students and staff" (Wood, Finch, & Mirecki, 2013, p. 13).

Studies on rural leaders. A literature review conducted by Preston and Barnes (2017) revealed a lack of studies on rural school leaders, although 24% of students in the United States are classified as rural students. These results also indicated a marked worldwide discrepancy between urban and rural school achievement (Preston & Barnes, 2017). It was further stated that school leadership is linked to "improved student achievement and wellbeing" (p. 6). Several studies have suggested that effective school leadership contributes to improved student achievement and student wellbeing (Preston & Barnes, 2017). This collection of academic work focused on the actions and behaviors of effective rural leadership and revealed some focus on rural leadership. However, the research was dated, and hence more relevant research is needed. The research further illustrated the myriad of researchable topics available that could shed light not only on the challenges associated with rural leadership but also on substantive recommendations.

Seeking to understand how rural school leaders address challenges and complexities, Du Plessis (2017) examined the leadership practices of rural school principals who succeeded in

improving student academic achievement. According to Du Plessis, few people care to discuss the challenges of educating rural students. He also mentioned that urban and suburban school principals receive the most attention when studying effective school leadership, and he discussed the distinctive challenges associated with rural school leadership that impede principals from performing their roles effectively. Du Plessis also addressed the concepts that rural school principals must be cognizant of, such as being accountable on achievement examinations, knowing what influences and produces success, and understanding the community, similar to what has been found in other studies. This is important considering that principal leadership has an indirect influence on student achievement, second only to teacher influence (Du Plessis, 2017). Principals are likely to understand that other factors, such as continued management responsibilities, are impediments to student academic achievement.

In his article, Du Plessis (2017) revealed several interesting findings associated with leadership practices. For instance, effective leaders allow teachers to develop the school's curriculum, have an open-door policy, have no limitations on principal authority, encourage the professional development of teachers, ensure classroom management and discipline, focus on teaching strategies and delivery, work on teacher motivation, encourage teacher recruitment, and secure money for technological upgrades. Several themes emerged throughout the study, such as the lack of resources, isolation, and inadequate teachers. The article also provided insights into principals, challenges, and leadership and dovetailed well with the overall theme. Although it focused on rural school principals overseas, the challenges were similar and persistent. That study also provided insights into rural school leadership challenges that occur globally.

Challenges Facing Rural Schools

Rural schools are generally faced with several challenges (Howley et al., 2009). For example, it is not uncommon for rural schools and districts to be small (Jimerson, 2005), despite the population growth in rural areas in recent years (Tuters, 2015). Rural schools and communities also tend to be poor and have large numbers of students who belong to minority groups (Howley et al., 2009; Jimerson, 2005; Klocko & Justis, 2019). Moreover, rural schools are often subject to financial distress (Jimerson, 2005; Klocko & Justis, 2019) and are often located in remote and isolated geographic areas (Du Plessis, 2017; Jimerson, 2005). These challenges pose significant hurdles for rural school principals.

Gifted students. Howley et al. (2009) discussed the challenges that gifted students encounter in rural schools. They examined how gifted children who attend rural schools are impacted by the following four challenges: declining population, persistent poverty, changing demographics, and ongoing accountability requirements. Although these are not new challenges, they are considered unique to rural schools. A declining population has serious implications not only for the community but also for the future of rural schools. Once rural students receive their college degrees, they rarely return, contributing to population reduction in rural communities and subsequent declines in enrollment at local schools (Dulgerian, 2016). Enrollment reduction is linked to funding: "With fewer resources, [schools] find it difficult to offer specialized courses or services" (Dulgerian, 2016, p. 517).

Poverty. Persistent poverty is a problem for rural schools and can have a long-lasting impact on funding and resources (Howley et al., 2009). Rural schools tend to receive below-average funding. This is typically experienced in areas where property taxes are a component of school funding. Rural schools also suffer from federal funding disbursement disparities. Such

low funding impacts the recruitment and retention of qualified teachers (Habegger, 2008; Howley et al., 2009), making rural schools unattractive to potential teachers (Lamkin, 2006). As a result, rural schools tend to have few educated, experienced, and qualified teachers compared to other locales (Habegger, 2008; Howley et al., 2009). Moreover, rural schoolteachers often do not possess the skills needed to teach specialized and high-need courses, such as mathematics and science (Howley et al., 2009). This impacts student academic achievement, especially when the resources needed to improve this achievement are unavailable (Du Plessis, 2017).

Demographics. Changing demographics pose another challenge to rural schools and rural school principals (Jenkins, 2009). Over the years, rural schools have witnessed an increase in the number of students who belong to minority groups (Howley et al., 2009; Klocko & Justis, 2019), which has been perceived as a potential threat (Howley et al., 2009). Demographic changes reveal the resistance to change that community members often exert against change agents and present an opportunity for school leaders to enter the community and advocate for the benefits of diversity (Tuters, 2015). Changing demographics are often associated with migratory work. People involved in such work sometimes lack proficiency in English and an understanding of the cultural differences related to the communities they arrive in, and they may have a sense of transience (Howley et al., 2009). All these factors can be overwhelming to many educators.

Increasing responsibilities for rural school principals. Some principals have succeeded in increasing their range and purview with respect to roles and responsibilities under the demands of school accountability requirements (Finkel, 2012; Cathriner, 2003). Finkel (2012) suggested that the accountability movement has changed the landscape. Principals who normally handled the managerial aspects of a school succeeded in delving into the instructional side, which was typically reserved for assistant principals. However, some challenges associated

with this move from manager to teacher exist (Finkel, 2012). Principals face budget limitations, entrenched teachers, time management challenges, and more responsibilities (Finkel, 2012), and each challenge potentially negatively impacts student achievement. Some rural school principals view parents, community interests, and values as impediments to student achievement (Preston et al., 2013).

Every Student Succeeds Act. Howley et al. (2009) mentioned the impacts that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which is no longer the educational policy that guides achievement standards, had on rural schools. The Every Student Succeeds Act is currently the educational policy that sets achievement standards. Most rural schools do not consider increases or decreases in performance to be significant, especially when considering the small sizes of the schools and classes (Howley et al., 2009). To reach academic standards, teachers were likely to narrow the curriculum and teach to the test (Howley et al., 2009). The authors also discussed the challenges that rural school principals encounter and provided a context and better understanding of the complexities associated with each challenge. The findings revealed steps and actions that policymakers, leaders, and the community itself should take to address such challenges. The study also provided a background for why rural school leaders may assume additional roles and responsibilities (Howley et al., 2009). In their study, the authors offered recommendations for several challenges. For example, schools and communities need to find ways to attract high-quality teachers and leaders, retain those currently in the community, develop economic capacities in the community, and preserve traditions while incorporating diversity and other cultures (Howley et al., 2009). These recommendations are notable because rural school principals may be responsible for or involved in considering, addressing, or implementing any of these as a role or responsibility.

Isolation and resistance to change. Lamkin (2006) discussed three areas that impact rural superintendents: isolation, limited resources, and community resistance to change. She also touched upon the challenges that rural school districts, and by extension rural school principals, encounter. Lamkin and Howley et al. (2009) similarly mentioned that rural school districts face different obstacles, such as "declining population, persistent poverty, changing demographics, and ongoing accountability requirements" (p. 516), which ultimately make working in rural schools unattractive. In her study, Lamkin added isolation and resistance to change to the list of challenges experienced in rural schools. Principals are occasionally the chief administrators in their communities. Lamkin also found that superintendents or principals are often targets of scrutiny, as they are often the sole chief administrators in the community, something rural leaders must grapple with, unlike their urban and suburban counterparts. She also indicated that such challenges for superintendents include increased responsibility for academic achievement and community involvement. Lamkin's findings revealed that while rural, urban, and suburban principals encounter similar challenges, rural leaders also experience challenges that are uniquely rural, a finding shared by other studies as well (Howley et al., 2009; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018).

High turnover rate. Hansen (2018) suggested that rural schools witness high turnover rates, ultimately impacting academic achievement. Hansen also noted that student test scores tend to be lower in schools with newer principals. Surface and Theobald (2014) discussed how to overcome the challenges of rural denigration, in other words addressing the cultural stereotypes associated with rural communities. They indicated that rural school principals can overcome barriers by accepting and understanding the factors that are on their side. For example, they recommended that principals know their students, maximize the advantages of fewer students per

class, and form strong relationships between the school and the community (Surface & Theobald, 2014). Ewington et al. (2008) extended the discussion on the relationship between the principal and the community, deeming it a vital form of social capital formation. Nelson (2019) addressed the distinct qualities of rural schools, similarly, mentioning the need for strong ties with host communities but also recognizing the social isolation aspect of these schools.

Rural residents' skepticism toward education. Bright (2018) suggested that rural residents operate under a "rural consciousness" (p. 4). These rural residents often view education with skepticism, distrust, and suspicion (Bright, 2018). Multiple factors, including social status, race, and the media, assist in the development and outlook of the "unique rural identity" (Bright, 2018, p. 4). Bright also described the impact of geographic and social isolation on rural schools, students, and communities. Factors such as trust (Ewington et al., 2008) and access to resources are impacted by isolation (Bright, 2018). Additionally, isolation has a noticeable impact on efforts to recruit and retain qualified principals and teachers. Although Monk (2007) described the challenges that rural schools encounter, he offered glimmers of hope. Many teachers, he noted, were content with the work environment, small class sizes, and the few disciplinary issues that they encountered. Despite those positives, high turnover rates still plagued rural schools (Monk, 2007), a finding that was also mentioned by Hansen (2018).

Isolation impacts on the education workforce. Isolation adversely impacts the number of viable candidates for teaching positions in rural communities and reduces the number of qualified teachers willing to serve in these communities (Monk, 2007). Policy options aimed at reducing the hardships associated with isolation, such as paying teachers more, could prove to be expensive (Monk, 2017). Greco (2007) further revealed challenges associated with recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. Rather than focusing solely on isolation, Greco identified the

influence of salaries and specific district factors on the inflow and outflow of qualified teachers at rural schools. The findings suggested that several factors, beyond isolation, created barriers to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers in rural schools, including lack of support from parents and administration, salaries, work environment, and challenges with the school board (Greco, 2007). Although these factors are not exclusive to rural schools, they were exacerbated by their uniqueness. Irrespective of their location, either urban, suburban, or rural, principals share similar challenges, and distinctly rural challenges continue to beset rural school principals.

Resistance to change. Preston et al. (2013) suggested that rural communities tend to reject change. The mentality of a school often mirrors that of the community it belongs to, and principals often find change to be a contentious issue that involves curriculum and policy changes and reporting requirements. Principals may encounter hostility and external pressure when adopting or adhering to policy changes. Being a change agent in a rural community is therefore difficult. Principals often need to walk a fine line by adhering to academic accountability requirements and central policy while at the same time attempting to maintain the integrity of and serving the community's wants, needs, and identity. Rural schools encounter challenges that tend to involve the principal. Policymakers are encouraged to address circumstances that contribute to inadequate principal professional development programs, lack of administrative staff and support, resource deficiencies, unqualified teachers without specialization, and hiring difficulties (Preston et al., 2013). All efforts should be focused on these as exclusively rural challenges rather than as general bureaucratic fixes.

Principals as superintendents. Lamkin (2006) revealed several findings intersecting with the challenges experienced by rural school principals and superintendents. Some rural school principals find themselves working as superintendents, and superintendents do more work

with less staff (Lamkin, 2006) and have fewer people assisting in completing tasks, leaving most of the work for them to complete by themselves. Superintendents experience challenges when attracting and retaining qualified candidates for administrator positions (Lamkin, 2006), just as principals experience at their schools (Howley et al., 2009). Lamkin suggested that, because some of the challenges are exclusive to rural superintendents, such issues "warrant specialized training" (p. 22). This may be something that rural school principals could support. Generally, superintendents, who are often the only administrators, are subject to the demands of the community and personal accountability, and are often distinct from urban and suburban superintendents, would benefit from more staff and separation from daily classroom duties and community concerns (Lamkin, 2006). Rural school principals are, hence, likely to appreciate this layer of support and separation of duties. Despite focusing on rural school district superintendents, Lampkin's study is relevant for this research. It drew enough parallels to intersect with the challenges that rural school principals experience. By extension, rural school principals are likely to experience similar challenges at their school districts. That study thus provided a higher-level context and revealed broader yet similar issues in terms of the challenges, roles, and responsibilities that rural school leaders encounter.

Lack of technology. Du Plessis (2017) asserted that a community that does not value higher education and technology contributes to rural school challenges. These challenges prevent principals from carrying out their multiple roles and place student academic achievement in jeopardy (Du Plessis, 2017). Kalonde (2017) revealed a general lack of support at the administrator and district levels, with other barriers such as equipment and infrastructure issues as well as a lack of technical support. Kalonde also stated that technological competence is key to success in the 21st century and that it is critical that teachers bring technology into the

classroom to facilitate student learning. Mentz et al. (2012) described additional technology challenges faced by rural schools, which often do not have the required infrastructure to support advanced technology and usually suffer from a lack of resources and equipment as well as funding problems that make it difficult to maintain hardware.

Indeed, technology can benefit rural schools. Howley, Wood, and Hough (2011) provided examples outlining the positive impact of technology on rural schools. Integrating technology in rural schools has several benefits. For example, it expands distance-learning possibilities, reduces the educational inequity gap, improves the delivery of education, and increases educational opportunities (Howley et al., 2011). Rural schools can generally benefit from expanded technological opportunities (Barter, 2013). According to Barter (2013), these schools seek to meet the needs of nontraditional students, close the outreach gap created by geographic isolation, expand course capacities limited by rural settings, increase competitiveness, and create and distribute individualized learning options. Gordon (2011) also explained the importance of technology in rural schools and acknowledged its benefits. Expanding the technological opportunities and infrastructure expands the learning opportunities for students (Gordon, 2011). Gordon also revealed barriers such as the lack of technologically savvy teachers, administrators, and community members to advocate for technological expansion in rural schools. Cullen, Brush, Frey, Hinshaw, and Warren (2006) emphasized the necessity of using technology in rural schools, suggesting that technological enhancements in rural schools can help overcome the challenges faced by such schools. Another important aspect that is worth considering is the feelings of teachers regarding technology (Cullen et al., 2006). Notably, their attitudes toward technology significantly influence the "opportunities to use technology" (Cullen et al., 2006, p. 10). Generally, in rural settings, the number of teachers who are comfortable working with

technology is low, which is attributed to several factors, including their attitudes and control over the structure of the school's environment (Cullen et al., 2006). Implementing technology in rural schools also helps improve classroom practices (Tyler-Wood, Cockerham, & Johnson, 2018).

Multiple jobs assumed by rural school principals. Another challenge that needs to be addressed is the often double-edged nature of rural school principalship (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). Preston et al. (2013) found that rural school principals do not have the capacity to delegate their managerial tasks as easily as urban or suburban school principals do, given their larger schools and staffs. Ewington et al. (2008) and Nelson (2019) suggested that smaller schools with limited or even nonexistent staff, isolation, high standards from parents, limited budgets, and challenges pertaining to recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers contribute to the increasing necessity for principals to take on multiple roles and responsibilities. This review of principals' roles and responsibilities identified a few new challenges that have not been mentioned in other studies, such as rural school principals having to be technology experts as they attempt to usher in technological access to rural students (Tyler-Wood et al., 2018). Some of these responsibilities are a result of teachers in rural schools lacking skills in and being uncomfortable with technology (Tyler-Wood et al., 2018).

Some people are concerned that school leaders are ill-prepared when they assume roles as principals (Pijanowksi & Peer, 2016). For instance, Reeves and Van Tuyle (2014) discussed a principal reform program designed to ensure that principals in Illinois are prepared to execute effective leadership that would improve teaching and learning outcomes and ultimately develop all students. According to Reeves and Van Tuyle, the programs that worked focused on the characteristics of rural schools, retaining school leaders in the area, and student academic achievement.

Underprepared rural school principals. Another problem observed in rural education is underprepared principals. According to Preston et al. (2013), some rural school principals apply for the position simply because they were encouraged to apply for an administrative position, not because they are actually prepared to do the job. The authors further posited that principals should be provided with professional development programs addressing specific aspects of the rural community. Such programs should include building skills that enhance school and community relationships and incorporate ways to help principals develop more self-awareness (Preston et al., 2013). According to the authors, this type of training would help leaders identify which jobs to handle themselves and which to delegate to others. Ashton and Duncan (2012) also acknowledged the importance of preparation and suggested that because principals are often not ready for the expected deluge of information, they could "increase their likelihood of success by making the effective management of the organization a priority" (p. 25). Generally, improving organizational management skills is key to considering the lack of resources experienced in rural schools (Ashton & Duncan, 2012).

International students at rural campuses. Preston et al. (2013) addressed the challenges of welcoming international newcomers to the rural community. Principals often lead the efforts to help new residents' transitions. Principals are also responsible for teaching, preparing, and hiring English as a Second Language staff to promote diversity in their communities (Preston et al., 2013). In turn, such teachers provide English as a Second Language support at the school and throughout the community. Larger schools and cities provide more robust services to support international families; however, such responsibilities are usually not left to school principals.

Female rural school principals. Only one study addressed the gender discrimination that female principal candidates and current female principals encounter (Preston et al., 2013). Although most rural schoolteachers are women, they are considered a minority in terms of principalship. Being a woman negatively impacts their chances for rural school principalship. This notion is in line with the idea that rural communities associate being a principal with maleness. Ideally, a candidate is a man who receives spousal support and is not encumbered by household duties or child-rearing responsibilities. These ideals, coupled with traditional rural values, render women more susceptible to gender discrimination when competing for principalship positions.

Lack of literature on leadership styles. A noticeable shortcoming observed was that the literature did not address leadership styles. Therefore, discussions should be expanded to include leadership styles and their impact on academic achievement. Additional research on female principalship, differences and similarities between rural and urban schools, and benefits of rural school principalship (Preston et al., 2013) should also be considered. Much can be learned from such challenges, which may allow rural school principals to develop strategies and actions aimed at addressing each challenge accordingly. Hence, more research on this topic is required.

Roles and Responsibilities

Du Plessis (2017) addressed the roles and responsibilities of school leaders and suggested that school leaders assume many roles, including acting as instructional leaders, conducting teacher observations and evaluations, focusing on curriculum development, and analyzing student achievement. Such leaders may also be responsible for creating schedules, supervising staff, and managing the school.

More than administrators. Preston et al. (2013) pointed out that rural school principals are often expected to be more than just administrators. Many community members expect such leaders to be adept at the rural lifestyle, live in the community, participate in community events, and be a community role model. All these duties seem to be more than the requisite responsibilities of a traditional principal. Several studies have indicated that rural school leaders need to dedicate time and effort to form bonds with the community. These bonds must include understanding, harmony, accord, confidence, and respect between the school and the community. Some principals in the study suggested that performing duties that helped form bonds in the community supported teacher "retention and promoted trust between the community and the school" (Preston et al., p. 3). This literature review indicated that the role is dynamic, rural principals wear many hats, and that it is common for them to be classroom teachers, instructional specialists, parent leaders, change agents, and community leaders. As academic achievement and accountability remain at the forefront of principal responsibilities, principals are expected to demonstrate compliance through a series of products, such as charts, tables, reports, and other documentation. This requires not only data analysis skills but also an administrative staff, which many rural schools do not have.

Stress and joy of rural and urban principals. Klocko and Justis (2019) sought to differentiate perceived stress and joy between rural and urban school principals. In their study, they examined principal workload stress through the underlying components of the transactional stress theory, which suggests that principal stress may result from an imbalance between the demands that principals face and the resources available for addressing those demands, rather than from the demands alone (Klocko & Justis, 2019). In that study, a quantitative time series design was used, including data from 2009, 2012, and 2015, and the participants were principals

from kindergarten to 12th-grade (K–12) schools in midwestern states. Moreover, the challenges

associated with rural school principalship and the roles and responsibilities of rural school

principals were also discussed. Rural school principals generally have different needs than their

counterparts in larger schools. Rural leaders are expected to assume instructional responsibilities

as well as supervisory and managerial tasks. Rural school principals may also serve as

superintendents, as principals at other schools, and as classroom teachers throughout the day

(Klocko & Justis, 2019). The results of that study illustrated that even though rural school

principals are resilient to contextual changes, they reported losing feelings of joy in doing the

work of principalship. Despite such resilience, stress likely impacts rural school principals as

their roles and responsibilities shift and accumulate throughout the school year. Although not

addressed in this article, other stressors associated with rural school principalship, such as

limited salaries, isolation, and distance from professional growth opportunities, are potential

reasons why attracting and retaining qualified candidates are difficult (Wood et al., 2013).

      Providing a vision. Clark (2015) outlined several steps that principals should take. For

example, principals need to provide a vision to all their students. Setting a vision helps close the

achievement gap because it involves setting high expectations for the students as learners.

Principals should assume a role that creates a positive learning environment and helps build

relationships with the students, staff, parents, and community. Principals should also be

continuous learners and advocate for continuous learning. Clark suggested that principals should

visit classrooms frequently, provide feedback after making their observations, and share their

best practices for instructional teaching. This shift from teacher manager to instructional has

become important, with the increased focus on accountability and student achievement. This

shift requires school leaders to become more adept at using data to improve learning, instruction,

and support to teachers and students (Clark, 2015). Davies and Halsey (2019) helped cement this point by suggesting that principals, by virtue of their roles, are responsible for the educational outcomes of their students. These outcomes should manifest themselves in students who "become successful learners, confident, and creative individuals and active, informed citizens" (Davies & Halsey, 2019, p. 2).

Multitasking and shifting roles. Habegger (2008) suggested that today's principals are constantly multitasking and that their roles shift at a moment's notice. Despite the importance of multitasking and role shifting, "culture is at the heart of improvement and growth" (Habegger, 2008, p. 42). Not all roles and responsibilities are equal. Although such roles and responsibilities are important, a "positive school culture is imperative" (Habegger, 2008, p. 42). In contrast to what has been outlined by other authors, Habegger found that some principals believe that building positive relationships is more important than focusing on test results. However, this does not mean that student academic achievement is sacrificed; instead, "a positive school culture is the underlying reason why the other components of successful schools were able to flourish" (Habegger, 2008, p. 44).

Leadership perception. Wieczorek and Manard (2008) addressed the leadership perception of rural school principals. Their study revealed that rural school principals suffer from a sense of professional isolation and that they must assume numerous roles within the school. However, in terms of leadership, rural school principals are viewed by their staff as instructional experts (Wieczorek & Manard, 2008). The authors also acknowledged the budget constraints and challenges faced by rural school principals and pointed out that rural school principals view themselves as flying solo, that is, alone in their efforts and responsible for everything (Wieczorek & Manard, 2008). Such principals seemed to comprehend their stature and place in the

community as principals and that their leadership is heavily relied upon, despite the multiple responsibilities that they have (Wieczorek & Manard, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

Northouse's (2016) leadership theory was used as the conceptual framework in this study. Identifying the leadership style demonstrated by principals is key to understanding how they perceive their roles and responsibilities. School leadership is critical to student academic success (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Leadership, as defined by Northouse, is the process by which an individual influences a group of others toward a common goal. Leadership is comprised of four components: process, influence, influence on a group, and meeting common goals established by the leader and a group (Northouse, 2016).

Process

Process is neither a characteristic nor a trait but is instead a transaction between the leader and the followers (Northouse, 2016). Ultimately, leadership is interactive and is available to everyone, not just the leader. Successful rural school principals demonstrate qualities that promote collaboration and trust among small staffs, with the ultimate focus on academic achievement (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Influence

Influence is essential to leadership (Northouse, 2016): "Without it, leadership does not exist" (p. 6). Principals must influence their fellow administrators, faculty, staff, teachers, and students. Primarily, influence is related to how the leader affects the followers. Influential rural leaders generally understand the community's value system, endorse the school's vision, articulate a plan to attain that vision, and encourage change (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Real leadership is attained when principals lead through groups (Northouse, 2016). Preston and

Barnes (2017) found that successful rural school principals develop relationships with the staff, parents, students, and community stakeholders. Ultimately, a principal must influence a group toward accomplishing an organizational goal, such as student academic achievement.

Common Goals

Emphasis on common goals provides leaders with opportunities to focus their efforts on a mutual purpose (Northouse, 2016). Leaders introduce and demonstrate behaviors that involve ethics and include cooperativeness. Northouse's (2016) four components provide an appropriate analytical lens, as principals are central to establishing process, wielding influence, leading groups, and shaping and defining organizational goals.

Conclusion

Rural schools are generally plagued by challenges and problems that make it difficult for rural school leaders to lead. This literature review revealed that it is not impossible to lead rural schools. Leaders must consider a few things to lead effectively. First, rural leaders must not compare themselves to their urban and suburban counterparts, despite the presence of some similarities between schools, roles, and responsibilities of being a principal. Instead, rural school leaders should embrace the uniqueness of being rural school leaders and adopt the necessary skills to lead their schools effectively. Second, principals should press policymakers and senior leaders to address some of the challenges outlined throughout this review. Researchers who appreciate the complexity of rural school leadership should take steps to address these challenges as well. They should also take steps to expand the research purview and address some of the lingering issues associated with rural school leadership that are prevalent yet ignored in the community.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses how a qualitative comparative case study was used to explore how rural school principals perceive their roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles. This approach enabled study of every school principal in their natural environment to determine and interpret their leadership styles and the meanings they ascribe to them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Rural school principals manage schools and have responsibilities similar to those of urban and suburban school principals. However, they often assume additional roles and responsibilities in addition to their typical ones (Preston et al., 2013; Wieczorek & Manard, 2008). Despite such additional duties, they are expected to attain academic achievement standards (Andreoli et al., 2019) similar to suburban and urban school principals (Erwin, Winn, & Erwin, 2011). These circumstances and factors present a challenge to rural school principals (Preston et al., 2013).

Comparative case studies are an ideal research method in these circumstances because they allow the study of multiple cases, which in turn enables understanding of several subjects (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Such studies also permit researchers to draw generalizations across many cases and provide researchers with two methods of data analysis (i.e., within-case analysis and cross-case analysis) to employ (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each of these methods allows researchers to contextualize data to determine categories, themes, or typologies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, these data help researchers build theories that span multiple cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I employed Northouse's (2016) leadership theoretical framework to explore each principal's leadership style. This framework allowed the examination of each participant's experience and understanding of their roles, responsibilities, and leadership

styles. Further, this framework facilitated the contextualizing and description of each principal's perception of their leadership.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore how rural school principals perceive their roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles as rural school leaders. Northouse's (2016) leadership theory guided the following research questions:

1. How do rural school principals perceive their roles and responsibilities?
2. How do rural school principals perceive their leadership styles?

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative comparative case design was adopted. As an in-depth approach, case studies are detailed, descriptive explorations of a bounded unit (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). They are also considered an investigation of a case within a real-life context. This approach requires data collection methods such as interviews (Creswell, 2015). Case studies are holistic and intensive and provide a rich understanding of a bounded component (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Exploring multiple cases, in my case eight to 10 principals across different rural school districts, allows for the collection and analysis of various types of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each case received its own portrait (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) or within-case analysis. After analyzing each case, I conducted a cross-case analysis to draw generalizations that helped build a "general explanation that fits all the individual cases" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 234). Correctly conducted cross-case analyses generally elicit rich cohesive data in the form of themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Site Information

The research setting included schools in rural counties in southwestern Wisconsin. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2009), each rural county generally has a minimum of 2,000 and a maximum of 50,000 residents. Given the varying educational grades (K–12) and the different cultures, population differences, and demographics, the findings were robust and may contribute to future discussions and research on rural school leadership.

Sampling Method

My goal in this study was to use nonprobability sampling. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), this method is conducive to qualitative research. I used typical purposeful sampling, which is a method of selection that allows the researcher to obtain the most from each participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach presented an opportunity to understand, discover, and learn from the participants. The established criteria were as follows:

- Each leader had to be a current rural school principal. This is important because the study is centered around exploring their current roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles as principals.

- The participants had to have held their positions for at least one year. This duration was important for these leaders to gain an understanding of the expanse of their positions. Without spending at least a year in their positions, they would not fully understand, be cognizant of, or appreciate their responsibilities and roles and may not have understood or perceived their leadership styles.

My goal was to invite principals from counties in southwest Wisconsin to participate in the study. I intended to have at least eight to 10 participants in this study. Ideally, this population should cover a variety of school types (i.e., elementary, middle, or high schools) within the

setting. Although these counties are in the southwestern part of Wisconsin, they are dispersed over several hundred miles, adding a layer of richness, complexity, and diversity to the study and potentially the findings. Given the current COVID-19 restrictions and how this pandemic has altered the entire landscape, data collection methods were impacted because of school protocols regarding visitation, and I resorted to digital means. I emailed superintendents, requesting participation from principals in their school districts.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Interviews were conducted to gather the data needed to answer my research questions. However, given the COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted via Google Meet or Skype. All interviews were semi-structured (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with 26 questions. I assumed each participant's responses would vary; therefore, unscripted follow-up questions were necessary to obtain pertinent information. Initially, all interviews were set for 45–60 minutes, but the responses of each participant influenced the duration. Each interview was recorded via the online platform and then transcribed using Rev.com, an electronic transcription service (https://www.rev.com/). I reviewed the transcripts and provided them to the participants for clarity and accuracy. Prior to this process, all interview questions were vetted by someone who has worked as a principal and in rural county schools and was recently awarded a position as superintendent in a rural school district. After this vetting process was complete, I refined my questions, obtained approval from the University of New England's Institutional Review Board, and scheduled interviews with the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis

To meet the requirements of a comparative case study, I interviewed different principals from multiple schools. I conducted a within-case analysis to analyze each case individually. I

synthesized the overall case and then provided the findings based on the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All data were collected and analyzed simultaneously (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Once I completed the interviews, I archived all the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which allowed for improved referencing and better analysis. I coded each interview by hand after it was transcribed, identifying key terms and trends. This assisted in future access and retrieval efforts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used open coding by writing notations in the margins while reviewing the interviews, observation field notes, and collected documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This coding enabled the categorization of data into groups, which was essential to ensure accurate interpretation and analysis. The intent was to pursue a full description of each setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My goal was to develop a master list of categories relevant to the study questions. Next, I reviewed all the categories and identified the main themes that emerged while focusing at the same time on answering the research questions. Throughout this process, I developed a separate document of similar themes found throughout the interviews of other participants. Each category was labeled according to the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and refined further to meet the study's purpose. The study was exhaustive, exclusive, and sensitive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which better informed the findings. I used both a within-case analysis, analyzing each case individually, and a cross-case analysis, aimed at integrating commonalities. Each of these approaches helped address competing thoughts, similar themes, and important components of the cases (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Limitations

This study had two main limitations. The first was that I was not able to conduct face-to-face interviews because of the current COVID-19 restrictions, and therefore I had to interview the participants remotely. The second was that the pandemic limited the number of participants

in the study. Not being able to reach the ideal number of principals to gather data did not pose a limitation to the study.

Credibility

I used triangulation to ensure credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), verifying actions and words by cross-checking the interview data. I then cross-checked each completed interview with the participant to ensure accuracy, maintain detailed records, and provide a rich description to help readers understand the findings. This ensured credibility and reliability. There were no evident conflicts of interest or any ethical considerations in this study.

This study allowed me to contribute to the current literature related to rural school principals with respect to roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles. Other studies employing the same questions may yield similar results. For example, other researchers exploring other rural county schools across the United States may generally reach the same findings. The current literature suggested that rural school leaders assumed more roles and responsibilities than those typically and traditionally assumed by other principals (Parson, Hunter, & Kallio, 2016). Therefore, rural school principals need to integrate these roles and responsibilities and balance their leadership practices while at the same time focusing on school achievement (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Participants' Rights

All the participants were required to understand the purpose of the study, as well as the length of the interview, and the procedures followed. The consent form (Appendix C) included the following components:

- **Background:** This section outlined the purpose of the study as well as the participants' criteria (Pratt, 2019).

- **Actions:** This section outlined how data were collected, managed, and analyzed (Pratt, 2019).

- **Privacy:** This section outlined how the privacy of each participant was protected using, for example, pseudonym assignment or document redaction.

- **Confidentiality:** This section outlined how responses were kept confidential as well as any associated limitations (Pratt, 2019).

- **Benefits:** This section clarified to the participants that no incentives would be provided for participating in this study (Smith, 2003).

- **Rights:** This section informed the participants that they had the right to refuse to participate at the outset, to withdraw from the study at any time, and to not answer any specific questions (Pratt, 2019). It also outlined the consequences of participation (Smith, 2003).

- **Options:** This section clarified to the participants that they did not have to participate (Smith, 2003).

- **Research questions:** This section outlined the research questions of the study.

- **Consent:** This final section was signed by each participant who participated in the study.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to discuss the research design used in this study. Using a comparative case study design allowed me to obtain rich, wide, and diverse findings regarding rural school principals in southwestern Wisconsin, particularly in relation to how they perceived their roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles. Additional exploration of these aspects of rural school principalship may contribute to the field of rural school leadership. The next chapter

presents the findings that resulted from my analysis of the semi-structured interviews described

in this chapter.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Eight rural school principals participated in semi-structured interviews, and their

responses ultimately generated the themes and subthemes of this chapter and the findings in the

subsequent chapter. From the interviews, the themes of leadership, challenges, roles, and

responsibilities emerged. Subthemes such as unawareness, servant leadership, amount and nature

of roles, and safety surfaced. These themes and subthemes bolstered discoveries from the

literature review, but some themes and subthemes that were not mentioned in the current

literature were revealed as well.

Analysis Method

Eight rural school principals were interviewed and asked 26 questions to gather data to

answer this study's research questions. Interviews provide rich, relevant data that are the

foundational components of qualitative research methods (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The

interviews were scheduled for 45 to 60 minutes and were recorded via Skype or Google Meet.

The execution and rhythm of each interview were driven by each participant's involvement,

engagement, and the answers they provided. I conducted semi-structured interviews because this

gave me an opportunity to ask follow-up questions if answers or comments provided deeper

insight to the original question or if the comments veered into other areas relevant to the study. I

specifically asked about their roles and responsibilities, with respect to those that were

nontraditional for rural school principals. Other follow-up questions involved how the

participants influence their staff, their largest role and responsibility, their thoughts on effective

leadership, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has modified their leadership styles. Interviews

that were conducted with the camera on were more revealing and free-wheeling and the data

were richer than those participants who conducted their interviews with the camera off. The interviews were downloaded from Skype or Google Meet and submitted to Rev.com, a transcription service, which subsequently transcribed the interviews. Seven of the eight participants conducted member checks for accuracy and confirmation. Three participants responded with minor edits that had no material impact on their responses. One participant did not respond to requests to review and provide edits or confirmation. I read each interview thoroughly and conducted manual coding, making notes in the margins, prior to applying coding techniques in ATLAS.ti®, a qualitative and quantitative data analysis service.

Reading through the transcripts, I became familiar with the participants, their responses, and their experiences as rural school principals. I was able to identify similarities and discrepancies across the interviews. While reading the transcripts, I wrote my thoughts on what I found interesting in the margins. Next, I synthesized the data from the interview transcripts and created themes and subthemes. Then I uploaded the transcripts into ATLAS.ti® to code the themes that emerged from my reading and manual coding. The system facilitated an effort to codify focused themes and then subthemes across each interview. The themes and subthemes identified are provided in Table 1.

Table 1.

Study Participant Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Leadership	Servant Leadership
Challenges	Funding, Staffing, Academics
Roles	Unfamiliarity, Multiple, Nontraditional
Responsibilities	Safety

Presentation of Results

This section provides an overview of the participants, the demographics of the schools where they are currently principals, and their backgrounds. The participant data are then

discussed under three categories: leadership, responsibility, and roles. The narratives were synthesized and grouped by subthemes.

Participants

Eight rural school principals participated in this study. Each participant was a current principal at a rural school, either an elementary, middle, or high school. In one case, a principal oversaw each level at one school. Each participant provided responses related to their experiences as rural principals. Their responses offer real-time, accurate portrayals of their time as rural school principals. The participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Table 2 lists data related to each principal's gender, school type, and school population with respect to the number of students and teachers to provide context and nuance to the participant's responses.

Table 2.

Rural School Principals: Participant Demographics

Name	**Gender**	**School Type**	**Student Population**	**Teachers**
Georgia	F	Elementary	400	42
Peter	M	Elementary	110	10
Pearl	F	Elementary	450	40–50
Marlen	M	High school	260	20
Gordon	M	Middle and high	136	40
Arlo	M	Elementary, middle, and high	379	37
William	M	High	658	49
Francis	M	Middle	325	18

Participants

This section discusses each participant's background and how they arrived at their current roles as rural school principals. While many of their paths were dissimilar, many have similar characteristics. Understanding each participant and how they arrived in their current position provides context and allows for a better understanding of the participant's responses.

Georgia. A white, female, elementary school principal. Georgia has three master's degrees and has been teaching or educating in some capacity for 26 years. She is currently principal of a rural elementary school and has held the position for three years. Her school has 400 students and 42 teachers across a school and a kindergarten center.

Peter. A white, male, elementary school principal. Peter grew up on a farm in a small town, slightly larger than the town in which he currently teaches, and he attended a rural school. After graduation, he attended a university an hour away and studied elementary and middle education with a social studies minor. After college, he was employed in a town that was larger than the one he was raised in, which was a change for him. Although the town was small, the school was larger than what he was used to. He taught seventh-grade social studies for three years. Next, he was employed as a sixth-grade teacher at the same middle school he attended. Peter went back to college and earned certifications to teach high school social studies. Later, Peter completed his principal certification. A year after completion, Peter was employed as an elementary school principal. As of this study, he was in his second year of being a rural elementary school principal.

Pearl. A white, female, elementary school principal of about 450 students. Pearl's education includes an undergraduate degree in elementary education with a minor in English and a master's degree from a local college. She has an extensive career in education, having worked in elementary schools, teaching grades three and four, and middle school as a social studies and English teacher; she was also an eighth-grade civics teacher and a dean of students for five years. Later, Pearl completed her principal licensure that ultimately prepared her for principalship. As of this study, Pearl has been a rural principal for the past four years at the same school where she last taught.

Marlen. A white, male, high school principal in his 24th year of teaching. Marlen's career started with teaching high school math and science to approximately 240 students. While teaching at that high school for six years, he pursued his master's degree. Marlen was later employed at a larger school as the assistant principal. As of this study, Marlen has been employed as a principal for eight years and is currently a rural high school principal at one of the largest schools in the state.

Gordon. A white, male, middle and high school principal. After graduating college, Gordon pursued a teaching career but then turned to private business, owning a bar and restaurant for nearly 20 years. Later in life, he decided to return to education. His first occupation after owning his private business was at a juvenile correctional facility. After further convincing from his siblings, Gordon returned to college to obtain his master's degree. After graduation, he was employed at a school for seven years as an AP (Advanced Placement) teacher and athletic director. After some promotions, Gordon was hired as a rural school principal at the school where he is currently employed because of his athletic background and love of sports.

Arlo. A white, male, elementary, middle, and high school principal. Arlo taught in the classroom for seven years, between two schools. He served as dean of students for two years at the same rural school where he is currently employed as the principal. He is the only administrator in a rural school that serves early childhood through 12th grade. His educational background includes a bachelor's degree in biology education, with a minor in chemistry. He holds a master's degree in educational leadership.

William. A white, male, high school principal. As of this study, William is employed as a rural high school principal at a school with about 660 students and 49 teachers in western Wisconsin. William is a career educator who has been employed as a rural principal since 2008.

Francis. A white, male, middle school principal. Francis graduated from high school in a rural town, then went to state university where he participated in track and field. It was his interest in working with students that led him into education, despite initially majoring in biology. After nine years of teaching, Francis contemplated leaving education because of the impact state leadership and local districts had had on statewide education. However, Francis decided to remain in education because he wanted to be a positive change agent. He returned to college and earned his master's degree and his principal license. In his tenth year, he was promoted to a rural principal position. His new employment was a short drive from where he was teaching.

This section discussed the participant's backgrounds and gave further data on how each participant became a rural principal. Their backgrounds provided a glimpse into who they are and an opportunity to better understand their views of leadership and their leadership styles.

Leadership

Leadership was at the center of this study. Each principal saw their leaderships style as integral to their success in running their school. Each principal described and discussed their leadership style. Four of the eight principals expressed similar leadership styles, agreeing they were servant leaders. The others had varying styles. The leadership discussions centered on effective leadership, influence, and leadership modification during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Effective leadership. Effective leadership is critical to the functioning of the school. Each participant provided their definition of effective leadership. Responses included impacting academic achievement, following up, following through, and building relationships. When it came to effective leadership, Georgia stated:

If there is student achievement or growth toward student achievement, there is effective

leadership. You cannot be effectively leading if there is low student achievement. I think

the second indicator of effective student leadership is taking dipsticks of climate. If those

two things are in place, you have effective leadership.

In a similar vein as Georgia, Arlo thought school achievement levels indicated effective

leadership. He asserted:

I think it is understanding and having an expertise of what is expected of a school system.

Where are the needs? What are the essential needs and pieces of an effective school? I

think you must have a lot of effective knowledge. Your focus has to be on what is needed

for kids to be successful.

Unlike Georgia, Pearl found effective leadership to be about something else. As Pearl

said:

You've got to follow through. A weakness of mine is the willingness to address issues.

Effective leadership, however, must be able to do that. Again, one must follow through

and one must be willing to admit when he or she is wrong.

Marlen saw it differently from Pearl, but he did connect with one of her thoughts:

I think effective leadership is building good relationships with people. Having people

trust you in situations, even if they do not necessarily see it or are able to give you the

benefit of the doubt. I think effective leadership is being able to admit when you are

wrong.

Peter, William, and Gordon arrived at varied meanings of effective leadership. As Peter

remarked:

I think a lot of it is about communicating and getting people on the same page with what we are trying to do. Also, it is about helping them to understand, so that they are motivated to do it.

William drew similarities to Peter's response, indicating that he thought "effective leadership is when everybody is on the same wavelength." He added, "it is not necessarily accomplishing your goal." Gordon thought it was more about "not being the guy leading the charge." He suggested that "you are the guy that got the other people to lead the charge. It is never about me; it is about the group. Get them to understand the best way to do things."

Francis, however, drew a clear line in the sand, stating that leadership was about influence and power. As he put it:

I think effective leaders influence people. I think ineffective leaders use power to make people do things. I think we also have to realize that when our staff comes to us, there are certain things they must do and then there are things that they volunteer to do.

Influence. Influence, a component of leadership, was revealed through processes implemented to persuade the staff to perform the way the principals needed them to and thus achieve the school's goals and objectives. Peter explained that "I try to really explain my thought process and open it up for discussion as much as possible." While that worked for Peter, Gordon's approach was different. For instance, he shared:

I normally will plant the seed and then try to cultivate it. I do a lot of walk-by talking to people. But I always ask them, "What's our goal?" I always ask, "What outcome do we want? And are the things we are doing pushing us to our end goal? Or what if we looked at it this way?" They also know that, on some things, if they come with a good enough data-driven argument, I will change my mind.

Pearl took it further and discussed her influence not only with teachers but with parents. As she indicated:

I think the parents and the teachers know when I ask them to do something, because I am willing to do for them. That tends to go both ways. With the parents, I think that by being willing to meet them on their terms or their time, that demonstrates that I really want what is best for their child.

Part of influence is the staff's reaction to the principal. Influence generally helps steer the staff and teacher toward the school's goals and objectives. When discussing the staff and teacher's reactions, Peter offered, "If I do make a mistake, they seem to be comfortable in telling me that something is not working. Let us try to fix it. I am trying to make it more of a team situation."

Marlen saw it this way:

I think they are reacting a lot better now. I have had to do a fair amount of adapting too. I do not think that has anything to do with the size of the building. I think that just has more to do with when you come in and you replace somebody that was there before you. That person was there for 12 years. Some of the stuff that my predecessor had done were things that I did not do. I have adopted some, taking on a few of those things that I would not necessarily have done. But it is a much better place now than it was at the start.

Gordon, like Marlen, thought his situation was in a good place, stating the reaction was "good. Because when somebody comes at me, we have a discussion. And I am normally very ready with the data. That is what it is based upon."

Influencing the staff and teachers helps principals achieve the necessary goals and objectives they have outlined for the school. That does evolve, though, particularly this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Modification. Leadership modification in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic sparked many comments. Since this has been an issue since early 2020, many of the principals found themselves having to adjust to a new reality. As Georgia revealed:

I am big on professional development and teachers determining their own needs, and then I support them in meeting their own determined, self-determined professional development goals. This year, I said, you can set goals and I will help you meet them. But I said, it is fine this year to not set goals, and about a third of the teachers did not. So that changed. Another change included more of my time was spent this year on managerial-type tasks. For example, I received a call last night, a teacher's positive [with COVID-19]. So now, I am figuring out how to deal with classes and who to call and how to cancel school, a lot more managerial work. I have not been able to teach as much this year as I have in years past.

Peter, unlike Georgia, did not find himself having to change, remarking:

I do not think it has been modified too much. I think I was trying to be very understanding of people and listen. There have been just so many more concerns, questions, and frustrations. I just tried to continue to listen to people and to offer help and solutions when possible, like I would normally. But there has been just more of it.

Marlen found communication and flexibility key and central to his modification, explaining as follows:

I think it is a lot more communication. Communication is the big one. I have got to be a lot more the physical-distancing police at lunch or before school. Also, communicating with parents too. I have had to sit in and substitute for classes. Right now, the lunch supervisors are the lady that takes the money at the register and me. So that flexibility has been unique this year.

Like Marlen, Gordon found that his communication strategy was altered. He said,

Well, I think as you can tell, I am a face-to-face, one-on-one guy. I will call the kids in, and I can look them in the eye, and they know I know. But if I cannot see them, it is a little tougher on the phone to talk to them and/or their parents.

Pearl's strategy changed like Marlen's and Gordon's. She had to reduce her time in the classroom. She declared, "I cannot do regular drop-ins, obviously. The kids are not there. I am trusting blindly that [the students and teachers] are doing well."

Francis, like Marlen, Gordon, and Pearl, touched on communication. His comments focused on technology:

I spend a lot more time on the phone with parents. I spend more time in meetings over Google or Zoom. I spend a lot more time as a troubleshooter for staff who are having technology issues. I help parents try to troubleshoot technology and trying to get their kids logged on. I spend a lot of time doing that and assisting teachers. I help them figure out how to fix that stuff. My job has changed in that way.

This section addressed how principals viewed effective leadership, how principals modified their leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what processes they had in place to influence their staff. The next section discusses how each principal perceived their leadership style.

Leadership style. The principal's style can influence how the school functions and operates. The responses, though disparate, did include several similarities. Georgia, William, Francis, and Arlo expressed that their style was servant leadership. Peter, Pearl, Marlen, and Gordon were different, with no overlap among them. For instance, Peter reflected:

> I would like to think that I am thoughtful about decisions. I try to listen to people as much as I can and to get people involved in decision making as much as I can. By doing so, I am hoping that gives them more ownership in what we are doing here and that they feel that it is fine to have a suggestion or an idea. We can all work together to make this better. I have found that if it is just coming from me, I can push it. But I have got to get everybody else on board with what we are doing, and they need to have ownership of it themselves.

> Pearl, contrasting with Peter in the sense that she did not employ servant leadership, said, I am distributive. My leadership suggests that if we have a problem, let us talk and figure out a solution. I will support you. We each will have a piece of the solution to solving the problem. I think I am a solution-oriented type of person.

> Marlen, like the other three, was not a servant leader. Instead, he admitted about his style, I think it is pretty laid-back and relaxed. It is open-door policy. It is if staff has a concern, kids have a concern, or parents have a concern, I like to sit down and talk with them. I am big into building relationships. I want people to do what I asked them to do because they want to do it for me, not because I am telling them they must. I am the principal of the building. I like to communicate and talk and get some ideas. But by the same token, there are some things that are non-negotiable. At that point, I say "We are going to do it this

way, and I know some of you are not going to like it." If I am here, we are going to continue to do this, because I think it has a lot of value, and it is important.

Gordon, also not a servant leader, signaled that he was collaborative with some limits:

But also understand that I will take your input, but it must be based on data. For instance, [referring to the teachers] just because you all agree that we should not be required to have lesson plans, because we have been teaching 20 years [means nothing]. You are going to have lesson plans.

Though not servant leaders, each of these participants provided a clear narrative on their leadership styles, which they felt allowed them to approach and achieve the objectives and goals they have determined for their schools. William, Georgia, Francis, and Arlo, on the other hand, identified servant leadership as their primary style.

Servant leadership. William, Georgia, Francis, and Arlo described their leadership style as servant. When it came to his style of leadership, William suggested that it was "servant leadership. That is the type of leader who asks, 'What can I do for you?' I believe in it and say that if I am not willing to do it myself, I'm not going to ask anybody else do it first." William gave several examples of this type of leadership in action:

Whether it is retrieving balls from the roof during recess, wiping down tables after study hall, or waving goodbye to the buses, it is all about servant leadership. It is simply about finding out what needs to be done and just doing it. I do not put people in situations where I say, "Go do this," and then I get in my truck and drive away.

Georgia, like William, declared that her leadership style is "transformational leadership, with a strong servant leadership slant." As she put it, "I do surveys. I survey all [the] staff several

times a year and we make sure to meet as a team, monthly for teachers and quarterly for all other staff. But then again, we communicate all the time."

Francis, like Georgia and William, employed servant leadership as his primary style. Discovering the style while at the university, he hinted:

> The university I attended hammered on the idea of servant leadership. I really liked that. That really spoke to me as far as how I wanted to lead a school. I would say that has been my leadership style. Wanting to serve others, wanting to lift other people up, and being there in the trenches for them resonates with me. I believe in not asking anyone to do something that I would not do.

Comparing his current position with an earlier one, Arlo said, "The theme in my programming there was really all about servant leadership. So that is what I try to bring into this position as well. What do people need?" He elaborated, saying that he focused on "making sure that you are asking people, 'how are you doing and what do you need?' And if you can help make that happen, try to do it."

Despite the type of leadership style they employed, the rural school principals interviewed were not immune from the challenges that arose, especially those associated with rural schools. No matter the leadership style, they still faced challenges like funding, staffing, and academics as obstacles they had to overcome.

Challenges Associated with Rural Schools

Marlen, Francis, Arlo, Pearl, and Gordon expressed and discussed the challenges they encountered at rural schools and as rural school principals. Themes such as funding, academics, and staffing emerged throughout their responses. Each played a critical role in how they led or navigated their schools. This section captures those comments in each category.

Funding. Funding was identified as a challenge by many of the principals. It was a significant issue that impacts their day-to-day operations across a myriad of categories. Marlen said, "Funding is definitely an issue for rural schools." Francis delved deeper into a component of the challenge. In his opinion, "Too many rural communities struggle with a very conservative look on education and on school funding…an uneducated look at how schools are funded, and that makes it hard for districts to help them out."

Arlo, like Marlen and Francis, found funding a challenge. He discussed funding this way: The number one challenge is high-quality curriculum, staying up to date with high-quality curriculum, and finding the budget to make those materials annually available to our teachers. Sometimes, there are a lot of exhaustible resources that need to be replaced and budgeted annually. A lot of workbooks and things like that.

Pearl touched on that sentiment as well, saying, "With textbooks, we were very frugal. I don't look at our fund balance or stuff, but our school has been known to be frugal." Gordon also experienced funding challenges, explaining that "Number one would be money." He added, "At my previous job, I had a guy that had unlimited money, and when I needed something, we would do it."

While funding posed problems for several of the participants, it was not the only challenge they encountered. Staffing issues emerged and presented their own hazards and impediments.

Staffing. Staffing, in terms of recruiting and retaining top teachers and staff, presented challenges for rural schools. Pearl, William, Gordon, Arlo, and Peter all mentioned the difficulties they encountered with recruiting and retaining teachers and staff. To some degree, this impacted the quality of teachers they could recruit and retain. For example, Francis said, "It

is extremely difficult to recruit and retain teachers and staff." Arlo, speaking bluntly, echoed the same sentiment about the difficulty of finding high-quality teachers:

> I'm not gonna BS anybody here. Your best teachers more than likely are in your suburban districts. Your teachers that have master's degrees and have professional teacher certificates are gonna go where they can get paid. If you do get a high-quality teacher, especially a young one, being able to retain them is really tough.

Pearl, like Arlo and Francis, experience difficulties in terms of staffing. She expressed some gratitude that she was able to hire quality teachers. She summed up staffing this way:

> It is really hard. Certain positions where [someone] would leave, it would be really hard to fill. Right now, we have a fifth-grade opening and a middle school reading, which was added three years ago. We got lucky four years ago when we hired those four elementary teachers.

William, facing similar challenges and harboring comparable feelings, stated, "We're competing with all these other schools to try and get good teachers." Gordon echoed the others, especially Arlo, with his experience with staffing. He expressed similar sentiments:

> It is really hard…keeping the staff. Teachers can go to a bigger school and they can sometimes make $10,000 more. And for younger teachers, this isn't the hotbed of social activity around here. We really do not have any housing here. We have one bar that's right down the hill from our school. I think we're the only school in the country that has a bar right down from school.

Peter acknowledged that salary was an issue in retaining teachers, as did Pearl, Arlo, and Francis. Peter provided a qualification, asserting:

I don't feel like we've lacked in anything other than possibly being able to retain teachers if we could pay them better. I think our pay is somewhat on par with area schools, but I know that our teachers could always go to make more money.

Along with funding and staffing challenges, participants admitted that academic challenges persist. Academic results and standings tend to attract significant visibility from board members, parents, and officials.

Academics. Francis, Marlen, Pearl, Gordon, William, and Arlo discussed the academic challenges they encountered in their schools. Despite the number of roles and responsibilities they have, academic standards and performance remained high priorities for principals. Marlen, Arlo, William, Francis, and Gordon provided observations on this challenge. William, suggesting that the challenge exists because of teacher incompetence, observed, "Our weakest area truthfully is with my special education teachers. They are great people, but our academic performance of our special ed teachers [is not good]." Marlen took a different route, suggesting that this challenge was based on not offering the right types of courses. He mentioned, "I think one of the major academic challenges we have is that we don't offer AP [advanced placement] classes." Francis connected the challenge to learning, behavior, and general sentiments on academics. He added, "It is academic, and it is a little bit behavioral. But I would say something I have noticed over probably the last 10, 15 years is apathy for learning." Pearl, like Francis, linked the challenge to learning, quipping, "Our high school ACT [American College Testing] scores are in the tank, in my opinion."

Peter, like Francis and Pearl, saw a learning nexus, even adding parents into the mix. He suggested:

We are not where we want to be with reading. Math is a little bit better, but not where we

want to see it. There is somewhat of a challenge of parent support in really putting an

importance on school and making sure that it is a big deal.

Arlo seemed to connect the parents to the challenge like Peter did. He said, "The

academic time on task is the big one." He added, "What I've found is the volume of assigned

readings, so that's the hardest thing, getting kids to spend time outside of class on academic

tasks."

Gordon, tying the academic problem to staffing, commented as follows:

The academics suffer because of the lack of teachers. We don't have enough teachers.

We have one middle-school English teacher. I have one high-school English teacher. I

have two high-school math teachers. We just don't have a robust staff.

Leadership and school challenges are just two components of rural principalship, and the

participants dove deep into both of those topics. The next section provides a closer look at roles

associated with being a rural school principal.

Roles

Many principals seemed unaware or unfamiliar with the different roles played by rural

principals and, to some extent, their own roles. Marlen, who previously served as assistant

principal at another school, was the only participant who served in a principalship prior to their

current assignment. This afforded him the experience and opportunity to form expectations and

an understanding of what the position entailed. The remaining seven participants were new rural

principals who learned about their roles while in the position. The participants provided

comments on the unexpected nature, unfamiliarity, number, and nontraditional characteristics of

their roles as rural school principals.

In his comments, William suggested that:

Rural school principals take on a lot of jobs. I am doing a lot of things that principals

probably do not do. Not only am I also the Xerox copy machine repair man, I order the

paper for the school. It is a matter of absorbing more of these roles. Yet the hardest part is

when you are looking at how do you keep [school] programs going. When the school is

short teachers, as a principal, you can go in and substitute. I know that every day that I

was at school, I was covering something at some point.

Like William, Francis took on other roles as a rural principal. He explained as follows:

Helping with the school counseling role as well. Not all principals do that. The larger

districts are much more compartmentalized. For instance, if that is a mental health issue,

it goes over here to this team. Now when this team is done making their analysis, they

might ask for my opinion or my permission as a leader, from the legal standpoint or the

funding standpoint. But I am not involved with some of those decisions until it reaches

tier three level. In a rural school, you are kind of in there at the tier one level. Substitute

teaching is another. I have heard from others from different districts that principals never

substitute. They are just not in the classroom [but I am.] I would say, I am pretty much

going to wear every hat.

William also mentioned that his largest role as a rural principal "is maintaining a positive,

welcoming atmosphere at the school." Like William, both Georgia and Gordon explained that

providing a safe environment for the students was their primary role as a principal. Georgia

further explained as follows:

My number one goal is to keep the students safe, which has become a challenge this year

because of COVID-19. Second is to ensure that we have top quality student achievement

for all learners. Another role is to make sure the community's engaged and supportive of what we do.

Like Georgia and Gordon, Arlo mentioned that it was important for him "to also create a positive environment for staff and students." He further explained:

Number one is setting the tone and creating a positive environment where our staff and our students feel valued and appreciated. Next is figuring out how to structure the aesthetic pieces of your building so that when staff and students walk into your building, just by looking at the environment, everyone understands that academics are important, are valued, that we value each other.

Arlo also said:

You must really market yourself. You must know what you want. We sell this image to our kids that we want them to be respectful to each other and treat each other well. We want to be responsible and take care of our daily business. We want to be ambitious. We want to figure things out for ourselves. We want to look for opportunities. I think that is the number one role as a building principal. You must set that tone of what you want your students and your staff to see every day.

Like Georgia and Peter, Pearl also had many roles she attended to. She clarified as follows:

We wear a lot of hats. I feel strongly that if it needs to be done, I will do it. For instance, after or before a board meeting, I will sanitize those tables, because I do not know who last sat there. If it needs to be done, then I do it. And that is how I lead.

Peter also had other roles. As he noted:

Other schools have dedicated paraprofessionals or teachers who respond to all sorts of

calls. It is kind of just like doing whatever needs to be done. I will hand out food to

students before the weekend. That is something that I do. At bigger schools, principals

are not necessarily going and loading up food.

Marlen mentioned that he still worked with the families and the students, saying,

I think in the rural [school], you have a lot more interaction with your superintendent of

schools, more than you do in a larger school… In a rural school, because we are small,

we share a lot of stuff. If you want to try to do anything from a building perspective, you

must work closely with the middle-school and elementary-school superintendent to make

sure everybody is on board.

Gordon had a short answer to describe his duties: "It is only me, especially compared to

other schools I have been in." Arlo was the only participant who is a principal for elementary

through high school. He described his other roles as follows:

Establishing a schedule that is going to be functional, which is hard, especially when you

consider the low staff. Trying to schedule one gym for all these activities is crazy. We

have one cafeteria where you must rotate schedules. My second major role beyond the

atmosphere is establishing a functional schedule. Working with teachers to establish your

core academic classes is important. We must make sure that all our students who want to

go to college have had a strong college readiness academic core so that they are prepared.

Arlo continued, saying:

I am responsible for having conversations with teachers to make sure we have as close to

high-quality instruction and accepted pedagogy in the classroom. We do not have an

athletic director that works in our building. He mainly schedules officials and supervises

games. Overall student management, not only putting progressive discipline policies in our student handbooks, but also overseeing, because we only have one guidance counselor, is on me. I also play a big role in career technical awareness. I teach classes on career exploration. I do ACT preparation. I respond to our local sheriff's department. I play a lot of roles; it keeps me busy. I am not short on things to do during the day.

Principals are expected to have roles that are associated with the position. Unexpected roles in conjunction with the appointed roles can add another layer of complexities.

Unexpected roles. Georgia, Peter, Pearl, and Marlen remarked that some of the roles they have assumed are simply unexplainable. Some were brought on by COVID-19, and others were functions of being in a rural school. Their responses displayed how the number and types of roles can expand for rural school principals. Georgia said, "Well, I do think the daycares were unexpected. COVID-19 threw so much unexpected weirdness into the frame." Like Georgia, Peter encountered COVID-19 issues, such as acting on informational technology issues for his teachers. Pearl and Marlen both mentioned they were the person who had to address COVID-19 quarantines and sanitizing the building. Francis explained that he was teaching more because of COVID-19. He explained, "In our school district, with COVID-19 and quarantines, I was in classrooms aplenty. Our superintendent ended up in the classrooms from time to time." Peter also mentioned that he conducted more outreach than previously thought. He described his largest role by saying, "It is a toss-up between oversight of leadership and what is going on in the classroom, to include supervising, behavior management, setting up behavior expectations, and enforcing those things."

Pearl acquired two more unexpected roles that she described this way:

Another unexpected role includes parent phone calls at home at night. Also, working with

the meals. Our kitchen staff is low. I can help…washing tables. I am guessing that if

other principals come in here and were to see what I do, they would say, "That's not your

job." I would tell them that it needs to be done. Often, when I am supervising a

lunchroom, I might as well wash the table.

Like Pearl, Marlen mentioned he too had to clean tables and quickly get the lunchroom

ready for the next set of students. Despite performing these functions, many participants could

not easily recognize they were performing duties that were generally outside the scope of

principals, rural principals specifically.

Unfamiliarity. Several participants responded with a sense of unfamiliarity when

discussing the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals. Georgia reacted this way when

discussing the roles of a rural principal, mentioning "Well, I think the same roles as anywhere."

She was not the only one to express this sentiment when asked this question. Peter similarly

replied, "I guess I don't know a lot different than what I'm experiencing now." William,

sounding like Georgia and Peter, suggested, "That's tough for me to say. I've never been

principal at any other school. This is the only school I've been principal at." Francis was also

unfamiliar with the roles of rural principal and said, "I think that depends on each individual

principal." Pearl, like the others, added, "I've never been a principal anywhere else." Not being

familiar with the roles of rural school principalship does not preclude one from being assigned

those roles. For these principals, roles and responsibilities can come from different angles,

without warning, and in large numbers.

Multiple roles. With some pressing and clarification, some participants were able to

distinguish their roles. Arlo, William, Marlen, and Pearl remarked on the multiple roles rural

school principals play, many of which were not routinely assigned to principals. Arlo said it plainly: "When you're a small school district with limited staff, those roles don't disappear. Those roles end up coming largely into the administration's role [purview]." William, speaking on having multiples roles, said, "As a rural school and small school, I think you just find out what needs to be done and you just go and do it." Pearl stated frankly, "It is a lot. We wear lots of hats."

Nontraditional roles. Some of the roles and responsibilities the interviewed principals incurred are nontraditional in the sense that they are not usually part of the principal's portfolio. Instead, someone else is usually assigned the role or responsibility, giving the principal the room and flexibility to perform functions more aligned with their position. Some roles are nontraditional in that they are distinct to rural schools. Several principals remarked on the experiences they had with nontraditional roles and responsibilities that were outside a typical principal's purview but more common for rural principals.

Georgia put it this way:

I think in a rural community, you are a celebrity. I cannot get anywhere. Everybody knows where I go. So you are constantly having to be a role model for the community. That is a lot of pressure. Around here, everything you do comments on the school.

Like Georgia, Arlo also mentioned he is held accountable for what he does:

Student management and accountability are important. Making sure that you are visible in the classrooms and in the building, holding students accountable for their behavior, and establishing a safe environment where kids feel accepted are major pieces of what I do.

Francis explained that he too is held accountable as a rural principal:

I think the role of principal in a rural community, for many rural communities, is

probably still a little bit conservative. You are the kind of guy or girl that comes in

dressed up; you have to have your tie on. Kind of the stand-up person who lives by the

law and exhibits discipline. I make sure the building has heat and books, kids have books

in their hands, that the staff is there each morning, the doors are open, and the lights are

on. That is my role.

Peter said, "That is another thing that I do for the school. I try to help kids who are

struggling. Sometimes I will take kids home when we are doing an afterschool reading program."

Pearl mentioned that she needed to supervise bus drivers because some drivers do not

know how to properly discipline the students. Therefore, she had to ride the bus for a couple of

months to determine the proper disciplinary actions for the students. Like Pearl, Arlo and Marlen

are also responsible for transportation, overseeing the bus drivers and bus schedules as part of

their nontraditional duties.

Marlen explained his other roles as follows:

I think some of the duties, like securing substitutes when people are out, are something I

never had to do before. When somebody is sick, I get the call at six o'clock in the

morning or four o'clock the morning, and then I must get on the phone and try to get

substitutes.

Arlo also summarized his nontraditional roles:

It is hard for me. I feel like more of a manager sometimes than an instructional leader. It

is hard for me to get into classrooms and coach teachers and have the conversations that

you want to have with teachers. That is what you really want to do. You want to be in the

classroom and see kids learning and look at their data and talk with teachers about

curriculum and instruction. That is the fun part. But you get sucked back into your office.

I had to take on a lot of those roles that I think a lot of building principals do not have to

necessarily take on.

Gordon had a different take from the rest of the participants:

Well, I do not personally [mind]. I know some other ones do. But it would be attendance

at all events. Me, personally, I like to do it. My wife and I plan to go to the football

games. Even when I was not a principal, I would still go to local events… I have heard

from other rural principals, you never have any time because you work until four o'clock

or five o'clock and maybe go home and grab something to eat, and then come back for

the girls' basketball game, the boys' basketball game, the wrestling match, or the Friday

night football game. But to me, you know that going in, so that's part of the gig.

The participants found that rural principal roles took on many forms, and some were

unexpected and non-traditional assignments. At first, Georgia, Peter, and William were

unfamiliar with their roles as rural principals. With some thought, they expanded their apertures

and saw their roles in a wider context. On the other hand, Arlo, Marlen, and Peter found their

roles to be unexpected, including ones they did not anticipate incurring. Having multiple roles

was a point raised by Arlo, Marlen, William, and Pearl. Georgia, Arlo, and Peter acknowledged

that some of their roles were nontraditional. The participants' responsibilities tend to have

similar characteristics to their roles.

Responsibilities

The participants also discussed their responsibilities as rural school principals. In this

section, each elaborated on their largest responsibility, the nonstandard responsibilities they had

encountered, and their responsibilities as a whole. Their remarks provided a glimpse into the wide and varied responsibilities of rural school principals.

When Georgia talked about her responsibilities, she said:

Well, the daycares again, that is added responsibility. Another issue is that we, in the rural school community, have a smaller job candidate pool. Currently, we have no turnover at the school. It is a great school, so you do not lose anybody. But God help us if there is a big wave of retirements, because nobody wants to come live in a small town, unless you are married already and have kids, because you would never find anybody here. There is no dating scene. There is nothing to do. That is an added burden, you know, the responsibility of finding quality candidates.

Peter suggested his largest responsibility was "ensuring that students have a quality, safe learning environment, that everyone has the ability and the chance to learn." When it comes to responsibilities, Pearl admitted:

The biggest one is the new COVID stuff. But, you know, now you must manage stuff. Like right now, so I was interrupted because a parent was supposed to pick up these little three-year-olds that come in for special education teaching. Also, I am taking classes, which then helps me be a better reading leader, I believe. I read articles at night. I connect with other people in [a] similar position that I am [in]. I make those connections sometimes during the school day, but often in the evening. Also, I am willing to talk to a parent at six o'clock at night because that is when the parent has time to talk to me about a student. To me, that demonstrates for the staff, not that I expect them to do it, but that I am willing to do it. And [that I will] do whatever it takes to help them and their students.

Marlen explained his responsibilities as follows:

I am the Title IX investigator. I am the chemical hygiene officer. I also do the planning

for in-services. In the larger schools, you have a director of curriculum and instruction.

When you have an in-service day for teachers to work, that person organizes speakers or

activities or the layout for the day. Here that falls on me. That is not something I have

experienced at the bigger schools.

Gordon also encountered some nonstandard responsibilities, one being that he is the

district assessment coordinator (DAC):

It is someone who ensures we take certain tests on time. I probably missed that in the

contract. I had never been the DAC, and I did not know anything about it. Suddenly it

came up. Normally, it is a superintendent that had been a principal. That is normally the

path. Our superintendent had been a special education director. I had to, very quickly, get

on the phone, but most of the people that I know, even my son who runs a big school,

he's like, "We have a DAC. I've never been that, so I do not know either."

He further explained his largest responsibility:

Improving the education of our students is the largest responsibility. That means making

sure that I get the data and everything else to have most of our teachers on board with

that. Because there has been a big shift, as you know, with who is responsible for

learning.

Arlo, like Gordon, mentioned academic achievement:

My largest responsibility is to the families and students to ensure that we have high-

quality instructional materials and pedagogy going on in the classrooms. Also, I must

ensure our academic time on task is real, and we are serious about that. That is our

fundamental mission of the school. We exist to ensure that we are providing academic

skills to these students and making them aware of what their talents are and where those talents can take them. That is the fundamental reason a school exists. The principal's biggest role is to focus on high-quality instruction and curriculum. That is the fundamental piece. I must ensure we are teaching what we are supposed to be teaching to the kids and that we are giving the kids feedback they need to grow and develop.

William spelled out his responsibilities this way:

I did not realize how much you become the face of the school, and it is usually associated with the bad. I get phone calls that are not about how good I am doing as principal. Instead, I get calls from angry parents. Two incidents come to mind. One involving a bus driver who dropped a child off at home and left without waiting for a parent to gather the child into the house. And an incident involving a parent's concern over a book the class was reading. My largest responsibility is school safety. It is about keeping everyone safe. We invested in security measures to ensure safety at the school, in the form of fencing and having people at the entrances. I am not one to believe those who do not believe that "it" can happen at a rural school.

Francis proposed this about his responsibilities:

I have a responsibility to parents to make sure I am calling them to make sure I am communicating what is going on. I have responsibility to my other buildings and my other administrators to make sure that we are working in concert with one another, because a lot of kids in my building are middle schoolers and have siblings in high school or siblings in elementary school or both. I think I have a responsibility, with respect to our country. When dealing with kids and discipline issues and things like that, I hope I am molding kids and showing them, you know, "We can be calm, we can be kind, and

you messed up. But there are going to be consequences and there are going to be things

you must do to make this better." So I have a responsibility to our future to try to be

molding some kids to be stand-up people moving forward.

Francis clarified that because of COVID-19, he had specific COVID responsibilities:

In a COVID world, we ramped up even more with physical distancing, cleaning routines,

and wearing masks and other personal protective equipment. Those are the

responsibilities in place to ensure our staff are teaching in a way that I want to see and

that our administrative team wants to see. I think responsibilities for the staff and

students' mental health. Making sure that everyone is doing well mentally and

emotionally, and professionally, essentially keeping the pulse on the people. Staff are at a

premium these days, so you want to make sure people are doing good so that you can

keep them as long as possible.

Francis went deeper into his responsibilities:

The number one responsibility is for the safety of staff and students, especially in the

world we live in today, where 20 years ago, the words "school shooting" were not

common words. Neither were "school violence." Now it is more common. First thing I do

when I walk in the door is ask if we are being vigilant. I go around checking the school,

making sure doors are locked and that things are working. That way, I feel that my

students and staff are safe every day.

Safety. Of all the roles and responsibilities, school safety was critical to many of the

principals. Five of the eight participants provided comments related to safety. Some of the

comments were mild, and others indicated that safety was their number one priority. Francis,

William, Arlo, Gordon, and Georgia specifically expressed the importance of safety in their

schools. Francis remarked that his "number one responsibility is for the safety of staff and students." He added, "I like to be outside by the buses or in the hallway, just keeping an eye on safety issues." William agreed, saying, "I take school safety seriously." Arlo also mentioned safety, noting, "I think the number one role is providing a safe learning environment." He continued, "obviously establishing a safe environment where kids feel accepted, being on top of bullying, and being on top of individual rights. These types of things are a major piece of what I do." Gordon remarked that a safe school environment is both his largest role and responsibility. He divulged, "Specifically, here, I make sure that it's a safe environment for kids," and added that he sees his greatest responsibility as "making sure the school is safe for our students." Georgia summed her thoughts up by saying, "I think my number one goal is to keep kids safe."

This section discussed responsibilities as perceived by rural school principals. The discussion allowed the principals to elaborate deeply on their responsibilities. Safety emerged as a subtheme in this discussion, with four principals identifying it as their largest responsibility.

Summary

This chapter discussed the analysis method, participants' backgrounds, themes and subthemes, participants' school demographics, and participant responses. Each participant provided candid responses to 26 questions related to their roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles as rural school principals. Several items emerged from the responses. When discussing leadership, four of the eight participants identified servant leadership as their primary leadership style. The other four found different leadership styles more effective. With roles, many found them to be untraditional, including ones that were not necessarily part of the principal's portfolio but still needed to be addressed. The roles have increased and expanded for many principals. Those with limited staffs found themselves taking on roles that were usually reserved for others

on the staff. Many found their list of responsibilities increased. Actions such as calling

substitutes, filling in for classes, managing the nuances of COVID-19, managing day care

centers, and overseeing the athletic department were just a few mentioned. Ultimately, safety

was a key responsibility for several.

What rural school principals experienced in terms of roles and responsibilities was

comprehensive, illuminating, and varied. Their leadership styles and interpretations of their roles

and responsibilities provided a lens into how they led their schools and executed their duties. The

findings related to their roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles are discussed further in the

next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Rural schools are complex and nuanced, face specific challenges like isolation, poverty, and funding (Jimerson, 2015), and are different from their urban and suburban counterparts (Logan & Burdwick-Will, 2017). Rural principals navigate these complexities and nuances daily to accomplish their schools' goals and objectives. Along the way, rural principals incur multiple roles and responsibilities, some inherent in the role of principal, others not so cleanly codified in the duty description. Moreover, they need to understand how to use their leadership styles and the components of leadership theory to guide them as rural principals. Despite a larger portion of American students (about 24% of the student population) attending rural schools, Preston and Barnes (2017) found a lack of studies on rural school leaders. Du Plessis (2017) argued that few people care to discuss the challenges of educating rural students. Additionally, there is a lack of information on how multiple roles and responsibilities distract principals from academic achievement (Du Plessis, 2017; Nelson, 2019; Preston & Barnes; 2017; Starr & White, 2008).

The purpose of this study was to explore the roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles of rural school principals. While discussions associated with the complexities and challenges of rural schools exist, there is limited research on the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals. The available resources become even more limited when the exploration focuses specifically on leadership styles. Two research questions were developed to guide the study:

1. How do rural school principals perceive their roles and responsibilities?

2. How do rural school principals perceive their leadership styles?

Themes such as roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles were used to shape the preliminary research efforts and during the literature review. The themes helped focus my interview

questions and assisted in coding efforts. I used Northouse's (2016) theory on leadership as the conceptual framework. This theory helped to frame the interview questions, and it provided the foundation for viewing the participants' responses when it came to leadership. The framework also assisted with identifying and understanding themes. I employed a qualitative comparative case study methodology. Eight rural school principals participated in this study by volunteering for interviews. At the time of the interview, each participant was a current rural school principal at an elementary, middle, or high school. In one case, a participant was a principal of all levels in one building. The interviews provided the opportunity for each participant to voice their thoughts clearly and candidly. It was my intent to fully explore their experiences through semi-structured interviews.

Emergent themes such as leadership, roles, responsibilities, and challenges were revealed through coding. Subthemes, such as servant leadership, funding, staffing, academics, unfamiliarity, number of roles, nontraditional roles, and safety emerged from the results and provided more details related to the participants' experiences. This chapter provides a discussion on the interpretation of the findings, under the two research questions, connected to and with the study's literature review. Additionally, this chapter reviews the implications of the findings and offers a series of recommendations for further research and a conclusion.

Interpretation of Findings

The themes that emerged from the study provide the answers to the study's two questions. The results from question one give insights into how rural school principals perceive their roles and responsibilities. These results confirm a continued increase in the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals. Finkel (2012), Cathriner (2003), and Preston et al. (2013) discussed the expansion of rural school principal responsibilities in detail. Several

participants, such as Marlen and Pearl, discussed the mounting number of their roles and responsibilities. Part of this accumulation was attributed to a lack of adequate staffing. Studies by Lamkin (2006), Howley et al. (2009), Monk (2007), and Greco (2007) revealed how isolation, in terms of geography, makes rural settings unattractive. Some participants, including Pearl, Arlo, Gordon, William, and Peter, voiced their concerns on and experiences with recruiting and retaining qualified teachers because of the components of ruralness. The next section provides a deeper presentation of the responses to the research questions.

Research Question One

To answer the first question, "How do rural school principals perceive their roles and responsibilities?" I asked several specific questions related to the participants' roles and responsibilities as rural school principals. Studies discussed during the literature review, linked to specific conversations below, provided support for some of the findings. Roles and responsibilities take on a double-edged nature in rural school principalship (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). This notion was bolstered by William, who commented, "I didn't realize how much you become the face of the school." He added, "I mean the face [is usually] bad. If someone's pissed at school, I'm getting a phone call." Pearl said, "I think in a rural community, you are a celebrity." Further, she noted, "I can't [go] anywhere, and you're having to be a constant role model for the community."

Preston et al. (2013) found that rural school principals do not have the capacity to delegate their managerial tasks as easily as urban or suburban school principals do, since the latter have larger schools and staffs. Arlo agreed, saying, "When you're a small school district with limited staff, those roles don't disappear. Those roles end up coming largely into the administration's role [purview]." Likewise, Francis said of rural schools when compared to

urban schools that they have the "same issues with a lot less resources." Ewington et al. (2008) and Nelson (2019) suggested that smaller schools with limited or even nonexistent staff, isolation, high standards from parents, limited budgets, and challenges pertaining to recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers contribute to multiple roles and responsibilities. Pearl echoed this sentiment when she mentioned, "If our staff are unhappy, they will leave." The principals felt the brunt of additional roles and responsibilities when they did not have their full complement of teachers. Gordon declared, "We don't have enough teachers." Marlen found himself working with the students as an instructional leader. He admitted, "That probably has to do with some of the unexpected roles too, like, working with an ELL [English language learner] student now." William cemented the point by asserting, "As a rural school and small school, I think you just find out what needs to be done and you just go and do it."

Interestingly, some of the participants were unaware of the unusual nature of some of their roles and responsibilities, mainly because they have only been principals in their current schools. For instance, Pearl said, "I've never been a principal anywhere else." Georgia thought she was performing "the same roles as anywhere." Peter conveyed a similar message, suggesting, "I guess I don't know a lot different than what I'm experiencing now."

According to Preston et al. (2013), some rural school principals apply for the position simply because they were encouraged to apply for an administrative position, not because they were prepared for what that entailed. Gordon was encouraged by a family member to get into administration. His sister, who has a doctorate, told him, "You could do a lot more, help with kids if you became an administrator." Pearl was courted by members of her school to apply for the vacant principal position, as she recounted, "They asked if I'd be interested in that position, and of course I was." William credited a former principal for encouraging him to get into

administration, saying, "I had a great principal who talked me into going into [administration]." Francis arrived at his position through the encouragement of fellow teachers. A combination of those teachers who saw him as a teacher leader and a struggle with previous administrators inspired him to move to administration. Arlo became a principal because, as he said, "I was next in line." He added, "I got recruited into the position." Preston et al. (2013) posited that principals should be provided with professional development programs addressing specific aspects of the rural community. Such programs should include building skills that enhance school and community relationships and incorporate ways to help principals develop more self-awareness (Preston et al., 2013). Though not armed with specialized training as rural school principals or self-awareness training, many of the participants, including Georgia, Marlen, Arlo, William, and Pearl, possessed either a principalship license or a master's degree before they became principals.

Unfamiliarity with respect to the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals emerged as a subtheme. When asked about the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals, a few acknowledged their limited experience elsewhere, their lack of awareness of the roles and responsibilities, and that they did not know anything different from what they were doing.

After some clarity and discussion, the participants were able to better distinguish their roles and responsibilities. Du Plessis (2017) addressed the roles and responsibilities of school leaders, suggesting that school leaders assumed many roles, including acting as instructional leaders, conducting teacher observations and evaluations, focusing on curriculum development, and analyzing student achievement. William, when mentioning his schedule, admitted, "By the time I get back to my office, I [try to complete some of my teacher] observations. I try to get into

everybody's classroom." Peter offered this when talking about curriculum: "Our achievement will improve because they don't have people trying to learn a new system, new things all the time. Our curriculum [was] set and stable, but it's kind of been in flux quite a bit in the past." Francis weighed in on this topic, saying, "Oftentimes I try to get one or two observations for our educator effectiveness taken care of, and then at 11 o'clock, I supervise lunch and recess."

Du Plessis (2017) suggested that such leaders may also be responsible for creating schedules, supervising staff, and managing the school. Marlen agreed, noting, "One of my big roles now, [since] I'm the most familiar with [it is] getting the schedule set up. So we're gonna [be] getting next year's classes put together." Marlen also quipped about supervisory responsibilities, "[I have] a lot of supervisory position[s]. If we have a concert or we have an activity going on, if we have a sporting event, often times I'm [here until] 9:30, 10:00, sometimes supervising those types of things." Francis touched on his supervisory roles as well. He talked about them in terms of covering classes, recess, and lunch, stating, "I supervise lunch and recess. I supervise cafeteria for fifth and sixth grade. I have usually each day about a 20-minute lunch or just kind of a quiet time." While Arlo found student achievement to be his largest responsibility, he also weighed in on having to create work schedules and perform evaluations. As the only participant who is principal for all three levels in one building, he said, "We're trying to manage here at school, and it is feeling like you're only just balancing instead of really making an impact. It is a struggle." He listed knowing what is going on in the classroom, supervising, and behavior management as some of his major roles as principal.

Preston et al. (2013) indicated that rural school principals are often expected to be more than just administrators. The fact that the participants have multiple roles and responsibilities emerged from the results as a subtheme. The participants found themselves operating beyond the

expectations of mere administrators. For instance, at least four participants were responsible for securing substitutes early in the morning in efforts to keep classes going. William found himself substituting for the teachers himself. Pearl mentioned being up in the morning trying to locate substitutes because a sick teacher called out, saying, "Arranging substitutes is something that [I] would not have to do in a bigger district." Marlen also discussed securing substitutes, stating that his responsibilities included "securing subs [substitutes] when people are out." Francis said, "I do all the calling for substitutes, and so if a teacher is sick, they call me and let me know, and then I have to find them subs in the morning." William went a step further, stating that, "As a principal, if you're short teachers, you can go and sub a classroom."

Others remarked about the small size of the staff and how that generated duties beyond administration. COVID-19 also exposed the lack of staff. Francis, discussing some of the associated changes, remarked,

> Right now, the lunch supervisors are the lady that takes the money at the register and myself. We used to have staff help all with lunch supervision. Well, if we don't have them, then we have more study halls, so we can have 12 kids in the study hall instead of 18 to 19, and then even more.

Some remarked that their duties during the pandemic were about doing what needs to be done. Francis put it simply, saying, "So it's kind of just like doing whatever needed to be done." Georgia added, "I'm rolling up my sleeves and getting in there." William summed it up this way, "As a rural school and small school, I think you just find out what needs to be done and you just go and do it."

Many community members expected such leaders to be adept in the rural lifestyle, live in the community, participate in community events, and be a community role model (Preston,

2013). This notion was expressed by several of the participants. Living in the community was important to William, who suggested, "If you're going to work at a rural school or even a small school, I think it's important that the principal lives in that community." Georgia has enjoyed living in the community where she is principal, though she said that after 10 years, she is still considered a newcomer. She added, "I believe in volunteering and being at events and being present. My relationship with the community is really strong. They really trust me. They know I'm doing what's best for the kids in town." Georgia added more, saying, "No matter where you go, everyone knows you and that you are always representing the school." Francis provided a comment from a different perspective, targeting teachers. He suggested, "You gotta have people who are interested in living in and coming to a rural community." This spoke to the larger point of community. Gordon suggested that not living in the community is a negative, intimating, "I think there is a drawback." He does enjoy this aspect of the job, adding that he and his wife enjoy going to after-school events. He critiqued others who complained about having little to no time because they had to participate in extracurricular activities.

Preston et al. (2013) mentioned that some of these duties seem to be more than the requisite responsibilities of a traditional principal. Nontraditional roles emerged as a subtheme. Some participants identified their roles and responsibilities as nontraditional. Arlo, Marlen, and Georgia reflected on how they found themselves managing facilities, working with social services and the sheriff's department, directing athletics programs, calling substitutes, managing daycares, and teaching ELL students.

The participants provided robust comments that answered research question one. Rural school leaders continue to experience multiple roles and responsibilities, some of which tend to be outside the traditional scope of principals. On occasion, they did not recognize that they have

incurred many of these roles and responsibilities. Working in a rural school contributed to this phenomenon.

Research Question Two

The results from question two, on how rural school principals perceive their leadership styles, supported Northouse's (2016) theory on leadership, and the participants provided comments related to the four components of leadership. The participants were asked questions on how they would describe their leadership style, what processes they have in place to influence their staff, how they would describe effective leadership, and how they have had to modify their leadership styles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each participant discussed their perception of their demonstrated leadership style. The participants described themselves as collaborative, distributive, thoughtful, task-oriented, laid-back, or servant. Three of the four participants who described their style as servant leaders remarked that they were introduced to that style during a master's level course. Arlo said that the "theme in my programming [at school] was really all about servant leadership." Francis, similarly, was exposed to servant leadership at school, stating, "One thing they really hammer on in every single class is the idea of servant leadership." William also mentioned his exposure to servant leadership while at school, saying that he had "done enough classes [in that] program that I believe in [it]. I subscribe to that." Others asserted that doing what needed to be done and being of service to others were components of their style.

The question on influence, specifically what processes each principal had in place to influence their staff, covered three aspects of leadership. First, according to Preston and Barnes (2017), principals have to influence their staff. Second, they have to lead through groups, an aspect of influence (Northouse, 2016). Third, the process by which they lead is more of a

transaction (Northhouse, 2016). Fourth, rural school principals must demonstrate qualities of trust

for and collaboration with the staff (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Arlo said that he influenced by

meeting regularly with his staff, adding, "It's just a listening process, right? It's giving them the

opportunity to feel heard." He further stated, "I always try to start faculty meetings with sharing

positives, both personally and professionally." Marlen also used staff meetings. Francis

employed principal advisory committees to influence his staff. When discussing the committees,

he said, "The staff brings to me any concerns. I bring to them thoughts or things that are coming

down the pipeline." Further, he mentioned, "That's an opportunity for a softening, so to speak.

You know, kind of a soft open on ideas. It also gives voice to some of the most respected

teachers in the building." Marlen, Francis, and Arlo listed getting to know the staff and teachers,

being more personable, understanding their problems and who they are, and being available as

efforts they used to influence. Habegger (2008) touched on positive cultures in schools, noting

that when principals use approaches that include being personable and available and attempting

to get to know their teachers and staff, they contribute to the formation of positive cultures.

William acknowledged that he did not have any set processes for influence, instead

mentioning "transparency" as his usual method. He later returned to the topic, remarking, "On

staff development days, I still try and do some fun stuff. We still do our professional

development during the morning." Pearl described her influence process this way: "We try to

have PLC [a professional learning community]." She added, "We try to understand what we

stand for at the school." Gordon talked about planting seeds and cultivating. He illustrated the

approach by saying, "I do a lot of individual just walk-by talking to people," adding that he often

asks, "By the way, what do you think about this thing?" He uses this method as a way to avoid

being the leader who comes up with all the ideas. Peter used a different tactic. He admitted that

he preferred to "really explain my thought process and open it up for discussion as much as possible." Georgia, taking a different approach, argued that "surveys are a great way" to influence. She added, "Goal setting is huge for us."

Real leadership is attained when leaders lead through groups (Northouse, 2016). Preston and Barnes (2017) found that successful rural school principals develop relationships with the staff, parents, students, and community stakeholders. Arlo described his relationship with the students as "pretty comfortable." With parents, he recalled, "I don't seem to have any issues." When it came to the stakeholders, he characterized the relationship as "probably down the middle of the road." He found dealing with some of the veteran teachers difficult. Marlen found the small size of the school facilitated a good relationship with the students, calling it "personable." He had a similar relationship with the parents for the same reason. Of his relationships with stakeholders, he expressed that they had improved over the course of his time at the school. With teachers, he said, "The biggest difference in a rural school is you get to know all of the staff and all of the different problems." He portrayed his relationship with other staff as "pretty close to the same" as with the teachers.

Francis said that in his relationships with the students, "I'm the kind of guy who [wants] to get to know every face and every name." He added, "My relationship with the students is very close, very positive." Similarly, he suggested his relationship with the parents was "very strong." With the community stakeholders, he used terms like "working relationship" and "positive." His relationship with teachers and staff was built on trust; he felt they trusted him. William, like Francis described his relationship with his students as "positive." He used the term "transparency" to describe his relationship with the parents and "very good" and "family" to

describe his relationship with the teachers and staff. He prefaced his statements about the community stakeholders using two terms: "weird" and "unique."

When discussing relationships, Pearl had plenty to say. She had only good remarks about teachers and staff, but she did not know if her teachers and staff were qualified. She followed up by asserting that she had a "very strong relationship" with the paraprofessionals. With the students, she described herself as "the person everyone knows." The relationship with parents was considered "good." Georgia, on the other hand, mentioned that she found her approach with the staff helpful, because she understands her staff is willing to do what she asks because they know she is willing to do the same for them. She also extended that comment to include the parents, which demonstrated her ability to influence beyond her staff.

There were several occasions when participants elaborated on goals and accomplishments as mentioned in chapter 4. Some chose to explain these during the conversation on effective leadership. Others elaborated when discussing how some of their actions reinforced what they were trying to accomplish. Georgia specifically said, "And are they [teachers and staff] challenged and focused on meeting goals? If you can say, [yes], there's growth, achievement growth, high achievement, or at least growth in the student achievement…you got effective leadership." When discussing her largest role, she said, "Helping people set [goals], monitoring, meet goals, to get to that big vision, and doing it." William mentioned goals when talking about effective leadership, saying his goal is to ensure "everybody's on the same wavelength." He added, "I won't even say it's necessarily accomplishing your goal." Instead, he associated goals with the school's vision statement. Further, he talked about establishing a positive environment as a component of accomplishing goals. Pearl described her goal as wanting the teachers and

students to understand that she has their best interest in mind, and she is willing to sacrifice her personal time to ensure they know that.

Marlen mentioned relationship building was a means to accomplishing goals within the school. He talked about the importance of talking to parents, students, and stakeholders. To him, calming the waters before storms reduced the potential impact of misunderstandings and disagreements. He said that it is "a lot easier to defuse those when you've got a personal relationship with people." That approach allowed for continued focus on accomplishing goals without distractions. Arlo offered that he told his teachers "to spend time planning [their] instruction to meet your essential goals for your unit and providing feedback to kids."

This section provided answers to the study's second research question. The participants' responses supported the conceptual framework and addressed each component of leadership. The participants had processes in place to influence their staffs and teachers in which they demonstrated influence, led through groups, and provided an atmosphere for teachers and staff to work toward common goals.

Implications

This research study employed Northouse's (2016) leadership theoretical framework to provide an understanding of how rural school principals perceived their roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles. The results of this study have implications for potential change at the local and district level, specifically with principals, superintendents, and district leaders and administrators. Wider implications exist at the municipal, county, and state levels.

The implications at the individual level may inform rural principals, district leaders, and district administrators of how current rural school principals perceive their roles and responsibilities. Further, this same group of leaders may glean an understanding of some of the

leadership styles currently employed at rural schools. The study revealed that the roles and responsibilities rural school principals encountered were multiple, unexpected, and nontraditional in nature, and in some cases, the principals were unfamiliar with their roles and responsibilities. This result aligns with several studies that addressed the components of roles and responsibilities that rural school principals incurred (Ewington et al., 2008; Starr & White, 2008; Wieczorek & Manard, 2008; Nelson, 2019).

Implications at the municipal, county, and state levels may inform officials and policymakers as mentioned by Monk (2007), Preston et al. (2013), and Versland (2013). They posited that an understanding of this problem may spur interest in specific policies and programs, including hiring, training, and professional development. Though the studies did not mention technology specifically, it should be considered as a component in this implication. Studies from Mentz et al. (2012), Kalonde (2017), and Du Plessis (2017) considered the challenges of inadequate technology capacities. Some of the participants discussed the technological challenges they encountered, especially as byproducts of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as managing high-speed internet and large quantities of digital content, general technological support when using online teaching platforms like Google Meet or Google Classroom, lack of technological skills across the staff, and lack of modern hardware, such as smart boards or touch screens. Nonetheless, studies by Barter (2013), Cullen et al. (2006), Gordon (2011), and Howley et al. (2011) have explained the benefits of technology in schools, such as closing the outreach gap that rural isolation creates; reductions in the educational equity gap; expansion of technological opportunities and infrastructure, creating learning opportunities; and opportunities for teachers to use technology in classrooms, which increases their comfort levels with technology. The COVID-19 pandemic brought technology and its benefits and deficiencies to the

forefront, causing principals to focus on the challenges and opportunities that technology presents. These studies could serve as a basis on which policymakers and officials further their understanding with respect to the benefits of technology in rural schools.

This section discussed implications derived from the study. Understanding the roles and responsibilities of rural school leaders, from the individual to the state level, may offer a greater appreciation for the role and provide more attention, and ultimately more resources, to the position. Understanding and addressing the technology challenges associated with rural schools may provide opportunities to positively impact student academic achievement.

Recommendations for Action

This study explored the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals and their leadership styles. The following sections discuss my recommendations for action.

Rural School Specific Professional Development Training

Preston et al. (2013) stressed that rural principals are subjected to challenging circumstances, including lack of administrative support and staff, resource constraints, unqualified teachers, hiring difficulties, and inadequate professional development programs. This recommendation focuses on increasing access to professional development programs for rural school principals. This recommendation is driven by the responses the participants in this study provided with respect to their unfamiliarity with their roles and responsibilities. Another component of this recommendation is driven by five participants who arrived in their current positions by encouragement, volition, or educational program rather than a professional principal developmental pipeline. Not only should professional development be provided, but it should be rural school specific. This was mentioned by Preston et al. (2013) as well, who suggested that rural principals should receive developmental assistance that addresses aspects of the rural

community. In addition to professional development opportunities, district leaders should work to create a support network of rural school principals. Canales et al. (2008) posited that rural school leaders should have a network of mentors and peer support groups. This network could create a collaborative forum where principals share experiences, request assistance, distribute resources, discuss best practices, and commiserate over challenges. Professional development training for principals may provide the necessary insight, set expectations, or generate a network to better prepare rural school principals prior to assuming the role or assist them while in the position.

Funding for Staffing

Howely, Rhodes, and Beall (2009) revealed that reduced funding and limited resources make rural schools less attractive to teachers and other staff members. The participants in this study mentioned that teaching in a rural environment is not attractive to would-be and current teachers and staff members. Conversely, Nelson (2019) and Ewington et al. (2008) indicated that schools with adequate funding and staff tend to do well in achieving academic excellence. However, they noted that this is not usually the case in rural schools. Acknowledging this paradox, the participants in this study added that the environment poses challenges to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. This recommendation encourages municipal, county, and state leaders to consider increasing funding to the schools, allowing for raises in teaching salaries to potentially offset the reluctance to come to rural schools and reduce the motivation to leave a rural school. Determining the components of the funding is more complicated, considering that a portion of school funding is derived through local tax policies and guidelines. This recommendation is solely focused on apportionment considerations at the municipal, county, and state levels. Increasing teacher and staff salaries would provide an opportunity to increase or

maintain the ranks of qualified teachers and possibly reduce the migration of teachers and staff to higher-paying schools. This would ultimately free rural school principals from wearing multiple hats and executing multiple roles, especially those that are related to teaching and staff functions.

This section provided details on two recommendations generated by this study. Both topics, professional development training and funding, were identified as critical components of rural school principalship in previous studies. Professional development seeks to provide principals with the necessary tools prior to and during their tenure. Funding, as it relates to staffing, ensures the school has the appropriate talent, ultimately freeing principals from multiple roles and responsibilities because of staffing voids.

Recommendations for Further Study

This study provided information on some of the dynamics associated with rural schools. Though not addressed in detail, resistance to change and technology were raised during the interviews. The literature review revealed these topics as barriers and challenges that are prevalent at rural schools. Lamkin (2006) listed resistance to change as a challenge that impacts rural schools, as mentioned by this study's participants. Not only does this impact the academic components of schools, such as curriculum, but there is a funding component involved, such as local tax increases to support the school. Future studies should measure community resistance in rural school communities or examine the impact and influence of such resistance to change. A feature of that study should incorporate aspects of the resistance, such as minimizing education, perception of school leadership salaries, and political ideology.

Technology and the lack thereof at rural schools should be given future study consideration. On any given day, technology poses challenges in rural schools and their associated communities. Du Plessis (2017) mentioned that the lack of technological capacity

presents academic achievement challenges to rural schools. Kalonde (2017) asserted that technology is critical for school success in the 21st century and implored teachers to become competent with technology and bring that capacity into the classroom. Participants from this study expressed a range of thoughts and emotions on technology. Many comments were relevant and poignant, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic still present in the communities. Future studies should explore the impact technology has on rural schools. A specific future study should seek to understand the impact technology has on academic achievement in rural schools.

This section provided considerations for future studies. Resistance to change and technology presented barriers to some of the rural school principals who participated in this study, and previous studies provided support for these claims. Understanding these challenges is worth consideration. Future studies should address these challenges and provide remedies to school leaders and officials.

Conclusion

This was a qualitative comparative case study that explored the roles, responsibilities, and leadership styles of rural school principals. The study setting involved eight rural schools in southwestern Wisconsin. Themes identified in the analysis included roles, responsibilities, leadership, and challenges. Subthemes such as servant leadership, funding, staffing, academics, unfamiliarity with roles, multiple roles, nontraditional roles, and safety emerged from the interviews. This study offers insights with respect to the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals and their leadership styles. It gives voice to eight rural school principals who enjoy their positions despite the challenges. Their experiences illustrate the uniqueness of and distinct characteristics associated with rural schools. This study contributes to the greater body of scholarship on rural schools and encourages further and deeper exploration into some of the

results and findings. The study presents actions for rural principals, administrators, and local and

state leaders to consider going forward. The recommendations, if considered and implemented,

could have a positive impact on the students, parents, principals, and communities.

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Appendix A

Request for Letters of Support

Dear Mr. or Mrs. (Superintendent),

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study in schools in your district. I am a doctoral student at the University of New England (UNE). This research is partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in transformational leadership from UNE. I am in the process of completing my dissertation, entitled "Exploring the Roles, Responsibilities, and Leadership Styles of Rural School Principals." I am seeking participants who are rural school principals and have been in this role for at least a year. The purpose of the study is to explore the roles and responsibilities of rural school principals and their leadership styles.

I hope the school administration will allow me to recruit principals within the district to participate in the study. Interested participants will receive, review, and sign a consent form outlining the study's parameters. The consent form discusses the study's components, ensuring participants understand the expectations, that participation is voluntary, and that they can withdraw from the study at any time.

If granted approval, participants will be interviewed via telephone or teleconference. Schools and participants will be given pseudonyms, and collected information will be confidential and safeguarded. Study participants and schools will incur no costs.

I would appreciate approval to conduct this study with members of your school district. If you have any questions and/or concerns, please contact me at the following: jlhewitt2@une.edu.

If you agree, please sign the attachment and return to jhewitt2@une.edu. Also, please provide a letter of permission on your institution's letterhead, granting me permission to conduct the study at schools in your district. Those letters can be submitted to the same email address above.

Thank you,
John Hewitt

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your educational background and your work experience?

2. What brought you to this position?
2a. How did you become the principal?

3. When you think of rural schools, what is the first thing that comes to your mind?

4. How many students are enrolled in your school?
4a. Please describe your relationship with your students.
4b. Please describe your relationship with their parents.
4c. Please describe your relationship with community stakeholders.

5. How many teachers are in the school?
5a. Please describe your relationship with your teachers.

6. Number of staff?
6a. Role of the staff?
6b. Please describe your relationship with your staff.

7. What challenges do you face as a rural school principal?

8. How do those challenges impact your work, i.e., your duties as a principal?

9. How would you describe your roles associated with being a principal?
9a. Which roles are not traditionally associated with being a principal?

10. How would you describe your leadership style?
10a. How does the staff react to this style?
10b. What process or processes are in place to influence the staff?

11. What did you expect when you applied for the job?
11a. In what ways have your expectations been met, fallen short, or been exceeded?
11b. What have been some unexpected roles and responsibilities?

12. How would you describe effective leadership?

13. What are some distinct challenges rural schools encounter?

14. How do the added responsibilities (if they exist) factor into everyday school life?

15. What types of "out of the building, after-work requirements" exist, if any?
15a. If they do exist, what do they entail?

15b. How do these reinforce what you are trying to accomplish at school?

16. How do these roles impact – in any way – your principalship?

17. How do these responsibilities impact – in any way – your principalship?

18. What would you say is your largest role?

19. Your largest responsibility?

20. What academic challenges are you facing?

21. Are there funding challenges in a rural school?

22. How difficult is it to recruit and hire quality staff?

23. How difficult is it to engage parents and get them involved?

24a. During this pandemic, many schools used remote learning as their vehicle for instruction.
24b. Did you have challenges with Wi-Fi?
24c. How did you address them?

25. In what ways have you had to adjust or modify your leadership style based on the school setting?

26. Any other thoughts you might like to share with me?