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RURAL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS AFFECTING MOTIVATION TO IMPROVE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE.

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Educational Leadership

RURAL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS AFFECTING MOTIVATION TO IMPROVE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE.

Abstract

School principals and teachers being a powerful force of social change is a well-established argument. While literature confirms the substantial impact school leaders and teachers have on improving organizations and student outcomes, there is a dearth of granular knowledge related to how rural school principals in China influence teachers' motivation to improve professional practice. Thus, by engaging in a qualitative study leveraging the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) this study aimed to illuminate the principals' behaviors that teachers perceived as having significant impact on their motivation to improve practice. As part of its conceptual framework, the study incorporated a theoretical framework that combined the Behavioral Theory of Leadership with Social Contagion Theory. Seven participants from various rural schools in mainland China participated in the study and in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in two rounds over a two-month timescale in the Fall of 2020. The findings revealed that rural school leaders' behaviors most germane to teachers' motivation to improve professional practice were genuine care and concern for teachers' well-being, accessibility and tempered friendliness, consequential dialogical discourse, articulated communication of school-based expectations and initiatives, avoidance of dogmatic micromanagement on classroom-based matters, perceptible consistency, and appreciable predictability. Recommendations for further study center on future longitudinal studies aimed at investigating the observed phenomenon over time and in different settings and a deeper investigation into the nature of principal friendliness to ascertain degrees to which teachers deem it to be appropriate.

Keywords

Rural schools, rural principals, rural teachers, rural schooling China, teacher improvement.

University of New England

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that teaching is a noble calling with the potential to improve lives and our world. Hence, it is within reason to view educators as agents of positive social change. Social change is ultimately about creating a world where individuals can flourish and be at their best (Heninger, 2018). As educators, teachers shape minds and shape futures (Anchan, 2014; Geher, 2015), which make a difference in the lives of many students (Estioko, 2019). Given the importance of teachers in children's lives, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms that affect teachers' motivation to improve themselves as educational practitioners. The imperative is especially important in the overlooked research area of rural education (Cuervo, 2016). A substantive way to help rural contexts enhance teachers' capacity is through a better understanding of the transformative influence school principals have on teachers due to the demonstrable effects school leaders have on school improvement (Davies & Halsey, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2009). Rural contexts are especially challenged owing, in part, to their geographic isolation (Klar et al., 2019) that contributes to making rural schools into under-resourced underperforming contexts (Brewer & Klar, 2014; Young, 2018).

In international contexts such as China where the research took place, the imperative was further undergirded by the fact that Chinese rural schools have high teacher turnover, which amplifies principalship challenges in such rural contexts that typically feature an economy of scarcity (Lui & Hallinger, 2017). Giving more significance to this author's study was the reality that China's mainland has the most extensive state-run system in the world with over 50,000 high schools, many of which are in non-urban locales (Textor, 2020). Rural schools in China are of utmost importance as they are a "primary manifestation of the state" (Li, 2016, p. 9).

Adding to the imperative is China's growing number of international schools, which number approximately 800 (Atack, 2019). China has a substantial appetite for international schooling where approximately half of the international schools are outside of urban centers like Shanghai and Beijing (Inter Nations Consultancy, 2018). In the aggregate, the vast number of rural schools, and the number of international schools in China, made the research effort necessary and a matter of social justice.

The research effort was, in a significant way, aimed at uplifting rural educational schooling through understanding higher forms of teacher-principal interactions that may give rise to scope for empowering disadvantaged rural contexts to better shape their future (Cuervo, 2016). Therefore, this phenomenological study was dedicated to helping rural educational contexts, and rural educational leaders, comprehend the minutiae of how school leaders affect teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative processes intended to improve professional practice. The intention was that the research effort add to the existing corpus of knowledge and fill gaps within the body of existing literature.

In framing the context of the study regarding the definition or rural, the study utilized the definitions of the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2015) and the United States Census Bureau (2010) where both classify communities numbering fewer than 50,000 people as rural. Also used as a criterion is the definition of the United States Department of Agriculture that does not merely characterize rural as being that of the countryside but as non-metro areas outside the boundaries of core metro areas, which include detached micropolitan areas with urban clusters of less than 50,000 people (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019). Including detached micropolitan areas was a natural annex given that some micropolitan schools in China are

situated contextually with the same economy of scarcity as “rural” contexts despite their relative proximity to core metropolitan areas (Robbins, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

The problem of leadership practice focuses on school leaders' influence on teachers’ efforts to motivate and engage them in processes intended to improve professional practice. The problem relates to the dearth of granular understandings of the mechanisms by which teachers’ motivation to improve in rural schools in China is affected by school leaders. As the research of rural principalship in global and Chinese contexts is scarce and features mainly narrow focus and broad-brush studies examining the general role rural principals have within schools (Ärlestig et al., 2016; Wang & Lewin, 2016), a clear need of the research was to understand the granularity of how principals’ leadership behavior affects teachers’ motivation to engage in developmental processes directed toward professional practice improvement. The focus was to discern the “way, manner or means through which principals might enact leadership practices that are constructive (helpful, beneficial, fruitful, useful)” (Davies & Halsey, 2019, p. 112) in motivating rural teaching practitioners to engage in processes (practice is a synonym) intended to improve professional practice.

There is a need for a conscious interface between principalship practice and the specific needs of the rural teachers to prevent rural principals from engaging in behaviors not germane to institutional demands, especially vis-à-vis instructional leadership. For example, if a rural principal needs to engage in modeling behavior or relationship building with teachers but is preoccupied with teaching classes or dealing with a plethora of minor time-consuming issues, then it is within reason to surmise that the misalignment between what the organizational members need from the leader and what the leader is doing is liable to produce detrimental

effects to the school. The occurrence of misalignment not only creates impoverished opportunities for rural school leaders to improve organizational outcomes but may also render the practice of rural principalship a haphazard proposition where the principal is mostly an aftermath planner (Martin, 2016). The uncoordinated principalship effort diminishes the effectiveness rural schools have within their communities (Holden, 2017; Liu & Hallinger, 2017) and may render discourse for increased attention to rural schooling a listless endeavor.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine rural teacher perceptions of the ways their school principal's behavior affects motivation for engagement in ongoing improvement of professional practice. Using a phenomenological methodology, the study aimed to understand the essence of teachers' lived experiences with regards to principals' behaviors that energize their (teachers') transformational efforts. The study encompassed the aim of generating rich knowledge on principalship behaviors decisive to motivating teachers toward professional self-improvement.

As qualitative examinations necessitate research questions in order to narrow down inquiry (Creswell, 2013a), this study leveraged two research questions intended to understand the nature of the phenomenon under study that focused on the teacher-leader relational dyad. The data may inform rural educational practitioners as to principalship behaviors fielding potential to act as energizing inducers to teacher professional development and improvement. Further, the research sought to examine the nature of leadership behaviors toward followers and what behaviors are "helpful, beneficial, fruitful, useful" (Davies & Halsey, 2019, p. 112) forces of transformational influence on faculty. While the study focus was on leadership behavior that affects motivation for engagement in efforts intended for positive change in faculty professional

practice, the research included collecting and analyzing data on principals' behaviors that have an adverse effect on teachers' motivation to engage in improvement efforts. Hence, identifying the energizing inducers and principal behaviors that antagonize teachers' commitment toward improvement may serve to develop integrative understandings of leader practices perceived by teachers as influential and deleterious to their improvement. The data analysis and discussion may assist rural school leaders in disarticulating ineffective instructional leadership practices.

Inherent within the purpose of the study is potential for transforming rural schooling contexts and reducing long-standing inequities on the rural-urban relational dyad (Cuervo, 2016; Heckhausen, 2010; O'Donoghue & Clarke, 2010; Wang & Lewin, 2016). An additional benefit is the study's potential for informing principalship training programs and resolving dilemmas related to marketing rural schools to attract qualified practitioners (Paynter & Taylor, 2018; Young, 2018). The research effort was also imbued with the intention of being, what Sugerman et al. (2011, p. 39) term, an "energizing leader," and put forth a genuine researcher-practitioner action toward social change agentry. The intention was for the research to help rural school leaders and research scholars in understanding the particularized processes by which transformational change can be accomplished in rural schools. The positive contribution the research effort may instantiate is especially important to leaders currently employed as rural school principals in China.

Research Questions

Berg and Lune (2017) suggest that research ideas flow into establishing initial research questions (RQs). Blaxter et al. (2010) note that research literature suggests that refined research questions effectively determine the methods used to answer them. Hence, the study in this paper focused on two research questions:

RQ1: How does teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative professional practice relate to the school principal's leadership behavior?

RQ2: What do teachers perceive are the principalship behaviors that affect their motivation to engage in efforts directed toward transforming professional practice?

Both questions naturally dovetailed into one another and helped form a comprehensive understanding of rural principalship sentient to its context. More specifically the research questions contributed to identifying behaviors which affect teachers' motivation to improve and detail the mechanisms by which the identified behaviors prompt improvements. The questions were best suited to be addressed through a qualitative research methodology—phenomenology—which allows for rich understanding of individual experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The findings of the study can be leveraged to calibrate a responsive, and more attune, principalship profile for rural school leaders.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework incorporated the key concepts of interaction and behavior under examination as part of the teacher-leader phenomenological dyad. Thus, core to the conceptual framework was the theoretical framework that served as a lumen to focus the research effort on behavioral practices that teachers perceive as related, and integral, to motivating their commitment to professional improvement. The theories aptly interfaced with the investigation's research questions through acting in conjunction and dovetailing, with one another. The two theories are social contagion theory and the behavioral theory of leadership. The former theory holds that people favor stimulating interactions (Christakisa & Fowler, 2012) while the behavioral theory of leadership focuses on how leaders' combination of task and relationships

behaviors influences goal attainment in followers (Northouse, 2016). The two theories naturally complement each other as both focus on behaviors of the leader-follow relational pairing.

The conceptual framework was also driven by a generative impulse of the researcher originating from professional vice-principalship tenure in an isolated high school in rural China. The experience was transformative and prompted genuine cogitations on the nature of leadership. Motivating the contemplative effort was the realization that the rural context was challenged to attract highly qualified teachers, which made it very important to understand leaders' role in influencing teachers to improve professional practice. The disposition led to topical research into rural principalship and how it affects rural schooling contexts in various locales around the world. The research of literature made apparent the multiformity of challenges principals and teachers in rural contexts face, which created a compelling urge to engage in research on how to optimally leverage the principalship to improve teachers' professional practice.

The final element of the conceptual framework connected the research effort to intellectual research that firmly established teachers as linchpins of student learning and student success (Mahoney, 2012) and even to students' psychological health (Tang, 2018). Hence, it stands to reason that, with teachers being integral to student success, the need to understand how best to help leaders of learners—teachers—improve and learn is as foregone a conclusion as it is compelling. Thus, the research presented aimed to accomplish the task of delving into the essence of the phenomenon of school leaders (principals) influencing teachers' motivation to engage in actions directed toward practitioner improvement.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

The assumptions for this study centered on the truthfulness of the data that needed to be collected through a two-stage interview process with each of the participants. The third-stage interviews were conducted to probe deeper into discrepant thematic areas. It was deemed that the nature of data collection, which occurred remotely via virtual sessions with participants situated in the comfort of their own homes, would produce reliable and trustworthy data allowing for a candid investigation. To the extent that rapport between the researcher and participants influenced the degree to which participants were comfortable with participating in the research process, the rapport also created a 'comfort factor'. The level of comfort played a significant role by cause of the interface with the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA)—the approach chosen as fitting to uncover the nature of the phenomenon under study—where interviews can last approximately one hour or more (Alase, 2017). Hence, it was within reason to anticipate relaxed interview sessions that, owing to their length and degree of participant comfort, yielded rich data.

Limitations of the research centered on the author's experience level related to conducting qualitative research and past employment in a rural context. Namely, the author's last engagement in research was four years ago (at the time of conducting the research), which made it reasonable to argue how the proposed research effort would be challenging at first. More arresting a limitation was researcher bias, which according to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) can inject the researcher's own subjectivity into the investigative process especially when the investigator is, or has been, part of the context. This author acknowledges the fact that past employment tenure in a rural context had the potential to inject a degree of subjectivity into the

inquiry. To account for and mitigate own bias, detailed bias-mitigation protocols were formed (explicated in Chapter 3).

Another limitation was related to the nature of the collected data. Namely, each individuals' experience is a single-perspective representation of reality (Morse, 2018). While the research aim was to understand the lived experiences of teachers with respect to their leaders' behaviors that affect motivation for engagement in professional practice improvement processes, the researcher acknowledged that a participant's depiction was a partial representation of the phenomenon. However, the partial representation of the phenomenon fits the aim of the study, which was to understand the phenomenon as experienced by a single group—teachers. Also, acknowledged was that participants' depictions of their school principals were not a representation of the essence of the principals. It was beyond the scope of the study to examine the principals' character (or that of the participants), which attenuated the adverse impact toward answering the core research questions.

Another area beyond the scope of the study was examining whether teachers' engagement in regenerative practices resulted in verifiable improvement as measured by student outcomes, teacher evaluations, classroom observations and document analysis. Hence, the delimitation of the proposed study was set at examining leader behaviors motivating followers toward improvement; therefore, delving into an investigation measuring the results and effects of the impetus for improvement could be an expansive longitudinal study in the future that extends beyond the delimitation.

Rationale and Significance of Proposed Study

The study is significant for the field of education as it provides a new way of thinking of rural principalship practice: Calibration of school leadership practice to its own context with

regard to motivating practitioners to improve the professional self. This infers a symbiotic relationship whereby the rural teachers transform the principal and the principal effectuates transformation of the same teaching practitioners. The reciprocity is an ideation confirmed by Northouse (2016) and Giles et al. (2012) who note that leadership occurs in context and, in turn, the context exerts influence on leadership. The context-leadership dyad is one that can be construed as a symbiotic relationship of co-adaptation and co-evolution. As rural principalship research is an underexamined domain within the field of educational leadership (DiPaola & Hoy, 2015), atomized studies such as the one detailed in this dissertation warrant scholarly attention as they give rise to scope for means by which scholars can granularly unpack the anatomy of rural principalship—related to improving and enhancing faculty—in rural schooling contexts. The study may contribute to leadership theory by illuminating the crux of both effective and mis-aligned practices on the rural-principal to rural-teacher relational coupling. It is the mis-alignment of principalship practice to the needs of rural teachers that prevents educational leaders from exercising what Bieneman (2011) ideates as transformative agency.

Thus, the study may help rural school leaders be more contextually responsive, which means engaging with institutional actors through continuous interaction and dialogue to develop sensitivity to the needs of the practitioners of the schooling context. It is within reason to argue that developing a conscious leader-context interface may enable rural school leaders to pro-actively minimize the constraints of the context to avoid becoming mere aftermath planners. By contrast, the proposed study diverges from the long-established Situational Leadership® model where leaders diagnose a situation to ascertain an individual's (or team's) level of competence in order to apply the correct leadership style for the purposes of accomplishing a specific task (Hersey et al., 2012). The proposed study advocates an approach where dialogue and interaction

may be used to guide the process of shaping rural principalship; the Situational Leadership® model, by contrast, depends on leaders alone to diagnose a situation in order to adjust their own leadership style (Northouse, 2016).

Another significant benefit of the study lies in its China-based context where few, if any, studies exist that examine the morphology of rural principalship related to motivating teachers' commitment to engage in ongoing improvement of professional practice. The study's uniqueness makes it an instrumental study, which is not solely confined to presenting a particular situation but intended to inform other contexts (Stake, 2010), especially those in Chinese rural locales. A minutiae-based understanding of how to adjust rural principalship practice to the development needs of rural teachers contributes to enhanced student learning and improves graduate outcomes (Byun et al., 2012). The minutiae-based understanding can contribute to molding rural schooling contexts into "empowered settings" (Aber et al., 2011, p. 99) that contribute to social justice through enhanced equity and an upsurge in parity with urban schooling contexts. The research may also help rural school principals better comprehend how to systematically arrange and transform their practices and behaviors so as to bring about an improved performance of institutional actors, which forms the core of virtuous leadership behavior (Bogotch, 2015) and is the centermost mooring of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Birasnav et al., 2010; Shields, 2010). This connects with the ideation of Drucker (2010) who notes that the task of leadership is to align organizational strengths so as to render an organization's weaknesses irrelevant.

Definition of Terms

Aftermath planner/Aftermath planning: Leaders who, owing to constraints of the internal and external environment, are not able to exercise full leadership agency; such leaders are relegated to the role of exercising leadership that is more reactive than pro-active (Martin, 2016).

Calibrating practice: Calibration is a process of carefully planning or devising (something) for the purposes of accomplishing precise use, application, and/or appeal (Dictionary.com, 2019). With regard to the research presented in this dissertation, calibration of practice is a recursive regimen of fine-tuning one's leadership practice through continuous interaction and dialogue with organizational members. In the context of this author's proposed research it is thought of more as adjusting and aligning than merely measuring and reacting.

Conscious interface: Leaders' consciousnesses that implies the ability of leaders to perceive, observe, interact, and engage in discourse with followers to adapt leadership practice that has fidelity to organizational needs. Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation study, a conscious interface is construed as active responsivity of the leader to the dynamics of the organization given the situational realties of the locale and individual organizational actors within (Robbins & Micevic, 2018, December 25). While appearing to have similarity to Situational Leadership Theory (Northouse, 2016), the ideation of conscious interface extends beyond Situational Leadership tenets through indicating the need for leaders to have a more encompassing awareness of organizations as being open systems (Wheatley, 2006) where organizational actors shape one another as they interact and engage in productive discourse with each other.

Professional practice (teachers): Leveraging of relevant pedagogy, resources, evaluation and assessment (Ontario College of Teachers, 2016), teaching models and instruction processes

(Çiğdem, 2016) and refinement through continuous reflection and inquiry (Glasswell & Ryan, 2017; Trede et al., 2019).

Rural: Communities under 50,000 people (United States Census Bureau, 2010; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2015), or detached non-metro areas outside the boundaries of metro areas, which include micropolitan areas with urban clusters of less than 50,000 people (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019).

Symbiotic relationship: An interdependent relationship where, to progress beyond the their current states, entities need each other and mutually shape one another (Oborne, 1986; Todoriki et al., 2002).

Conclusion

Teachers change the lives of many (Estioko, 2019) and it is within reason to argue that investing in the development of teachers is as important as investing in the development of students. One way to assist the development of teachers as professional practitioners can be to develop deeper understandings of school leaders' influence on the transformation of teaching practitioners, especially in under-resourced rural contexts (Brewer & Klar, 2014; Young, 2018). The imperative of this study was to examine how rural school principals affects teachers' motivation to engage in professional practice improvement efforts. The study's imperative was especially important given that rural education is an overlooked research area (Cuervo, 2016). Rural education research is scarce and typically manages to present normative broad-brush investigations on principalship (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Ärlestig et al., 2016; Ashton & Duncan, 2012; Beesley & Clark, 2015; Parson et al., 2016; Real & Botia, 2017; Reeves & VanTuyle, 2014; Surface & Theobald, 2014) or narrow-focus studies of limited dimensionality on principalship (Duma, 2015b; Gray & Summers, 2015; Hardwick-Franco, 2018; Hartell et al.,

2016; Huggins et al., 2017; Kempa et al., 2017; Mette et al., 2016). Hence, it is vital to expand the boundaries of educational research knowledge on rural school leadership, especially in contexts such as China, which boasts the largest state-run schooling system in the world, with over 50, 000 high schools alone (Textor, 2020). Given the fact that rural schools in China are traditionally construed as an extension of the Chinese state (Li, 2016), it can be argued that it was vital to extend and enrich the corpus of research knowledge on principalship in rural schools in terms of its role in developing teaching faculty.

Hence, the research aimed to understand the mechanisms by which rural schoolteachers in mainland China are motivationally affected by their school principals' behaviors to engage in ongoing professional practice improvement processes. Using two guiding research questions, the study deployed the qualitative research methodology with a focus on leveraging the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). Conducive to understanding the nature of the phenomenon was IPA's attribute of small sample sizes that explore in-depth telling cases of participants' lived experiences (Alase, 2017). A criterion-based sample of seven participants was selected and data collected through a total of two rounds of semi-structured interviews. Follow-up third-round interviews with select participants were conducted to probe discrepant areas that emerged from the data. In addition to understanding better the nature of the investigated phenomenon, it was this author's aim that the research would be used as a heuristic guide, for rural practitioners and scholars, by which to calibrate and create optimal rural principalship profiles tailored to unique needs of rural teachers. Ultimately, the broad-brush aim was to help elevate rural educational contexts.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is abundant research of urban principalship (Ärlestig et al., 2016), which is not the case with research into rural schooling owing to the paucity of inquiry into rural principals' influence on teachers' motivation to improve professional practice. Thus, the need exists to dedicate research effort to understand how rural school leaders contribute to improving student outcomes through influencing teachers who represent the direct interface point at which learning is impacted. Understanding the impact of the rural principal on teachers is crucial to understanding generative processes by which school improvement occurs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Therefore, this study situated within a gap in the current research-based literature and provides the existing scholarly narrative with a granular understanding of rural principals' behaviors that affect the motivational impetus in teachers for engaging in regenerative practices centered on improving professional practice. The research effort presented within this dissertation has the potential to also add richness and thickness to the body of knowledge regarding the Chinese educational marketplace, which has over 50,000 schools of which most are in non-urban contexts (Textor, 2020). In addition, it is established that China has "insatiable" zeal for international schooling (Fox News, 2016) and the number of international schools in the mainland number approximately 800 (Atack, 2019) of which most are outside the largest metropolitan educational marketplaces of Beijing and Shanghai (Inter Nations Consultancy, 2018).

Conducting research that occupies a knowledge gap is carried out by leveraging the critical review of literature which allows researchers to understand the intellectual traditions and research knowledge that guide inquiry (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2009; Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016) and help with core understandings of the anatomy of rural school principalship. Thereto appertaining, the review in this study cast a wider net because of the need to comprehend principalships' influence on practitioners' professional practice improvement, which could not be accomplished via focus on only one region given (a) the paucity of research works on rural principalship influence on teachers, and (b) the multifaceted anatomy of rural principalship practice (Algozzine & Hancock, 2006).

The Context and Significance

Situating within the broader domain of research on educational leadership, this study nested its inquiry within the sub-domain pertaining to research on rural educational contexts. The past couple of decades have seen an increased interest in educational-context research due to reform (Bush, 2008; Ravitch, 2013) and modernization agendas (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, 2016). Interest in research on school leaders has also increased owing to a large body of research evidence confirming the vital function school principals have apropos improving educational institutions (Precey, 2013) and fostering an institutional culture of empowerment, collegiality and learning (Jantzi et al., 2007; Jantzi et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2010).

The research effort presented in this dissertation contributes to the field of educational leadership via its narrow focus that helps practitioners understand the how and what of rural principalship behaviors affecting teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative efforts aimed at improving professional practice. Moreover, this researcher's aspiration was to instantiate further research that will extend the current boundaries of knowledge on rural educational leadership's influence on teachers, which is a substantive contribution, considering what Mackay and Bertani (2016) denote as the "beyond-incremental" scale and urgency of change that school leadership is confronting.

Viewed in the aggregate, the current body of research-based knowledge provides general purview into the anatomy of rural principalship. However, the literature bares a broad-brush focus on rural principals' and how they influence school improvement. Most of the research pieces lack granularity of focus on understanding the mechanisms by which principals in rural schooling contexts affect the central aspect of learners' schooling experience: Learning (Acker-Hocevar et al., 2012). Absent minutiae-focused research, the current body of knowledge is limited vis-à-vis presenting a granular understanding of how the role of rural principal influences teachers' impetus for practitioner improvement. An effective conveyance used to explain the predicament of the current corpus of knowledge is through an (imagined) analogy where the field of medicine has only practitioners of general medicine without specialists who are trained to understand fields of practice with highly narrowed foci, which are crucial to society's wellbeing and the medical profession at large. Hence, the problem with current research-based knowledge on rural principalship's impact on learning is the incomplete understanding related to the minutiae of mechanisms on how rural school leaders, through their interactions with teachers, affect practitioner improvement (Ärlestig et al., 2016). This constitutes a problem of practice also applicable to under-researched Asian contexts such as China.

In order to absorb a significant amount of information, which is best achieved by way of compartmentalizing information into thematic domains (Finley et al., 2018; Kalpouzos & Nyberg, 2010), this chapter's review of literature organizes into (a) works that unpack the multi-faceted anatomy of rural principals' instructional leadership practice including understandings on rural-context challenges, which constitute valuable informants of professional development andragogy; (b) rural principals' practice found to contribute to school improvement; and (c) works featuring deficiency-based examinations of rural principals' deleterious practices, which

afford valuable perspective into elements of inadequately capacitated instructional leadership. Contemplated and discerned as an integrated whole, the thematic compartmentalization forges a substantive base of knowledge valuable to understanding the fundamental anatomy of rural school leadership and the challenges nuanced to different rural contexts in which principals operate as they attempt to improve their schools.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a construct that explains, in graphic or narrative form, the main facets to be studied in a research piece, which includes key factors, variables and concepts under examination (Miles et al., 2014). The definition is extended by Ravitch and Riggan (2017) who note how the conceptual framework not only shapes the design and direction of a study, but through a series of logical propositions, forms an argument as to why a selected topic matters. The notion of conceptual framework justifying the purpose of a study is also supported by Marshall and Rossman (2016) who strike an argument for the need to include a conceptual framework in research owing to its potential to convince readers of a study's connectedness to key intellectual traditions, theories and real-world issues that affect people. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) remind that conceptual framework is not a static construct; in other words, it is an evolving piece reflecting a researchers' continuous integration of differentiated understandings of the problem under investigation.

The purpose of this study was to examine rural teacher perceptions of the ways their school principal's behavior affects motivation for engagement in ongoing improvement of professional practice. The study was qualitative and adopted a phenomenological approach toward understanding the rural principal's behavior that affects motivation of teachers to improve. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows individuals to give

individual perspectives of how they perceive the reality of shared experiences (Lodico et al., 2006) and owing to the familiarity of the researcher with the research context, which lends itself to a deeper appreciation of the sacred nature of the experiences told (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Thus, core to this study's conceptual framework was the exploration of telling cases rather than generalized ones.

The study leveraged the benefits of the conceptual framework through a scaffolded approach of articulating sections of the deployed framework. The framework details sections viewed as primary elements of a conceptual framework, which include personal interest, topical research, and theoretical frameworks (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Given the arguments presented above, it is within reason to surmise how omitting inclusion of an articulated conceptual framework strips a research study of valuable heuristic dimension and renders listless discourse of significance and rigor. In the aggregate, the scholarly development of the elemental facets forms a framework revealing (a) connectedness of the inquiry to key theories used to illuminate core aspects of the research, (b) intellectual traditions guiding the study, and (c) the argument for the study's relevance and rigor.

Personal Interest

Marshall and Rossman (2016) depict personal interest as an impetus that powers one's motivation to seek knowledge and ask questions, which reflects passions and beliefs about the world and the nature of how things work. This study drew on motivation from experience working in a rural context. Namely, this study's author filled the organizational role of Vice-Principal at an international school of 1200 students located 70km outside of Shanghai, China. Immersion in the context prompted a genuine desire to gain a better understanding of how the rural context impacted the lived experience of teachers and leaders staffing the school as well the

academic and organizational facets of rural schooling. The experience gave rise to scope for comprehending better the unique rural context challenges across multiple domains; one such domain relates to principalship influence on teachers' motivation to engage in ongoing regenerative efforts to improve professional practice. The focus of leadership influence on teacher improvement was an 'empirical outgrowth' stemming from, first curiosity borne of experience, and then follow-up research efforts on the topic. The work experience generated curiosity because of the overwhelming amount of time the then-principal and the author devoted to leading and mentoring teachers through professional practice improvement efforts.

Since teachers have the most impact on enhancing student learning (Du Plessis, 2017; Parson et al., 2016), it was a foregone conclusion that significant effort had to be exerted to improve upon the instructional capabilities of the faculty. In addition, more than just deploying a task-based structural approach, a behavioral alloy was called for to optimally leverage relational aspects of the leader-follower dyad in the schooling context because all faculty, at one time or another and each in their own manner, voiced feelings of isolation, disconnectedness, and in some cases self-diagnosed depression. Thus, the principal and the author were placed in a position where heightened awareness of behavioral elements of school leadership was needed. The need for more awareness was instantiated by the fact that interactions with faculty were frequent and comprehensive. Individual teachers were approached on a near-daily basis to influence improvements in their professional practice; hence, being attune to behavioral sensitives of faculty was a significant consideration for the then-principal and the author.

Therefore, to the extent that a researcher's personal influence is shaped by life experience and reflects a researcher's curiosity and passions (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), it is evident that the choice of research topic is, in large part, a palimpsest of personal experience. The genuine

orientation apropos the topic in this study also incorporated a broader motivation, which is an earnest desire to contribute to the corpus of research-based scholarly knowledge on rural international schooling contexts. Note that the acknowledgement of personal influence upon the study mitigates a common shortcoming of researchers, which, according to Ravitch and Riggan (2017), is the failure of theorizing the self into the inquiry process. A dovetailing ideation is that a researcher engaging in phenomenological inquiry is part of the research process to the extent that the researcher gives voice to participants' perspectives (Lodico et al., 2006). Moreover, being able to relate to research participants (owing to the author's lived experience of working in a rural context) is of utility.

Topical Research

Topical research was integral to the conceptual framework owing to its capacity to inform how a topic has been investigated by others (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), which allows learning on a topic to occur (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Topical research also contributes to the conceptual framework through providing potential arguments for the significance of one's study (Maxwell, 2013). Thus, this dissertation leveraged topical research and the conceptual framework benefits.

Moreover, while urban contexts have a long legacy of research undergirding its intellectual tradition and contextual understanding (Rury, 2005), the corpus of knowledge on rural schooling proved it difficult to 'pin down' a cogent articulation of how rural principals affect faculty motivation to improve professional practice. The lack or articulation formed a considerable part of the impetus behind the research effort. While current research is able to confirm how principals have a significant impact on improving rural schools (Hardwick-Franco, 2018), the mechanisms by which enhancements are effectuated, especially regarding practitioner

improvement are under-researched and unclear (Ärlestig et al., 2016). The gap provided support for generating the study topic presented in this dissertation and guided the formation of the conceptual framework toward understanding the mechanisms by which rural principals' behavior affects teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative efforts directed at improving professional practice. Thus, topical research connects to this study's conceptual framework by contributing to, what Miles et al. (2014) highlight, as the explication as to what key elements are to be studied. Moreover, the topical research effort revealed the severity of the problem of practice expounded upon in this study, which is a lack of granularized understandings of how rural principals affect teachers' motivational impetus toward practitioner improvement.

The value of legacy knowledge is something Marshall and Rossman (2016) denote as the *sine qua non* of allowing established intellectual traditions to benefit one's study. Thus, the research-based pieces on the topic were used as valuable informants of this study's design and methodology. The literature review was organized utilizing, as a general guide, the 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership Framework™ (University of Washington: Center for Educational Leadership, 2014), which encompasses specific beliefs on school leadership related to leaders' efforts to improve professional practice of faculty. Each dimension represents a domain of a school leader's behavior and influenced the data collection methodology to the extent that it focused the scope of data sought.

Data collected from the semi-structured and unstructured interviews was sorted and organized into themes or categories of information (detailed treatment of the analysis is conducted in the findings and discussion chapters presented later in this dissertation while the coding protocol is detailed in Chapter 3). Acknowledged is the fact that conceptual framework is not static and becomes more inclusive of integrative knowledge that researchers develop over

time (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Hence, the conceptual framework presented in this dissertation underwent many changes involving iterative processes that enhanced the framework's calibration to optimally fit the study purpose and accomplish the research goals set out in the inquiry.

Theoretical Frameworks

Owing to the research problem examined in this study being about behavioral attributes of principals that influence teachers' motivation for professional practice improvement, the two theories forming the theoretical framework undergirded the research via sensitivity to leader interaction and behaviors toward followers. Thus, the two theories comprising the theoretical framework for this study are (a) social contagion theory, and (b) the behavioral theory of leadership.

Social Contagion Theory

Social contagion theory posits that people favor interactions that stimulate enhancement in energy (Christakisa & Fowler, 2012), which ideally interfaces with the previously-stated ideation of 'energizing inducers'. Social contagion theory seeks to understand behavioral contagion by engaging in examination of the spread of behaviors within populations via simple exposure (Communicationtheory.org, 2019). Social contagion theory ideally interfaces with the aims of this study's second research question that aims to detail leader behaviors (identified through answering the first research question) are favored by teachers. Social contagion theory helps with understanding the nature of behaviors toward which individuals gravitate. The theory also aims to explain why certain behaviors are potent 'contagious' transformational forces as evidence shows that "contagion effects" are exerted by an individual upon others via interaction and association (VanderWeele, 2011). The idea of transference of behaviors is documented by evidence from other study disciplines such as cross cultural, social, and experimental psychology

(Hatfield et al., 1994). The medical field of research also corroborates the idea of contagion through the conceptualization of cohesion, which is a direct-acquaintance dynamic (Kuwashima, 2018). Thus, social contagion theory acted as a natural and symbiotic compliment to the behavioral theory of leadership owing to the scope for answering the second research question related to the potency and nature of 'contagious' principalship behaviors, which are identified through the lens of the behavioral theory of leadership.

The Behavioral Theory of Leadership

The behavioral theory of leadership focuses on how leaders combine relationship behaviors and task behaviors to influence followers' goal attainment (Northouse, 2016). Considering the goals of the proposed study, the behavioral approach is an ideal paradigm because the focus is on the follower-leader relational dyad, especially leader behaviors toward followers (Northouse, 2016). The paradigm's focus on leader behaviors, as directed toward followers, is important given the fact that the study participants were teachers. The behavioral theory of leadership was also of utility in instructing as to the data collection starting point, which isolated efforts toward collecting data on leader behaviors directed toward followers as experienced by followers. Hence, the behavioral theory of leadership is an approach directly supporting this study's second research question, which related to identifying principals' behaviors influencing teachers' impetus for engaging in ongoing regenerative efforts aimed at improving professional practice.

Behavioral Theory of Leadership and its Interface with Social Contagion Theory

Combined, the two theoretical frameworks formed a structured plan. The plan gave rise to scope for the specific focus of the inquiry. Namely, synthesis of the two theories (a) isolated behavioral elements of principalship influential in motivating teachers to improve practice and

deepened the inquiry further by (b) delving deeper into the types and nature of the identified 'energizing behaviors' and how they influenced practitioner self-transformation.

It is important to examine the intellectual legacy behind the two theories, which helps with gaining a deep understanding and appreciation of how they connect with one another and formed an ideal fit for the purposes of this study. The behavioral theory of leadership is an approach that aligns with social contagion research via seminal work of Blake and McCanse (1991) who uncover subtle behavioral dynamics between leaders and followers. Dovetailing with considerations of the behavior is the work of Burt (1987) who ascertains that social contagion is about people proximate in social structure using each other to manage uncertainty of innovation. The works of Blake and McCanse (1991) and Burt (1987) directly interfaced with this study because the works examine what makes individuals proximate each other's behavior; the research effort presented in this study was to focus on teachers and school leaders who both function in a proximate social structure. At the same time, the work of school leaders and teachers focuses on innovation through the mandate to enhance student learning (Law et al., 2011), which interfaces with another piece by Burt (2004) showing behavior and opinion as being more homogenous within a group than between groups. Burt's (2004) ideation of homogeneity of group behavior dovetails with the work of Tolga et al., (2015) through the conceptualization of "local contagion" by cause of proximity. Extending the same argument of behavioral transferability is Parkinson (2011) who illuminates the ideation of social appraisal, which is explicated as one individual's changes in emotional state rendering a transformative effect on another individual's evaluation of events.

Established literature supports research presented in this dissertation through ideations centering on behavior transference. The literature review section confirms that school principals,

through interactions with people and their environment, are able to influence school improvement, which makes the behavioral theory of leadership and social contagion theory apt paradigms to utilize. Further supporting the idea of behavior transference, through the use of social contagion theory framework, is Zawistowska (2015) who finds significant role models (SRM) are able to "infect" individuals in their close-proximity network with generative ideas and impulses. School principals, especially when engaging in modeling behavior, have the power to "infect" faculty with generative impulses bearing transformational potential for motivating teachers to improve. Therefore, the principal is construed as an SRM and an energizing inducer.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework deployed in this study is strongly substantiated through a multitude of research-based studies that validate the behavioral theory of leadership (Northouse, 2016). Northouse (2016) also reminds of the clear delineation of task and relationship behaviors featured in the behavioral theory of leadership approach, which is a bifurcation that supported this author's research by cause of guiding inquiry toward collecting data targeting specific behaviors school principals enact toward teachers. Hence, the research benefited from an inauguration point prefigured by the behavioral theory of leadership lens. On the other hand, as theoretical framework weaknesses are assessed, it is meaningful to acknowledge that the behavioral theory of leadership, as an approach to understanding leader behaviors that impact followers, does not sufficiently explain how task and relationship behaviors influence outcomes such as job satisfaction and productivity of followers (Northouse, 2016). Effects of the weaknesses are minimized owing to this study's narrow focus limited only to examining rural principalship influence on teacher motivation for engaging in regenerative efforts aimed at

improvement of professional practice, which relegates performance outcomes measurement beyond the study delimitation.

Reinforcing the strengths of the behavioral theory of leadership approach was the advantage of social contagion theory for which empirical research confirms the hypotheses of human behavior tending to cluster in time and space (Marsden, 1998). Moreover, meta analyses evidence the tendency of human behavior to gravitate toward homogeneity (Levy & Nail, 1993). Social contagion theory's weakness is connected to the absence of a standardized definition owing to insufficient consensus about the mechanisms undergirding social contagion (Marsden, 1998). This dissertation attenuated the weakness of social contagion theory through adopting the most inclusive definition of social contagion. Namely, it is the definition in The Handbook of Social Psychology (Lindzey & Aronson, 1985), which clearly delineates the contagion phenomenon to acts which spread or affect behavior where one person is the stimulus for the actions of another person. Because the research presented in this study examined principals' influence on faculty's motivation to improve practice, the adopted definition of one individual stimulating actions of other individuals ideally collocated with the leader-follower dyad under examination in this dissertation.

Rationale of Theories

The research carried out for this dissertation intended to understand rural principalship behaviors that affect teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative efforts to improve professional practice. Hence, it was fitting to use a behavior-based theoretical framework isolating focus on the leader-follower relational coupling. Relationship and task behaviors, which comprise the components of the behavioral theory of leadership (Northouse, 2016) formed a foundational centralization of effort for initial collection of data. Inclusion of social contagion

theory into the theoretical framework generated enhanced scope for comprehensive understanding of the identified behaviors' potency as transformational change inducers for teaching practitioners.

The theoretical framework found deep anchoring in seminal research validating the behavioral theory of leadership approach. Although the behavioral theory of leadership does not adequately explain the connection of task and relationship behaviors to performance outcomes like productivity and job satisfaction, the shortcoming was of no impact to the research in this study because it situated outside the delimitations. Social contagion theory finds support, in research meta-analyses across multiple disciplines (Marsden, 1998), for its assertion of behavior being contagious and that one individual influences actions and behavior of other individuals through proximity-based interactions (Tolga et al., 2015). Social contagion theory's core weakness, related to lacking consensus on a standardized definition, was mitigated by the adoption of an inclusive definition (e.g. Lindzey & Aronson, 1985, p. 85) most germane to the study aims.

Finally, the theoretical framework explicated in this dissertation gives rise to scope for the argument that the theoretical framework can be utilized as an improvement heuristic for future research efforts. Future research may explore deeper understandings of the behavioral nature of good leadership, which situates within the overlay of effective and ethical leadership (Ciulla, 2017). Used as a guide, the theoretical framework can allow researchers to generate ideas regarding the most adequate methods by which to engage in investigations that isolate the leader-follower relational pairing.

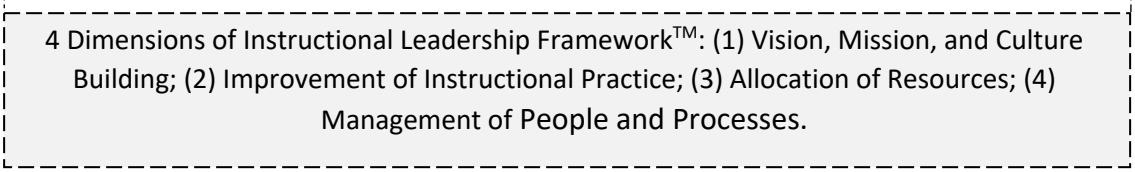
Review of the Literature

Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) note the objective of literature reviews as being powered by the need to delimit focus to literature which directly interfaces with a researcher's study purpose. Thus, the literature review in this chapter confined scope to pieces related to dimensions of instructional leadership as identified in the 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership Framework™ (University of Washington: Center for Educational Leadership, 2014), which are: (1) vision, mission and culture building; (2) improvement of instructional practice; (3) allocation of resources; and (4) management of people and processes.

Figure 1

Utilization of 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership Framework™ as a tool for systematic organization of literature research and guide for literature review.

First Theme:	Rural principals' a priori capacities + training and development needs in relation to context needs.
Second Theme:	Rural principals' practices positively impacting teacher improvement and enhancement.
Third Theme:	Deficiency-based examinations of rural principals' deleterious practices.



Using the framework as a systematic guide, or 'filter' (Figure 1), allowed for clarity of focus and contributed to the methodology of executing searches for research works dealing with rural principalship vis-à-vis domains of instructional leadership, which was a direct interface with this author's research that aimed to understand how rural school principals influence teacher-practitioners' motivation to improve practice. The resulting aggregation of pieces in the

review formed a scholarly oeuvre comprised of informative works from rural educational contexts in different locales. The collection of pieces helped with understanding the anatomy of rural principalship. While the main delimitation excluded pieces dealing with national, provincial, or district level policies, the external factors immediate to the rural context that impact principals' ability to lead school improvement were dealt with to some extent. Note that the review of literature features works utilizing appreciative *and* deficiency-based inquiry approaches.

The literature review was organized into thematic threads that were an outgrowth of the systematic organization of the literature research and review guided by the 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership Framework™ (University of Washington: Center for Educational Leadership, 2014). The first thematic thread was a foundational element that established an a priori baseline, which allowed for an understanding of what rural school leaders bring coming into their schooling context and of their training and professional learning needs juxtaposed to the challenges faced in various contexts. Achieving a deeper understanding of the first thematic thread generated an organic dual parsing into (a) rural principals' level of awareness regarding issues typically encountered in rural contexts, and (b) arguments for professional training to be tailored toward the unique challenges of rural schooling contexts. The ontological belief was that the literature review in this chapter would be incomplete without this baseline review. Namely, it was within reason to surmise that principals who are, *ab initio*, better prepared coming into a rural context are also better capacitated to effectuate improvements in the professional practice of faculty. Hence, the first thematic thread was one of direct interface with this dissertation's purpose, which was to delve into the minutiae of principalship behaviors on the leader-follower

(principal-teacher) dyad that affect teachers' motivation for engagement in regenerative efforts aimed at improving professional practice.

The second thematic thread and the third thematic thread relate to practices ascertained as effective for rural principals' instructional leadership capacity. The second thematic thread bifurcated into internal and external practices of rural principals bearing impact on leader capacity for effectuating improvements in teachers' professional practice. The third thematic thread provided contrasting research-based perspectives, which complemented the second thematic thread through delving into deficiency-based examinations of rural principalship examining practices deleterious to improvement efforts. The final (third) thematic thread 'circled back' and connected to the first thematic thread by helping to complete the understanding of rural principalship along the four salient domains of instructional leadership.

Enhancing Preparedness Through Enhancing Understanding of Contextual Challenges

Parson et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study of 81 rural school principals in North Dakota where key domains of role differentiation between rural school principals and their urban equivalents were identified. By contrast to urban principals, the inquiry ascertained role duality as the core contributing factor behind rural educational leaders not being able to spend enough time dedicated to engaging in efforts geared towards improvement of instructional practices (Parson et al., 2016). While proffering findings of utility, the study lacks comprehensiveness as its most detailed finding proffers the assertion of rural school principals construing their leadership roles as mostly transactional in nature. A similar broad-scope research effort of Hardwick-Franco (2018) finds that principals in rural contexts, in contrast to urban school leaders, face a multiplicity of challenges of which the most significant are limitations on professional growth, absence of anonymity from public view, multi-grade teaching duties, and

faculty inefficiency. The teacher inefficiency challenges correlate to instructional quality (Hardwick-Franco, 2018), which was of informative value pertinent to this dissertation's study aims. Challenges related to the fourth domain of instructional leadership—managing people and processes—identified earlier in this chapter are given an added perspective through the work of Liu and Hallinger (2017) who determined that Chinese rural schooling contexts have high turnover rates of teachers, which exacerbates difficulties principals face in their typically under-resourced contexts making it hard to meet teachers' needs. High turnover rates in Chinese rural contexts is a concern that finds partial explanation in the research of Zhao and Fu (2018) who ascertained that rural teachers' conceptualization of identity is one of rootless transience. Hence, it is within reason to surmise how the feeling of rootlessness can diminish a rural teachers' willingness to commit longer term to a rural context.

Staffing issues also extend to principals themselves. Namely, the study of Grissom et al. (2019) found, through a state-wide investigation of 1800 Tennessee schools, that rural contexts are staffed by less qualified principals. The finding illuminates the problems facing rural educational contexts as the disparity forms a disproportionate gap that dovetails into this dissertation's purpose: Scarcely can it be expected of rural principals to be effective school and faculty improvement leaders if they are coming into an under-resourced context underqualified as practitioners where they are expected to lead underqualified teachers. Addressing the dearth of qualified teachers are DeFeo and Tran (2019) whose research into 41 rural Alaskan superintendents found the urgency of securing qualified teaching talent to be so pressing that even district-level leaders such as superintendents devoted a significant portion of their time to recruitment efforts in addition to retention and training. The authors find how creative recruitment strategies, context-based cognizance of localized community, is key to crafting

nuanced recruiting approaches to attract quality teaching personnel (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). While superintendents engaging in teacher recruitment and training is not common across the cannon of current research literature, the research piece highlights the hardship of securing qualified teachers in certain rural contexts.

More prevalent within the body of research are investigations into principals engaging in training efforts related to improving the professional practice of teachers. Hardwick-Franco (2018) found how principals tend to construe their practitioner selves as instructional leaders despite evidence showing how the time-scarcity and other duties prevent them from devoting enough time to instructional leadership practices in a way that would have decisive impact. The notion of rural school principals having little time to devote to improving learning and practitioner practice is highlighted in the research piece of Mickey et al. (2019) who—via a case study of a rural school principal—found that that the principal had feelings of inadequacy both as a teacher and leader. Cited as the core reason for feeling inadequate is the finding that the continuous and excessive work intensification lead to a myriad of responsibilities rendering the principal unable to devote sufficient time to developing practitioners and focusing on improving student learning (Mickey et al., 2019). The notion of time scarcity is one that appears in other research works as well.

Namely, research that deals specifically with the issue of insufficient time for instructional leadership is presented by Lynch (2016) through a multiple case-study approach examining mid-Atlantic rural principals in America, which confirms rural principals have insufficient time to devote to instructional leadership owing to being overextended by (other) duties having to do with role-duality mentioned earlier in this chapter. Reporting on issues related to the inability to devote sufficient time to instructional practice is a research piece by

Wallin et al. (2019), who examined rural principals across three provinces in Canada (Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta), and determined that the majority of the principals reported insufficient time to devote themselves to instructional leadership. The research places issue of principals being pressed for time to the forefront of considerations for human resources professionals and district leaders tasked with staffing rural principalship posts.

While being pressed for time is a considerable challenge facing rural principals, there are more issues that compound the problem, which the Jamaican-context study by Miller (2015) documents through examination of four school principals in rural contexts where findings point to feelings of isolation being a psychological determinant adversely impacting principals and the teaching faculty. Miller (2015) concludes how principals and teachers can scarcely be expected to perform well amidst feelings of isolation. The conclusion touches on a central issue identified in the title of this theme's exposition which connotes the need for rural principalship candidates to be exposed to rural-context specific training to help leaders understand the challenges they will be facing in rural schooling contexts.

Analytical discourse on role multiplicity of rural principalship was executed by Parson et al. (2016) who denoted rural principals' importance to schools because rural educational contexts are typically staffed with fewer staff and administrators. Fewer professionals staffing rural schools serves as an antecedent to rural school leadership being supernumerary in nature as it compels rural principals to take on a variety of responsibilities (Acker-Hocevar et al., 2012). Permitting another vantage point from which to understand the impact of role intensification was the research of Liu and Hallinger (2017) who found role diversification as causing principals in rural schooling contexts in China to be confused and unable to articulate their role apropos instructional leadership and reform. Another study related to the confusion ideation was a

Spanish-context study by Real and Botia (2017) who examined urban, suburban and rural schooling locales and found rural principals to be confused the most due to role duality. Being both a school principal and classroom teacher contributed to dissonance, which the study distinguishes as instability of professional identity (Real & Botia, 2017). Relatedly, Miller (2015) denotes how rural school principals not only function as teachers, but highlight the complex nature of the teaching duties (multi-grade groups across different ages), which further exacerbate difficulties with regard to being able to engage in effective instructional leadership practice.

Gender of rural principals also plays a role in shaping difficulties rural principals confront. Gender issues of the rural principalship are exposed by Duma (2015a) who used a sample size of 150 rural South African female principals and found female school leaders exposed to sexism and problems related to absence of recognition, which inhibited the (female) principals' leadership effectiveness. Although the South African locale is culturally-distinct with a unique social movement history (Northouse, 2016), the gender-based lens instructs about leadership challenges along a leader-gender dyad that can limit a rural principals' effectiveness toward engaging in instructional leadership practices. Duma's (2015a) piece also instructs as to the limitations rural principals face in countries where school leadership roles are typically construed as being single-gender domains dominated by males.

Anatomy of Principalship in Rural Locales: External Factors Prefigure Challenges

In a rural study of 12 American districts of the southeast, Klar et al. (2019) denote the issue of geographical isolation as being a substantial contributor to many challenges rural principals face. Context isolation places rural school leaders with smaller collaborative pools (of colleagues) (Klar et al., 2019). The notion of collaborative pool listlessness and deprived

exposure is further unpacked in a study by Wang et al. (2017) who contrasted rural-urban professional learning and development capacities to find rural schools featuring teachers who engage in more "solo-play" development efforts, in contrast to urban teachers' immersion in communal learning opportunities.

In a study of 'context connectedness' Jones et al. (2019) present a research piece of two rural elementary-school European principals, working in Texas serving students of African American descent, and found the principals to be successful in synergistically integrating with the community. The principals' cultural awareness and community integration were determined to be the most significant impactors in the principals' ability to effectuate improvement with regard to teacher development (Jones et al., 2019). Both Mette et al. (2016) and Jones et al. (2019) fortify the view espoused earlier in this chapter (and the elucidated in next section below) related to the need for context-aware and context-responsive principalship training that enhances practitioner preparedness to create the most impactful principalship profiles optimally capacitated toward effectuating improvement in faculty professional practice.

Rural Principalship Training: Making the Case for a Specialized Approach

A number of pieces of literature formed a (sub)thread cluster pertaining to context-adaptive andragogy for rural school leaders. Klar et al. (2019) used their findings to map the structure of effective customized training for rural school leaders and concluded that job-embedded exposure to leadership learning communities (LLC) entailing interaction and networking across districts (the study included 12 rural schooling districts), contributed to elevating the effectiveness of rural school principals while causing improved retention rates. Thus, it is within reason to surmise that access and exposure to peer networks and personalized learning opportunities is decisive for enhancing rural school leaders' professional practice.

Expanding the notion of peer network accessibility, and the value thereof, is done by Silva and Miranda (2015) whose findings noted the success of an initiative, inaugurated in the form of the Agrarian Residence Program, as the core driving force behind "emancipatory" transformations in rural educational contexts in Brazil.

Evidencing the potential of peer networks, the study also points to the capacity of organized movements, which can be used to leverage knowledge wealth towards uplifting rural educational domains on a broader level. Dovetailing with the conceptualization of accessibility to learning networks is the study of Brown et al. (2017) who ascertained that rural school principals face a myriad of challenges and cannot be accountable for overcoming everything on their own without exposure to instructive and valuable communities of practice. Hence, access to peer networks and participation in coaching and training programs contextualized toward rural issues is a substantial heuristic for improving rural school leaders' professional capacity. Suggesting the same is Hardwick-Franco (2018) who ascertained that engaging rural school principals as co-creators of professional andragogy is an effective (and nuanced) stratagem for providing rural principals with development opportunities differentiated to their rural contexts. Hardwick-Franco (2018) echo the argument of Liu and Hallinger (2017), based on a body of global research, that holds vital the need for rural principals to adapt professional practice to constraints and opportunities inherent in their rural settings.

An opposing perspective related to the body of research-based knowledge on contextual impactors to rural principalship is that of Goddard et al. (2016) that characterizes the last two decades worth of leadership studies as being replete with research on educational leadership theoretical models' weaknesses without sufficiently considering influence of context-embedded factors. While the contention is supported, it fails to account for early-21st century awareness of

Leithwood et al. (2004) who identified contextual factors such as location, schooling level, and size of district as core impactors of school leadership practice. Subsequent works of Leithwood (e.g. Jantzi et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2010; Leithwood et al., 2009) also provided purview into considerations of contextual factors.

Rural School Principals' Effective Instructional Leadership Practices

The corpus of literature surfaced a second thematic thread having to do with rural principalship practices found to be effective instructional leadership practices. For the purpose of clarity, practices internal and external to the schooling context are explicated. Effective leadership in schools has considerable impact on enhancing student learning and achievement (Brown et al., 2017), which Shava and Ndebele (2016) affirm via investigating rural principalship in contexts characterized as high performing. Namely, the findings point to a recurring theme within research literature related to distributed leadership effectuating organizational cultures of participative shared agency in decision-making (Shava & Ndebele, 2016).

Distributed Leadership

The transformational potential of practicing distributed leadership is confirmed by findings of Huggins et al. (2017) who ascertained increases in organizational capacity to be attributed to principals' practice of distributed leadership where organizational members exhibited high engagement levels. Similar findings were revealed by Jacques (2017) in a dissertation piece examining a single-site urban schooling context where 12 areas of distributed leadership practice were found to have a strong correlation to teacher self-efficacy leading to improvement in instructional practice. While the study of Jacques (2017) is not of a rural context, it is telling of the cross-context utility of distributed leadership. The work of both

Jacques (2017) and Huggins et al. (2017) interface, and align with Gray and Summers (2015), Shava and Ndebele (2016), and Brown et al. (2017) through the ideation that principals' intentional deployment of distributed leadership practices constituted a decisive capacity-building practice in teachers and promoted shared agency and enhanced participative behavior. Studies like these are representative of a trend that moves away from deficiency-based approaches to inquiry, which contributes to the continuation of the trend (over the past 20 years) of research in the social sciences gravitating toward the appreciative paradigm of inquiry (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The literature review in this chapter leveraged both the appreciative and deficiency approaches. The former provided an in-depth purview into rural principalship domains of instructional leadership apropos 'what-is-found-to-work-well' and the latter paradigm illuminated research findings that instructed as to rural principalship practice pitfalls. Together the two research approaches produce inquiry efforts that inform a richer understanding related to the anatomy of rural principalship instructional leadership dimensions.

Standardization Approach

Mapping rural principals' effective practices is Du Plessis (2017) who utilized a standardization approach in a case-study triangulating observations, analysis of documents, and open-ended interviews. Findings revealed that of the ten practices ascertained as effective, four related to teacher development by way of instructional coaching, professional development, teacher empowerment and motivation. Related to the latter ideation of empowering and motivating teachers, a study by Smit (2017) deployed a relational behavior lens toward examining rural school leaders' influence on teachers' impetus for improvement and found how relational leadership was able to induce "interpenetration of expertise" (p.12) (leaders and followers influencing each other's improvement). Interpenetrative interactions contribute to

improvement in practice via the leader-follower feedback loop which builds not only more integrative but also more holistic professional perspectives (Smit, 2017). While interpenetrative interaction is unique, the ideation which it represents is confirmation of the conceptualization holding investment in developing teachers as a crucial element to improving schools. In a similar vein the quantitative correlational study of Amtu et al. (2019) (of 216 teacher participants from a variety of schools in Indonesia) found that 46.7% of teachers' creativity was influenced by school principals. The study notes a correlation of R=0.684 between principals' leadership skills and teachers' creativity evidencing the significant role principals have in motivating teachers to be more creative, which is a factor in improving pedagogy (Setiyati, 2014).

Principal Modeling of Behaviors and Building Trust

Delving into the domain of investing in teacher development is a piece by Brown et al. (2017) who contend that principals' modeling of behaviors conducive to improving instructional practices is decisive to the encouragement of teacher learning. In a unique conclusion, Brown et al. (2017) ascertained that a foundational aspect of principals' ability to model behavior was personification of institutional values. Liu and Hallinger (2017) found that without the ability to embody school values, rural principals are detrimental to the schooling context. In their case-study of a rural school principal in China, Liu and Hallinger (2017) not only determined that the principal was unable to model leadership behavior, but found the leader's inadequacies as fostering distrust, apathy and resistance throughout the organization causing teachers' unwillingness to participate in improvement initiatives.

A separate study by Yin and Zheng (2018), with over 1000 (teacher) participants from Chinese primary schools, delved deeper into the notion of trust in particular and found principalship practices to have a positive effect on teacher trust and professional learning. The

study also attributed the teachers' participation in professional learning communities (PLCs) to the ability of school leaders to engender trust within the organization, which fostered the building of PLCs. Core within the learning environment of PLCs are activities where teachers engage in analyzing and using data to make information-driven decisions to improving instructional practice and learning (Haynes et al., 2015). In this vein, Chitwood (2018) presents a research piece (on nine principals and over 100 teachers in 11 schools) where it was found that principal behaviors in support of collecting and using data driven improvements in instructional practice relates to teachers' high levels of data driven decision-making behaviors. The finding corroborates the ideation of principals being decisive influencers of teachers' impetus to improve practice, especially when it comes to utilizing a scholarly data driven approaches. Hence, the ability of school leaders to exercise leadership, build trust, and model behaviors through embodying virtues the educational institution espouses are core attributes of a school leader's repertoire for leading improvements in teachers' professional practice (University of Washington: Center for Educational Leadership, 2014).

Similar research related to trust building was done by Hardwick-Franco (2018), who conducted an analysis of research works spanning five continents, and found that rural school leaders' ability to promote the building of a culture of trust and positive relationships as fundamental to successful schools. Along the same lines, Wildly et al. (2014) conducted a 15-principal rural study in Central and South America, and found collective efficacy and teacher participation in PLCs to be directly related to principals' capability to induce trust and create collegial, enabling organizational structures. While mainly relying on perceptive data (185 teachers), it is within reason to surmise how enhanced gravitas could have been achieved with a varied suite of data collection methods. The notion of principals building trust and cultivating a

culture of collegiality and support is one that bares significant impact on the retention of teachers, especially in the international school marketplace where teachers form, what Poole (2019) uniquely ideates as an “educational precariat”.

Namely, Pool’s (2019) research of a group of teachers in two isolated-context international schools in Shanghai revealed that financial insecurity, lack of agency, and marginalization of professional identity forms the core of lived experiences of international teachers, which contributes to the transience of educators from one context to another. Hence, connecting rural principals’ capacity toward building trust and establishing supportive and stable working environments can be construed as a substantive dictum for allowing international teachers more opportunities to develop agency and achieve stability. Teacher agency was researched by Simpson et al. (2018) in a cross-context study (Australia and China) that examined the capacity of faculty agency to counterbalance policy rigidity and countervailing forces such as systematized teaching controls. The study denoted how school leadership was a core factor that impacted the building of teachers’ “agentic” behavior, which was found to be a potent force in improving teachers’ instructional practices owing to the development of emancipatory and empowered pedagogical practice (Poole, 2019).

Principals acting as retention agents and empowering leaders who, owing to behavioral aspects of their leadership disposition, create a sense of belonging for teachers is manifested in some literature with divergent presentations trough the notions of relatability and approachability. Brown et al. (2017) presented a study in which perceptive data lead to finding principals’ relatability to teachers as helpful to creating an inclusive collegial school culture while the same ‘closeness’ was a grievance to some rural principals. The consternation was caused by identity confusion, which diminished leader effectiveness owing to principals’

identifiability to faculty, especially for principals who were both leader and teacher (Real & Botia, 2017). Contrary to the findings of Real and Botia (2017), Feng (2016) contests the points on approachability and relatability through presenting a study that examined the correlation between a rural principal's authentic leadership and the psychological wellbeing of teachers; findings indicated that a high degree of authentic leadership was a positive impactor on faculty attitudes and student learning. The lack of convergence of literature on the issue of (rural) principal 'closeness' to teachers characterizes as an unresolved problem of practice. Thus, within reason is the call for more research on the impact of principals' closeness and identifiability to teachers; inquiries of the type are made more relevant as practitioners and scholars strive to understand the nature of rural principalship given local contextualities, which fortifies the purpose and relevance of this dissertation.

Dealing with the notion of local considerations is Noman et al. (2017) who found rural principalship occurring as a social phenomenon, which the authors found to be best understood through comprehending how local context phenomena prefigure and shape a rural leader's practice. The case study comprised observations and document analysis data gathered from a variety of stakeholders and converged on finding that the rural principal's effective instructional practices were people-centered and effectuated the building of coalitions conducive to creating positive school climate that powered improvement (Noman et al., 2017). Although most of the people-centered practices were confined to leadership practice within the institution, Noman et al. (2017) also highlight effective instructional leadership practices that relate to context externalities. Considerations of external factors and ways in which they are leveraged to effectuate improvements in teachers' instructional practice leads to the next thematic sub-thread elucidated in the section below.

External Factors Shaping the Multiformity of Rural Principals' Instructional Leadership

Brown et al. (2017) presented exemplars of rural school leaders effectuating school improvement via keeping abreast of initiatives local to the community and by cultivating relationships with various schools within the shared locale. The value of cultivating healthy relations with other educational contexts is confirmed through Goddard et al. (2016), who ascertained the building of coalitions as a top practice utilized by effective rural school leaders, which dovetails into the ideation of Wildy et al. (2014) of rural principals utilizing a place based leadership disposition vis-à-vis leadership practice. The importance of context was also studied by Hutton (2019) who note that rural principals need to be responsive to the needs of the constituents served in order to impact school performance in substantive way. Analysis of data, obtained from over 1500 school constituents from Jamaican rural schools, lead Hutton (2019) to conclude that the "prevailing" context is a potent factor in determining how effective principals engage in various dimensions of leadership practice. That rural principals' instructional leadership practice is inextricably linked to the local context is an argument made earlier in this chapter and forms a fundamental mooring of the phenomenological research presented in this dissertation.

Another argument related to the impact of the external context on rural principals is one that views rural school leaders as mediating layers between teachers and external communities of stakeholders, especially when pressure originating from various stakeholder groups becomes excessive (Hoy et al., 1991, as cited in Gray & Summers, 2015). Hence, the ideation of rural principals being organizational actors placed in role where they absorb negativity is a point of interface with the research work of Shava and Ndebele (2016) who characterize rural principalship as a socially influenced phenomenon. The ideation of social influence and

contextual cognizance is further dealt with in the dissertation of Pledger (2018) who determines how the key to better serving diverse student populations is in adopting an asset-based approach whereby cultural identities and external socio-political contexts are invited into schools to drive instructional practices and curriculum design. Thus, Pledger (2018) corroborates the validity of the notion presented in the title of this section, which holds the leveraging of context 'externalities' as a dictum for rural school leaders aiming to drive instructional improvement. The ideation of leveraging external factors is also driven by the convergence of literature pieces presented in this section, all of which confirm the need for rural principals to ground practice in the awareness of epistemological processes that occur on the context-leader dyadic relation. Research determines the impact of context to be of substantive potential in prefiguring the nature of rural principals' instructional leadership practice.

School Leaders' Practices Detrimental to Instructional Leadership Improvement

The second thematic thread in this literature review instructs as to devising improved professional development andragogy and training programs for rural principals. Related to the latter, in order to compliment the heuristic that informs creation of more tailored principalship training, it is well within reason to argue as necessary the understanding of principals' detrimental practices' (the third thematic thread of this literature review). Therefore, it stands to reason that reviewing research pieces grounded in the deficiency-based paradigm of inquiry gives valuable insight as to disadvantageous practices of rural principals' instructional leadership practice, the understanding of which can be used to disarticulate ineffective practices and inform improvements in professional development programs. Understanding the anatomy of practices found to be detrimental to instructional leadership is as relevant as reviewing appreciative inquiry-based research pieces. The combination of the two approaches provides a framework

whereby the aggregation of knowledge gives rise to scope for an integrative improvement heuristic to emerge. The symbiotic manner in which the deficiency-based approach interfaces with the appreciative inquiry approach is copacetic and mutually-reinforcing.

Ineffective Principalship Practices

The third thematic thread is branched into sections. The sections review examinations of principalship practices that research finds to be ineffective to practitioner improvement efforts in terms of three different dimensions of instructional leadership: (1) vision, mission, and culture building; (2) improvement in instructional practice; and (3) management of people and processes (University of Washington: Center for Educational Leadership, 2014). The aim of the disaggregation was to provide for an easier absorption of information.

Vision, Mission, and Culture-building

The unpacking begins with an examination of the fundamental elements of casting and sharing vision without which organizational change is unable to progress (Fullan, 2011, 2013). Delving into the elements of vision is Kempa et al. (2017) who deployed the ten-factor leadership effectiveness instrument as a means through which a small-island Indonesian rural school principal's practice was evaluated. Kempa et al. (2017) found that the school principal did not adequately socialize the vision of the school, which Liu and Hallinger (2017), in a separate study of their own, found to result in impoverished shared agency across the institution. The two studies highlight the importance of rural leaders engaging in rapport- and culture-building, both of which Kempa et al. (2017) found absent in their observed principal's instructional leadership practice. Without the capability to instantiate a shared-agency institutional culture, organizations are bereft of passion-igniting culture that spurs commitment of members toward accomplishing more (Fullan, 2011).

Culture-building, as viewed through the twin lenses of networking and rapport-building, is a problematic ideation when it comes to professional training because it relates to hard-to-acquire soft skills (Campbell, 2014; Zemke et al., 2013). In presenting a decade's worth of aggregated research findings, Ärlestig et al. (2016) found that school principals who combined practitioner know-how with soft skills are leaders who possessed the most effective professional competency. While the same research piece does not conclusively ascertain the absence of soft skills as incapacitating school principals, it is within reason to theorize how the presence of soft skills can be an advantage for principals' instructional leadership efforts. Dovetailing with Ärlestig et al. (2016) on the ideation of soft skills is the notion of (un)democratic school principals. Specifically, Liu and Hallinger (2017) found that rural principalship contexts in China, much like urban principalship contexts, are characterized by an authoritarian leadership approach. The authoritarian leader-centered approach is one diametrically opposed to instructional leadership practices ascertained (via review of literature in the previous section) as effective to rural principalship and defies participative people-centered leadership that fosters a climate of shared agency and empowerment of culture (Edwards, 2010; Wagenaar, 2015).

Relatedly, Myende et al. (2018) presented a rural principalship study with a poignant quandary: Owing to the vastness of challenges rural schooling contexts face, are individuals in rural schools more likely to submit to the authority of the principal? The question is brought to fore by the authors' research into financial management practices of rural principals. Data collected on five novice principals (deemed successful as determined by graduate outcomes) provides purview into principals' (a) willingness to cede power to governing stakeholders through limited inclusionary efforts, and (b) self-regulation and transparency willingness. Hoy (2002, as cited in Wildy et al., 2014) asserts that excessive control on the part of leaders is a

hindering structure and inadequate leadership practice, particularly in rural schooling contexts, which feature unique, often ubiquitous, challenges.

Improvement in Instructional Practices

Of decisive importance to instructional leadership is its sub-component of improvement of instructional practice (University of Washington: Center for Educational Leadership, 2014). Thus far the literature review revealed the rural principals' role as crucial when it comes to leading schooling contexts toward improvements in instruction. Lynch (2016) examined the consequences of leadership practice devoid of capacity to enhance instructional practices, via inquiry into three rural school leaders, and found their understandings of instructional practices limited in nature and scope. Another study that delved into the issue of improvements of instructional practice is that of Manard (2017) who ascertained that the 12 novice rural principals observed had an "eloquent" understanding of their role in leading improvements in instructional practice. However, the daily demands placed on the principalship roles of the participants steered them toward practices peripheral to leading improvements in instructional practice, which Manard (2017) attributes to the reality of rurality in reference to the multifaceted nature of rural principalship roles. The issue of rural principals' multiplicity of practice is dealt with earlier in this chapter and complicates rural school leaders' ability to engage in adequate instructional leadership.

The multiplicity issue is one that places the onus on those tasked with staffing the rural principalship and those designing professional development frameworks. Namely, it is critical to educate leaders transitioning into rural principalship of the multifaceted morphology of leading instructional practice improvements in rural settings; also critical is rural school leaders' deep cognizance of the what-and-how of practices relevant to instructional improvement. However, it

is important to assist rural leaders in their instructional leadership efforts via also better preparing teachers for the rigors of employment in rural schooling contexts. Rural context research efforts of Barrett et al. (2015) and Murray-Orr and Mitton-Kukner (2017) confirm the need for pre-service programs to be more integrative in educating young teachers about the unique challenges placed on both teachers and leaders in rural schooling contexts. Murray-Orr and Mitton-Kukner (2017) conducted a study whereby analysis of four-year longitudinal data from Atlantic Canada confirmed pre-service teacher training programs as inadequate in preparation for teaching in the rural context, while Barrett et al. (2015) found a link between teachers with higher rates of participation in professional development programs and improved student learning. Note that the Barrett et al. (2015) study was also about examining the role of rural principals in cultivating local teacher talent as argumentation in support of sourcing context-aware teaching candidates that are optimally capacitated toward being responsive to serving a student body with which there is commonality. The research of both Barrett et al. (2015) and Murray-Orr and Mitton-Kukner (2017) inform that rural school leaders do not always get fully prepared teachers, which corroborates a core facet of the argument in this author's dissertation holding vital the role of rural principals in motivating teachers to improve professional practice.

Managing People and Processes

Absence of leader capacity to effectuate transformational change is evidenced through Liu and Hallinger's (2017) quantitative research that juxtaposed urban principals to their rural counterparts whereby findings showed how the latter deploy significantly weaker learning-centered leadership. Lacking capacity to exercise leadership that focuses on learning is problematic in that it exacerbates the aforementioned predicament: Considering that rural schools typically do not get staffed with teaching faculty of the highest caliber or level of

preparedness for teaching in rural locales, the requirement for leading instructional practice improvements and motivating teachers to become the best practitioner self becomes imperative (Bush & Middlewood, 2005; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Hence, the research of Murray-Orr and Mitton-Kukner (2017), Barrett et al. (2015), and Liu and Hallinger (2017) inspire a theoretical proposition which suggests the following: The degree of rural principals' intensification of instructional leadership practice needs to be proportionate to the degree of faculty development needs. Lending credence to the theoretical proposition is a seminal study by McKinsey & Company (2010), which examined longitudinal data focusing on highly-successful worldwide school systems and found two-thirds of improvement interventions in such schools to relate to instructional improvements.

Therefore, the idea of instructional improvements being vital to improving schools has been around for a considerable length of time. However, as argued earlier in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, understanding on a granular level how rural principals go about instructional leadership to instantiate improvements in teachers' practice and professional learning is difficult given the lack of inquiry into such a specific focus area. The critical analysis of literature pieces in this chapter's literature review shows that rural principals' ability to be effective instructional leaders and lead improvement in instructional practices is hampered by the multiformity of rural principalship practice. Thus, prudent is the query into whether rural school leaders can have sufficient time to be instructional leaders even when situated in highly-advantageous conditions, which characterize as contexts where principals: (a) are equipped with thorough understanding of the various facets of instructional leadership, (b) are well-trained and prepared for the rural principalship role, and (c) have the luxury of working with high-quality faculty prepared for the

rigors and challenges of teaching in rural contexts. It is within reason to surmise how future inquiry into an advantageous rural context would be revealing and informative.

Strategic Planning

A fundamental aspect central to organizational improvement is the strategic management acuity of leaders (Drucker, 2010). Strategic planning also affects school leaders' ability to impact instructional practices (University of Washington: Center for Educational Leadership, 2014), which is a direct interface with the focus of this dissertation. Schlebusch and Mokhatle (2016) conducted a study of 10 South African rural schools, for the purpose of ascertaining strategic management's role in the management and improvement processes of rural schools. In contrast to other studies presented in the literature review of this chapter, Schlebusch and Mokhatle (2016) engaged in an analysis of data through participants' verbatim responses, which gives rise to scope for reader-based interpretations. The two researchers found school principals often excluding members of the School Governing Body (SGB) from the drafting process of the strategic plan and note how lack of SGB involvement is especially detrimental in rural schools that are impoverished of resources (Schlebusch & Mokhatle, 2016). Through reader-based interpretations of the data (verbatim responses of participants) it is surmised that a select number of principals dismissed the contribution potential of stakeholders' participation in the strategic planning process. Namely, the prevailing evaluation among some school principals was that stakeholders, particularly parents in impoverished rural schools, are often unqualified to be involved in strategic planning geared toward school improvement.

In a similar vein, Hartell et al. (2016) investigated rural South African principals' perceptions (in three rural schools) on the role of parents in the operation of SGBs where findings revealed that the principals believed the level or education of parents was insufficient to

be involved in SBG operations. The conclusion prompts a debate on whether school leaders in rural schooling contexts ought to arrogate governance responsibilities to themselves absent sufficient other-stakeholder capacity. Ascertaining the conditions under which it is prudent for rural school principals to assume increased governance control, in the presence of diminished stakeholder capacity, is a substantive consideration for future inquiries in the domain of rural educational leadership.

Adding more complexity to the principalship is the issue of rural school bias. Namely, Surface and Theobald (2014), in a study about the history of rural schooling of denigration, found disparagement of rural schooling, and stakeholders within, to be a protracted trend in discourse on rural education. The study implies that an important dictum to countering rural schooling biases is inviting rural school leaders not to feed the rhetoric of rural schooling inadequacy, which entails a moral commitment for embracing positive dispositions toward recasting the narratives on rural education (Surface & Theobald, 2014). Another study advocating the reframing of rural education is that of Azano and Biddle (2019) who found rural education research to be riddled with paradoxes, which need to be addressed through reframing rural educational inquiry to attenuate deficit-thinking about rural education. The research piece poignantly concluded how deficit-based thinking stunts improvement of praxis and training programs for both teachers and leaders (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Thus, changing both research approaches and narratives on rural schooling is viewed as a potent, and fundamental, strategy designated to establish a more favorable base from which to effectuate school improvement in rural educational locales.

Conclusion

Central to the argument of this study is the literature's role in articulating the various, often ubiquitous, challenges rural principals face as instructional leaders. The exposure of challenges fortifies this dissertation's purpose (and urgency) to better understand rural principals' work so as to devise more potent ways by which to improve student learning via motivating teachers to engage in regenerative efforts to transform themselves into better professional practitioners. Hence, the thematic threads of this chapter's literature review represent interrelated cores that form a detailed picture on the body of current research-based knowledge dealing with rural principalship's instructional leadership behaviors as researched in various locales. The critical review provides (a) an understanding of the diversified, and highly intensified, nature of rural school principals' leadership roles and the inherent potential for informing more specialized development training and programs; (b) a deep exploration of rural principals' leadership practices ascertained as potent school improvement forces; and (c) a deep probe into research delving into principalship inadequacies detrimental to rural school improvement. Some of the most pronounced challenges are related to human resources while more nuanced research works relate to gender-based inquiry into rural school leaders. Human resource challenges impact how rural principals deploy instructional leadership practices to effect improvement within the institution. Hence, as understanding of the type and nature of adversities that rural principals encounter thickens, a more substantive heuristic emerges for creating highly relevant professional training and development programs for those transitioning into rural schools as leaders and for those aiming to improve existing rural teachers' professional practice. Enhanced comprehension of the anatomy of rural school leadership practices, along

with its challenges, allows educational practitioners and scholars to devise better mitigating strategies intent on minimizing adverse effects.

A notion related to achieving a deeper understanding of leadership challenges that befall rural school leaders is related to the multiformity of practice the literature identifies as prevalent within rural principals' work. Review of the research dealing with effective practices bifurcates to unpacking internal and external factors that impact rural school leaders' work, with cognizance of external circumstances showing as a facet as often neglected by principals as it is respected. Findings shown in the literature corroborate the notion of leveraging context-awareness and adaptivity as the *sine qua non* of effective school improvement leadership practice for rural school leaders. Without the capacity to capitalize on rural-context advantages and the ability to engage in positive tone-setting, the findings prove that rural principals' leadership becomes limited, inadequate, impeded, and even deleterious. Ascertained within the literature as the most potent school improvement practice is involvement in instructional leadership, which is decisive to improving professional practice of teachers and improving student outcomes.

The alignment of literature converges on the notion of leader behaviors related to instructional leadership being a decisive factor in school improvement, which fortifies the argument of this dissertation calling for the need to engage in granular inquiry of how rural principals influence teachers' motivation to engage in ongoing regenerative efforts aimed at improving professional practice. The appreciative cluster of research pieces is complemented via a 'mirror cluster' of deficiency-based research on inadequate leadership practices found to be deleterious to rural schools. Detrimental practices are illuminated through understanding of challenges rural schools face in the absence of principals' ability to deploy practices fundamental

to school improvement. The fundamental practices entail rural principals' capacity to effectuate a culture of participative shared agency among shareholders in terms of socializing a common school vision, building rapport, engaging stakeholders in strategic planning efforts, avoiding excessive control of people and processes, and building an environment of empowered members that have access to support that allows for improvements in teachers' professional practice to occur.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study focused on rural teachers' perceptions of the ways their school principal's leadership behavior influences teachers' motivation for engagement in regenerative practices. The investigation deployed criterion-based sampling to include participants situated in rural schools in China's Mainland who have spent at least one year in their school. The impetus for the research was powered by personal experience, this author's work first as a teacher, and subsequently as the vice-principal, at a rural international school situated in a non-metropolitan isolated locale. The lived experience provided an awareness of the difficulties confronting the then-principal, especially with regard to challenges stemming from the multiformity of practice of the rural principalship role. The employment tenure in the rural context also generated significant motivation to engage in thorough research of literature intended to enrich understanding of the multiplicity of challenges materializing in rural schooling contexts related to principals' capacity to influence faculty improvement.

The impetus led to a detailed examination of research-based literature on the anatomy of rural principalship dealing with the multiformity of principalship practice. The literature review presented in this study, while including some discussion on external factors that shape principals' practice, nevertheless centered on examining the internal conditions in schools which impact principals' practice and behavior as related to the four dimensions of instructional leadership: Vision, mission and culture building, improvement of instructional practice, allocation of resources, and management of people and processes (University of Washington: Center for Educational Leadership, 2014). The structured approach allows for focus regarding the data collection process and delimits the scope of the inquiry.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine rural teacher perceptions of the ways their school principal's behavior affects motivation for engagement in ongoing improvement of professional practice. The research effort presented here garnered its generative impulse from an ontological position imbued with personal drive but also from a genuine desire to contribute to the topic-related corpus of knowledge in the field of educational leadership. Moreover, core to the study's aim was its contribution in filling the knowledge gap featuring a dearth of inquiries delving into the minutiae of mechanisms by which principals in rural schools in China influence the improvement of teachers' professional capacity. Filling the gap by thickening knowledge on the topic may assist rural principals in calibrating practice for optimally interfacing with teachers to develop superlative stimuli that effectuate transformative change.

Achieving a deeper understanding of the complex issues confronting rural school leaders, concerning leadership practices necessitated a far-reaching literature review, which entailed literature pieces from different rural contexts on five different continents, not limited only to China, or Asia. The first thematic thread in the review of literature established an *a priori* baseline from which to understand rural principals in terms of their level of awareness of rural schooling challenges, which dovetails into reviewing literature pieces examining the need to tailor professional (principalship) training toward rural understandings. The second thematic thread presented in the literature illuminated practices of rural school principals found to have a positive bearing on teacher improvement. However, the corpus of research pieces did not delve into detailed examinations of a complete 'set' of behaviors by which teachers are influenced by their principals to improve professional practice. The third thematic thread confirmed the gap as it presented an inverse to the second thematic thread, which is deficiency-based examinations

delving into rural principals' practices found to be deleterious to school improvement efforts. Hence, the gap in the body of current research-based knowledge placed a spotlight on the need to engage in a narrow-focus investigation to illuminate a set of behaviors on the part of the rural principal that teachers perceive as having influence on faculty with regard to practitioner improvement. Thus, the phenomenological inquiry presented in this study examined, on a granular level, how teachers' motivation is affected—through interactions with the principal and his/her leadership behavior—to engage in regenerative processes aimed at improving professional practice.

Research Questions and Design

The research questions (RQs) guiding the inquiry are as follows:

RQ1: How does teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative professional practice relate to the school principal's leadership behavior?

RQ2: What do teachers perceive are the principalship behaviors that affect their motivation to engage in efforts directed toward transforming professional practice?

Chosen to answer the research questions, and enhancing lucidity, is this study's theoretical framework featuring the mutually reinforcing theoretical paradigms of social contagion theory and the behavioral theory of leadership. The theoretical framework structured inquiry and focused sensitivity (Kearney & Hyle, 2014) on the examination of rural principals' behaviour and interactions with faculty to understand how followers' improvement efforts are influenced. The behavioral lens was complemented by the lens of behavioral contagion; the 'dual lensing' approach was selected owing to the symbiotic nature with which the two theoretical frameworks lended themselves to answering the study's research questions.

Best fitting the nature of the research effort was the qualitative methodological paradigm of the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), which focuses on individuals' perceived realities in relation to a phenomenon (Alase, 2017). Creswell (2013b) informs that qualitative investigations are best deployed where rendering context complexity is accomplished via inductive reasoning. Further anchoring this positionality is the notion espoused by Creswell (2013b) who notes that research in real-world contexts is well-equipped to understand socially constructed phenomena. In particular, the phenomenological approach provided the ideal interface with this study's questions because the approach does not study just the variants of an individual's personal experience but also commonality, or essence, of human experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

While the choice of qualitative paradigm was also informed through the literature review in Chapter 2, where qualitative inquiries predominated, the methodological choice was further underpinned through the causal inference feature attributed to qualitative inquiries (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). Causal inferential reasoning develops new avenues of inquiry in terms of honing and crafting evocative questions for interviews (van Manen, 1990), which is an attribute that helped with understanding the effects of rural principals' behavior and practices on teachers' motivation to engage in efforts aimed at improving professional practice. The honing of questions through causal inferential reasoning also assisted with delving into the essence of the studied phenomenon as evocative interview questions enhanced the researcher's ability to understand individual experiences (in relation to the research questions). Leader influence, much like anger, is a phenomenon that is experienced by people (Brinkmann, 2013), and is a phenomenon that was meaningfully investigated in this study.

Therefore, IPA was an apt choice for the research effort presented in this study because it allows individuals to give individual perspectives of how they perceive the reality of shared experiences (Lodico et al., 2006). The core methodology of phenomenological research is one of sense-making whereby micro level discourse analysis is deployed to explore telling cases that have the potential to reveal the essence of a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). IPA is moored in cognitive psychology (Thorne, 2014), which aligned with this study's theoretical framework examining the follower-leader dyad in terms of how followers are influenced by leaders. Smith et al. (2009) note that IPA is suitable when trying to uncover how individuals perceive situations and how they make sense of their personal and social world. Hence, IPA ideally interfaced with the nature of this author's research because the core aim was to understand how teachers perceive leadership behaviors of the principal to ascertain the motivational effect the behaviors have on teachers' engagement in regenerative processes directed toward improvement in professional practice.

Site Information and Population

The American definition of "rural" used in this study (United States Census Bureau, 2010) also aligned with the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2015) that classifies as rural communities under 50,000 people. Also used as a criterion was the definition of the United States Department of Agriculture that does not merely characterize rural as being that of the countryside but as non-metro areas outside the boundaries of metro areas, which include detached micropolitan areas with urban clusters of less than 50,000 people (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019).

The research participants were selected from rural or detached micropolitan locales from China's Mainland. The recruiting method was through social media and gave the researcher the

greatest exposure to viable candidates for participation (Appendix B shows the participation invitation social media posting). This author anticipated being able to recruit participants from three to four different rural schools in China. This author acknowledged the possibility of some sites yielding multiple participants, which is what occurred with two of the seven participants. The remaining five were from distinct rural locales. Having a clustered imbalance of participants did not diminish the study's potential as each participant's lived experience is unique and added to the validity and transferability potential of the research by cause of accessing different viewpoints (Danaher, 2016) that aided in the understanding of the phenomenon in focus.

Sampling Method

A key consideration which influenced the number of participants selected was that the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) focuses on depth rather than breadth (Finlay, 2012; Husserl, 1982). Smith et al. (2009) expand on the ideation of depth and sample size by noting how IPA benefits from a "concentrated focus on a small number of cases" (p.51), which lends further support to their quality-over-quantity argument. Moreover, as the nature of human phenomena is complex (Husserl, 1999), IPA necessitates an in-depth examination of individual lived experiences (van Manen, 1990), which lends itself to having a smaller number of research participants. Hence, the nature of phenomenological research requires researchers to delve into, what Schutz (1999, p. 75) calls the "life-world" of participants implicating depth and small-sample size as attributes necessary for IPA research.

Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) note that IPA studies with larger samples are possible but less common; the authors further denote how doctoral programs typically recommend a sample size of six to eight participants for IPA research. Hence, considering the advisory of literature and researchers, a population of seven teachers was selected for this research. Furthermore, the

research participant sample size (of seven) was deemed to be appropriate given (a) the timescale of the study, and (b) the detailed time-consuming case-by-case analysis nature of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

This study used purposive sampling, also called criterion-based selection or criterion based sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposive sampling is a method that involves selecting participants based on their potential to be informative given the research aims and study questions (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Hence, the study participants that were selected for the study comprised individuals who are teachers in rural and/or micropolitan contexts where they have been teaching for at least a year.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the recruitment process of participants was carried out through social media posting (Appendix B). The one-year requirement was necessary as it meant that the participant has had enough time to interact with their school principal. It is important to note that the researcher obtained written permission from participants that elucidated as to the protection of participants, confidentiality, safeguarding of data, and participant rights. The written permissions were collected using a standardized informed consent form (Appendix A) including a brief description of the study topic and along with consent statement items under which the participants' placed their signature. The researcher was committed to upholding the highest of ethical standards and adopted a 'do no harm' approach to interacting with participants.

Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedures

The data was gathered through multi-cycle semi-structured interviews with seven rural teachers. The multi-stage interview process (Appendix G) was needed owing to the large number of topics that the leadership behavior questionnaire (Appendix C) informed and because each

round of interviews generated some additional avenues of inquiry. The additional queries were explored using guiding questions. The selection of participants was carried out with careful deliberation through purposive sampling, detailed in the previous section of the chapter.

Smith et al. (2009) states that qualitative research interviews are purposeful conversations informed implicitly by the research question(s) powering the inquiry while considering participants' responses, which are used by the researcher to further calibrate questions to uncover interesting areas that arise. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary means of collecting data from two rounds of interviews. The Leadership Behavior Questionnaire (Northouse, 2016) (Appendix C), served as the guide to inform the creation of questions for the first- and second-round of semi-structured interviews (Appendix D). Hence, the questionnaire was the instrument used to hone the semi-structured interview questions. Appendix E depicts the data collection process in visual form.

As IPA is described as participant centered (Alase, 2017), the researcher facilitated a mutually agreeable mode, location, and time of executing the interviews. Acknowledged was the utility of virtual interviews as a means of collecting data, which Creswell (2015a) highlights as non-threatening and providing participants with enhanced comfort to discuss sensitive issues. The online mode of data collection, via the WeChat communication platform/app, was appropriate given the social-distancing measures effectuated in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the strict-access protocols adopted by campuses around China with regard to non-members.

The time between the interviews was spent transcribing and coding texts. The two-week interval gave the researcher ample time to prepare for the next stage of interviews. As anticipated each interview will last approximately one hour, which Alase (2017) recommends as a general

guide for IPA research interviews. Third-round unstructured interviews were considered as optional and were originally designated to explore ideas that the initial (two) rounds of interviewing might have identified as inconsistent from the core themes and in need of further clarification (Appendix E), or to explore topical trajectories that initial data analyses of the semi-structured interviews have identified as having potential to answer the research questions. However, it proved more efficient and effective to pursue the topical trajectories and inconsistences during the first and second round of interviews as such occurrences proved to have in-the-moment revealing prescience. After the data collection process was complete, the data analysis process began in earnest where the data coding process generated thick data related to the participants' lived experiences in terms of how they were influenced by their respective school principals to improve professional practice.

Data Analysis

The core methodology of phenomenological research is one of sense-making whereby micro level discourse analysis is deployed to explore telling cases that have potential to reveal the essence of a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which in this study's case was understanding how rural teachers were influenced by their respective school principals to improve professional practice. In considering the matter of reflexivity, the researcher observed the guidance of Moustakas (1994), which instructed that a researcher "bracketing" the self away from the participants' lived experiences is a beginning step in IPA data analysis. The bracketing process, according to Creswell (2012), or *epoche*, according to Husserl (1999), is executed by the researcher describing their own experience with the phenomenon under study, which should prevent interjection of the researcher's personal experience and bias into the lived-experience stories of participants. Hence, this dissertation's author acknowledged the need to bracket the

self away owing to past employment tenure in a rural context where the phenomenon under study was a lived experience. Bracketing occurred through journaling and explicit exposition in the opening of the data analysis chapter.

The next step in the data analysis process was to develop, what Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 126) term, a list of "significant statements", which functions as the foundation for understanding the phenomenon under study that represent statements or quotes giving an understanding of participants' experiences of the phenomenon. Hence, the phenomenological approach chosen for this study was ideal because it allowed individuals to give individual perspectives of how they perceive reality of shared experiences (Lodico et al., 2006). More specifically, phenomenology explores how individuals experience the essence of a particular phenomenon (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017), which was this study's core aim: Delving directly into, what van Manen (1990, p. 9) terms, "the things themselves" in relation to a phenomenon.

The list of significant statements was developed during the initial coding stages to contain non-overlapping statements, each of equal value in terms of consideration of their worth. The next step was grouping the statements into macro information units called "meaning units" or "themes" (Saldaña, 2012, p. 13). Once the themed groupings were done the guidance of Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 129) was followed to write a "structural description" and "textural description" of participants' experiences, which also included verbatim-response samples. The textural responses form the description of *what* the participants experienced vis-à-vis the studied phenomenon, which directly interfaces with this study's second research question.

The interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) is suitable when trying to uncover how individuals are perceiving situations and how they make sense of their personal and social world (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, IPA directly connected to the next stage of the data analysis

process, which was, as Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 129) suggest in phenomenological analysis, to write a "structural description" that was aimed at uncovering *how* the participants' experience forms (interfaces with the first research question); this enabled the researcher to reflect on the context and setting in which the phenomenon was experienced. Hence, IPA ideally interfaced with the nature of this research because the core aim was to understand how teachers perceive instructional leadership efforts and behaviors of the principal to ascertain the effect said efforts have on teachers' improvement efforts. Therefore, the task of this author, as a phenomenologist, was to depict the essence of the basic structure of the teachers' experiences regarding the principal's behaviors and instructional leadership efforts perceived to be influential to their (the teachers') self-improvement.

The final step in the data analysis process was to write a composite description in the form of a summary, which incorporates textural and structural descriptions into prose depicting the essence of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The composite description is the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study ideally interfacing with this author's research because much like phenomenology, the research presented in this study does not study just the variants of an individual's personal experience but also commonality, or essence, of human experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The search for the invariant, formal structures is highlighted by Schutz (1999) who endorses the view of Husserl (1982) that advocates the search for formal invariant structures of, what Schutz termed, the "life-world" (Endress, 2005). Appendix F shows a visual depiction of the data analysis process while Table 1 (next page) shows the coding protocol.

Table 1

Research Coding Protocol

Step 1: Familiarization. Getting to know data through transcribing, reading the text and note taking.
Step 2: Coding text to create codes describing the text content. Double hermeneutic approach is considered (interpretation of participants' interpretation of the lived experience related to the examined phenomenon of principal influence on faculty motivation to improve professional practice) while acknowledging the importance of bracketing away personal preconceptions and biases.
Step 3: Creating themes from codes. Taking individual codes and categorizing them into larger categories to form themes.
Step 4: Reviewing themes to ensure fidelity to data representation. This step includes revising for clarity, enhanced utility, and accuracy.
Step 5: Naming and defining themes. Naming involves creating succinct clear names that allow for understanding of each theme while defining themes involves explicating what is meant by each theme and how the themes help understanding the data and to answer the research questions.
Step 6: Write-up. Analysis and Discussion.
Note. Adapted from Caulfield, J. (2019). How to do thematic analysis. https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/thematic-analysis/

Assisting the data analysis process, and serving as the tool for executing the data coding protocol was Atlas.ti, which is workbench software used by qualitative researchers to generate codes gathered from extensive textual data that allows for systematic and sophisticated ways to manage research material (Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2020). Transcription of audio material was done manually. The software assisted data analysis through its capability of permitting a viewing of complete sets of data set in the same review pane, which Miles et al. (2014) note gives rise to enhanced scope to systematically answer the research questions at hand. Given that IPA necessitates an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of research participants (Smith et al., 2009), it was prudent to utilize qualitative analysis software owing to the capacity of the platform to identify connections, and co-occurring ideas between and among

data codes. Atlas.ti's extensive purview provided scope for understanding the impact of the phenomenon on participants. The software was a substantial workbench tool that helped in creating a better understanding of the phenomenological significance and nature of participants' experiences in relation to the observed phenomenon.

The specific type of coding used was thematic coding, which interfaced with the research through the attribute of building units of meaning from smaller, in-vivo, codes Longhofer et al. (2013). Thematic coding also interfaced with the nature of this author's study by cause of its suitability to inquiries that delve into understanding people's experiences and perceptions (Caulfield, 2019), which directly connects to IPA's core attribute of enabling understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and sense-making of their personal and social world (Smith et al., 2009). The Research Coding Protocol (p. 67) details the research coding protocol that was deployed through using Atlas.ti.

Limitations of the Research Design

Limitations of the research design centered on IPA's attribute of being a research-intensive approach involving lengthy in-depth interviews followed by data analysis that requires a double-hermeneutic approach where the researcher interprets how participants interpret an experience (Kahn, 2000). The double-hermeneutic proviso made the process of bracketing (described in the previous section of this chapter) crucial in avoiding a skewed understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Also known as epoche (Husserl, 1999), the process of bracketing is difficult (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a), yet it helps to acknowledge and be acutely aware of the need to rigorously examine preconceived notions that may be brought into the data collection and analysis process. Reflection helps with illuminating tacit assumptions by articulating them into understandings of how individual perspective is a confluence of one's own

outlook, perspective, and assumptions (Schein, 2010). Hence, it is within reason to surmise how an intentional effort to examine pre-conceptions contributed to a substantive bracketing effort.

Moreover, in overcoming the limitations, the bracketing process was fortified with guidance from twin policies parallel to bracketing, which include "ethnomethodological indifference" (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970, p. 342) and "analytic bracketing" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 495). The former is a process by which a researcher suspends all *a priori* commitments to the understanding of the phenomenon (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970). The latter keeps the research process balanced by disallowing complete disregard for the realities of a lived experience while ensuring that the investigator is not deeply enmeshed in the "unrepentant naturalism" of the world in which research occurs (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 499).

The policy of ethnomethodological indifference dovetails into the idea of bracketing and the nature of the first research question aiming to understand the *how* of the observed phenomenon in a way such that contextual factors are considered in balance with the indifference espoused by the ethnomethodological bracketing strategy. Analytic bracketing naturally dovetails into the second research question that delved into the *what* of the lived experiences of the participants in relation to the observed phenomenon Thus, the confluence of the two parallel bracketing approaches provided a substantive addition to the bracketing strategy designated as part of the research design.

The tri-partite bracketing strategy directly interfaces with enhancing credibility by giving rise to scope for providing stakeholders with a more dependable study of which conclusions may be utilized to fine-tune and refine rural principalship profiles. Thus, this study's potential to transform rural schooling is significant and worthwhile given that most of the world's children

attend schools in rural locales despite the global trend of rural to urban migration (UNESCO, 2019).

Credibility

This study's credibility is anchored in the ontological positionality espoused by Creswell (2012) who notes that researchers ought to be mindful of the quality of the research during the study and its conclusion. Hence, the study presented in this dissertation was evaluated to ensure that the phenomenological inquiry carried out focused on quality at every step. Ensuring quality throughout began with ensuring that the participant selection from rural non-metropolitan and/or micropolitan sites were selected for the right reasons, which was done based on their lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon observed.

Further ensuring the quality of the research, and fortifying credibility, was the integrity with which participants were selected to form a representative sample of teachers best positioned to help understand the phenomenon and answer the research questions. Additional validity and credibility assurance came in the form of exercising awareness of explicit and implicit biases with potential to adversely affect the study aims and the integrity of the research (Patton, 2002). The detailed explication of the bracketing protocol (explicated in the previous section of this chapter) formed a substantive effort to remove the researchers' personal experience from the lived experiences of the participants. The strategy was one that substantially removed the jeopardizing elements of researcher bias. Additionally, the researcher committed to the thorough investigation and follow-up throughout the research process, with a view toward ensuring that every thread of information with potential to answer the research questions was sufficiently 'teased out' and followed-up on.

Member Checking Procedures

Some argue that member checking in phenomenological research is misplaced and not trustworthy as study participants are not trained phenomenologists capable of a disciplined approach to confirming the meaning of their own experiences nor evaluating researchers' data analysis (Giorgi, 2008). However, Guba and Lincoln (2013) note that quality criteria in hermeneutic approaches—which interpretative phenomenological research is (Smith et al., 2009)—are met through member checking. Flick (2007) and Miles et al. (2014) expand the support of member checking by noting that participants are adequate judges owing to having expertise in the experience.

Moreover, in qualitative research, member checking is a technique that contributes to enhancing accuracy and palatability (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006), improving credibility (Flick, 2014; Saini & Shlonsky, 2012) as well as dependability (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and transferability (Savin-Baden & Major, 2010). The member checking procedure that was carried out in this study entailed having participants check the core themes generated as part of the data analysis process. The procedure involved the participants examining interpretations through having descriptions of themes presented to them by the researcher via digital online mediums (shared password-protected cloud-based folders). The timescale in which this occurred was short since member checking is often most effective when member checks are conducted within a short turnaround period (Stake, 2010). Responses to the descriptions of themes generated additional useful data, and in instances where there was disagreement in interpretation, Kahn's (2000) advice that the researcher go back to the field text for clarification was followed.

Points of disagreement were considered in the presentation of results section and further dealt with in the discussion section of Chapter 5. The description of themes was provided to all

participants at the same time and entailed giving them access to an online document; the expedience of the procedure allowed the researcher to incorporate new information into data analysis and discussion of findings. The single-document approach was prudent owing to the fact that no verbatim quotes from any other members were presented; rather, it was only the researcher's (thematic) interpretation of field text data that the participants were asked to member check.

Transferability

The detailed description of the research helps determine what Cohen et al. (2007, p. 137) call "the typicality of a situation" which may assist others in ascertaining comparisons to different settings and how they translate to other cultural contexts. The thick descriptions of the methodological process give rise to scope for determining the extent to which findings are generalizable to another context. Providing consumers of research with sufficiently rich data was a dictum followed throughout this study proposal, and is supported by Guba and Lincoln (2013) who note that users are the ones that ultimately ascertain the degree of transferability based on thick research description.

Dependability

Dependability is synonymous with reliability (Denzin, 2009; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). The contributing elements to dependability of this research effort were generated from its investigative depth, research integrity, procedural fidelity and follow-through, as well as its scope for replicability. Each element contributes to enhancing the reliability, which aims to demonstrate that if another similar-context study were to be conducted with a similar group of participants, it would yield similar results (Cohen et al., 2007). Moreover, dependability was enhanced through commitment to achieving a high level of trustworthiness. It is the attribute of

trustworthiness that is inextricably woven into reliability and is accomplished by presenting the research inquiry and knowledge claims in such a way that resonate as trustworthy (Leavy, 2011). This author was firmly committed to enhancing trustworthiness and exercised rigor every step of the way during the research project.

Confirmability

The investigation's provision of a clearly articulated (and acceptable) research process served as an internal audit trail, which addresses the issue of confirmability of results (Golafshani, 2003). A reflexive journal was kept and served as an audit trial (Morse, 2018) by which the researcher reflected on key moments within the inquiry, and notable ideations. The reflexive journal also reinforces confirmability by dovetailing into the previously-explicated bracketing strategy designed to maintain researcher neutrality that is an element of trustworthiness matched against objectivity (Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Hence, reflexive journaling added to credibility in that it fosters objectivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b) whereby the researcher acknowledged personal feelings and opinions throughout the investigative process that were considered when writing-up the research findings.

Ethical Issues

The ethical issues integral to this study centered on (a) non-maleficence, (b) informed consent, and (c) confidentiality. Non-maleficence entailed a commitment to a 'do no harm' approach toward participants, which prevents exposure to psychological and physical harm, and legal or social injury (Berg & Lune, 2017). Informed consent was an extension of non-maleficence by cause of providing (potential) participants with enough information that allowed them to ascertain whether they wished to participate in the study. Through informed consent, participants were able to know that their participation was of their own volition with no potential

for harm, duress, deceit, manipulation or inducement of any kind. Confidentiality was achieved through sanitization of identifiers, safeguarding of data, and the data will eventually be destroyed after five years. Data was 'scrubbed' for any items that had the potential to reveal the identity of the participants. Moreover, the researcher inoculated data with fictional identifiers to enhance the protection of identity of the participants, their respective schools, and corresponding school principals.

No known conflicts of interest were present as the researcher did not supervise or have any relation to any of the participants. The participants were not from sites where the researcher was working or has worked in the past. The participants' work sites were not in any way compensating the researcher nor was the inquiry funded by any individual or organization. However, the research can be characterized as a "confluence of interest" (Stake, 2010, p. 201) since both the researcher, the participants and their work sites may benefit to the extent that knowledge gained will be leveraged for improvement and 'next levels' attainment.

The researcher was committed to protecting the research data, which was stored in a secure location. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and the transcriptions were sanitized to protect the real identities of the participants, their schools, and their school principals. The data will be stored for a period of five years after which it will be destroyed. All collected data was archived in military-grade encrypted, password protected, cloud-based files.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine rural teacher perceptions of the ways their school principal's behavior affects motivation for engagement in ongoing improvement of professional practice. Participants of the study comprised a criterion-based sample of seven teachers who had the potential to present rich 'telling cases' for illuminating the phenomenon

under study. Data was collected through a total of two semi-structured (approximately) hour-long interview sessions. The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) was ideally suited to explore the interpretations of the participants' life-worlds with regard to experiencing the phenomenon of leader influence upon practitioner motivation for professional practice improvement. IPA's philosophical underpinnings are in cognitive psychology (Thorne, 2014), which ideally aligned with the theoretical framework's scope focusing on the follower-leader dyad in terms of how followers are influenced by leaders. Ideal interface with the aims of the study's research was also found in IPA's suitability for uncovering how individuals are perceiving situations and how they make sense of an experienced phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

Prior to commencing data collection, participants were presented with a standardized consent form seeking their assent. Data was collected through virtual video interviews conducted via a video conferencing platform. Data was sanitized to protect participants identity and was stored on an encrypted, password-protect web-based cloud that will only be accessible to the researcher. Data analysis was initiated via the researcher's bracketing away of biases and pre-conceived notions on the topic. After the bracketing, the data analysis followed a multi-stage protocol that helped with producing a structural, textural, and composite description of the nature of the investigated phenomenon. Credibility of the study was effectuated through transparency, rigor, and commitment to upholding the highest of ethical standards.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As stated in Chapter 1, this study examined the problem related to the dearth of granular understandings of the mechanisms by which teachers' motivation to improve professional practice in rural schools in China is affected by school leaders. Chapter 4 is organized in terms of the two specific research questions (RQs) posed in Chapter 1. The first RQ reports how teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative professional practices relates to the school principals' behavior; the second RQ examines the behaviors of the principal that teachers perceive as affecting motivation to engage in efforts direct toward transforming professional practice.

Forming the structural description and addressing the first RQ—how participants related their respective rural school leader's behavior to their own motivation for improving professional practice—the presentation of results begins with a reporting on the themes related to (1) care and concern of the school principal toward teachers, and (2) accessibility and friendliness of the leader. The co-occurring ideations of care and concern emerged as a theme early in the data analysis process and resulted in being recurring ideations of mention by participants. Similarly, the ideations of accessibility and friendliness formed the second high-density cluster that is the second theme, which (also) directly interfaces the first research question. Both themes help form the structural description of the lived phenomenon that reflects on the rural context and setting of the lived experiences of the participants.

Forming the textural description and addressing the second RQ—what participants have experienced in relation to the studied phenomenon—are the themes of (3) communication, and (4) leader consistency, which have been identified as having substantial influence on motivating the rural teachers'/participants' motivation to improve professional practice. The third theme

divides into two sub-themes that deal with (a) clearly communicating roles, responsibilities, and expectations, and (b) considering teachers ideas, input, and trusting their expertise. The fourth theme also interfaced with the first RQ in that it provided further insight as to how teachers related the school principal's behavior to their improvement in the respective rural contexts they populated.

The demographic composition of participants included three female and four male rural teachers with work tenures in China ranging from 2 to 10 years and the mean number of years working in education was 12.5 years. Of the seven participants two were Chinese nationals, three were American, one Moroccan, and one South African. The participants' age range was from 24 to 63 years of age. All participants reported having daily interactions with their school leader. All participants were interviewed by using the video conferencing platform WeChat, the most commonly used social media app in China at the time of this writing. Three of the seven participants opted to do the interviews on video conferencing and four opted to conduct interviews via audio conference.

Analysis Method

The core methodology deployed in the data analysis process was based on the tenets of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Phenomenological research is a process of sense-making that leverages micro-level discourse analysis to explore telling cases with potential to reveal the essence of the investigated phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Prior to commencing the data analysis, the researcher observed the guidance of Moustakas (1994) who informs of the importance of bracketing away one's own preconceptions. Hence, the data analysis in this chapter begins with an exposition of the researcher's own experience with the phenomenon under study. The bracketing process, preceded by significant note-taking reflection,

was a substantive effort directed toward preventing the researcher's personal experience from developing a bias that would skew the interpretation of data.

The next step in the data analysis process was to highlight "significant statements" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 126), which functioned as the foundation for understanding the participants' lived experience with regard to the phenomenon. The list of significant statements formed the foundation for creating themes. Once themes were formed, the guidance of Creswell and Poth (2018) was observed and structural and textural descriptions of participants' experiences was generated. The structural description which, in IPA, aims to uncover the how of participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 128) interfaces with first research question that deals with how teachers relate school leader behaviors to faculty motivation for improving professional practice. The textural description relates to the second research question that deals with *what* teachers have experienced with regard to the phenomenon. The final step in the data analysis entailed creating a composite description that blends the structural and textural descriptions into prose depicting the essence of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hence, the composite description presented in this chapter is the culminating aspect of the data analysis and takes the form of the chapter summary.

The entire data analysis process was assisted by following a 6-step research coding protocol (p. 66), that was deployed via using the qualitative workbench software Atlas.ti. As the coding type was thematic coding, which builds meaning units from smaller codes (Longhofer et al., 2013), the qualitative software proved to be of utility in allowing the researcher to view complete sets of data in the same review pane. The software also helped in identifying connections and co-occurring ideas between and among data codes. Hence, the coding protocol

and workbench software was leveraged to create an understanding of the nature of participants' experiences with regard to the observed phenomenon.

Essential was the guiding 'mandate' of the conceptual framework that focused the data analysis process on data germane to the RQs and study's theoretical lens. The research questions aimed to understand how teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative professional practice was related to the school principal's leadership behavior and what behaviors (on the part of the school principal) teachers perceived as affecting their motivation to engage in efforts directed toward transforming professional practice. The latter, the theoretical lens, isolated behavioral elements of principalship influential in motivating teachers to improve practice and deepened the inquiry by delving deeper into the types and nature of the identified 'energizing behaviors' and how they influenced practitioner self-transformation. Hence, the two elements, comprised the powering features of the conceptual framework and provided an aggregate lens by which to array, sort, and analyze data.

Presentation of Results

Bracketing

Chapter 3 detailed the relevance of the bracketing process characterized as an attenuating element to this author's bias. The avoidance of skewing data analysis because of author bias moored in pre-conceived notions of rural school contexts (owing to a year-long employment tenure in one) is as necessary as it is prudent. Hence, the presentation of results is preceded by an account, or inventory-taking, of this author's pre-conceptions of rural schooling locales in China.

Namely, based on a year-long tenure in a rural, extremely isolated, context in mainland China from 2016 to 2017, the author believed rural contexts to be inherently demotivating to teachers owing to the isolation and lack of urban amenities vital to enabling an improved quality

of life and mental well-being for teachers. The author also construed the rural school principalship role as burdened with excessive responsibilities that stem from role-duality and enhanced scrutiny placed on them by cause of the close-quarter nature of most rural schools.

Finally, the author believed, at the time of this writing, that rural teachers ultimately do not have a significant impetus to remain in their school even when reasonably content with the conditions of their school. Hence, the belief was that the urban context presents too attractive an opportunity to 'pass up' as a place of employ. Rural schools, as contexts for limited career growth, are thusly pitted against the wealth of career opportunities available in large urban environments. With the above preconceived (author) notions, the presentation of result section organizes into four themes arranged by order of magnitude in which the data analyses identified them.

Concern and Care as Motivational Currency

The first theme interfaces with the first RQ and establishes a foundation for the topic of care through the understanding of a principal's relevance to teachers in a rural context. The relevance is evident in the statement of participant 'I', an early 30s female (fist letter of name used as short-form pseudonym for all participants), who noted that "…in a rural context teachers do not really have much support because it [is] an isolated kind of location. So, your colleagues and your leader is all of your support, at work and after work." Extending the argument, in a more granular fashion, is the statement of 'M' (early 30s, male) who noted the importance of getting support from the school leader in dealing with the difficulties of a rural context while also commenting on how that affects motivation for improvement:

> Probably I will get lost, probably I cannot speak the language, I cannot go back home, it will be difficult. But when there is this kind of support after work and while you are

> working or any time, when just your manager or your school leader will say ‘okay listen, I am available anytime you want just call me, it will be no problem, even at night time’ that can give you more motivation to do more for the school, more motivation for these people because they are trying to help you and you feel a kind of a family, not just like you work together.

The ideation of care as being a currency that can be used to motivate teachers to improve professional practice is noted by ‘T’ (early 40s, male) who connected motivation for improvement to the extent of a school leader’s concern for teachers’ well-being. ‘T’ did not indicate that the intensity of a teacher’s motivation is in proportion to the principals’ effort to show concern but noted there is a direct link between the two where he felt obliged to improve his practice when the school leader showed concern for his (T’s) wellbeing. In the participant’s own words:

> If [the leader] shows a lot of concern to, they know that we're in the middle of nowhere, and so they show concern to make you as comfortable as possible like that, it's definitely you want to do a better job for the school because they are trying their hardest to do well for you.

The idea of concern being motivating to rural teachers’ improvement efforts was corroborated by participant ‘R’ (early 40s, female) who listed as critical the principal’s concern for her quality of life in the rural context by noting how the school leader

> …has gone out of their way to check on people, to help people find accommodation, pay for things, get money overseas. And I think that is going to affect how we work as a teaching team. I think feeling like, I matter to my boss as more than an employee.

The above statement fortifies the notion of improvement being related to how rural teachers feel about their school leader's concern and care for the faculty. Participant 'R' went even further by expressing how much the effort of concern on the part of the school leader(s) is valued by noting:

> One of the big things I have noticed is that our principals, both of them, take the time to say, 'How are you doing with all of these? We know it is stressful. We know that you are doing this and that and struggling.' And, they do take time to actually check in.

Providing a baseline argument for why rural teachers deem principals' concern for quality of life matters outside of their work context is participant 'T' who establishes having one's quality of life affairs settled in a rural context as a fundamental pre-condition for being able to perform well as a practitioner. In this vein 'T' said that: "In order to do anything well, in terms of your professional environment, everything else in your life needs to be sustainable or needs to be in a level of balance …and in order to give your complete mental facility to the effort at hand." He further went on to note that "[i]f a school leader is friendly as we had mentioned and takes an effort to show concern for your well-being. That makes your level of discomfort less than what it could be."

Participant 'D' (early 60s, male) went into more detail on issues of the rural context and how important a school leader's role is in helping rural teachers resolve the plethora of quality-of-life issues that the contexts presents. Explicating the issues and directly relating motivation for improvement of professional practice to a leader's concern for teachers' well-being is the following statement by 'D':

> If you understand that your superior, your boss, is concerned with how you are living, your quality of life, then you are going to be more motivated to do a good job. In a rural

> context, you do not always have the best living facilities. The apartments may not be able to be what you consider to be good standards. There might be difficulties in getting food on the [isolated area]. We did not have a lot of western restaurants, we did not have transportation, a lot of things we just did not have. We were isolated, so that goes to quality of life. A principal or an administrator who is concerned with that, and shows you how to go about obtaining, improving your quality life, you are simply going to be more motivated to do a good job, keep up with what you are supposed to be doing.

The above statement was corroborated independently by participant 'T' who confirmed the notion of leader concern for the well-being of teachers in rural context as integral to motivation for teachers' improvement by noting the following:

> The thing is that if your leader is focused on the well-being... Am I really invested in the well-being of my teachers or my students, which means do I actually really care about my people? That definitely flows over into the attitude of your teachers, and they feel it, and they see it, and then they follow, and they will listen, and they will improve. Absolutely. I believe it is extremely important for improving professional practice.

The notions of care and concern was nuanced by another ideation that surfaced within the body of analyzed data. Namely, it is related to the school principal's genuineness of concern and care. On this topic, participant 'R[1]' (mid 30s, male) states the following:

> So, it does create a kind of concern in the sense of is the person genuine at what he or she thinks? Is the person honest or is the person that you are seeing there …is the person genuine or will the person like—what is the term—be two-faced and then go say something else to someone else in order to just please them or to make them happy.

Participant ‘T’ noted similar sentiments by noting that “[o]f course, when there is that genuineness with the school leader, of course, I have the motivation to do a better job.” Participant ‘T’ reiterated the importance of genuineness of a leader’s concern by singling it out as the most important leader behavior that positively affects his motivation to improve professional practice. The behavioral trait of genuineness on the part of the school leader was noted as especially important in close-quarter small rural contexts on which participant ‘T’ commented that “genuineness of a smaller city school leader, then, of course, that influences your behavior to do a better job.

The above (three) verbatim responses lend credence for the argument that concern, if not genuine, may not have a positive effect on teachers’ motivational impulses for improvement. Thus, it is within reason to surmise how a school principal’s lack of genuineness in showing concern for rural-context teachers’ well-being, and quality of life matters, can be deleterious to the teachers’ motivation to improve professional practice. Therefore, care is important to prompting motivation for improvement for rural teachers, but the evidence suggests the ‘alloy’ of genuineness as integral.

The results presented above indicate that concern and care are clearly leader behaviors that energize teachers’ motivation for improvement. The theoretical framework that combined the Behavioral Theory of Leadership and Social Contagion Theory provided the focus to isolate leader behaviors that energize followers, which surfaced the theme of concern and care early in the data analysis process.

Accessibility and Friendliness is Key

The idea of accessibility is another notion that emerged from the analysis of data. The participants’ principals being accessible to teachers was cited as integral to how teachers

construed the relation between their motivation to improve and principals' behavior. Participant 'D' noted how his principal "…was accessible to all of the teachers. He did not disassociate himself from the group." In this association with the group, and through shared lived experienced in the rural context, the principals gained gravitas and were afforded esteem and respect by the participants. On the topic, participant 'D' states the following:

> [The principal] always referred to himself as a practitioner as well as an administrator. So, he was actually teaching classes. He was in the class. He knew what the teachers are going through because it is difficult working that kind of [rural] environment, especially with students who are not working in their native language and their mother language. They have difficulties and the teachers are the first to realize that, of course. He was there, he knew, he understood what we were going through.

In a similar vein participant 'M' stated: "So let's say, for example, you have a frustration …and the school leader, comes to you and says, 'Look, I understand your frustration, I have this frustration too' right? There is not really anything that we can do with it. Let's sort of find a way past it, in which we can help the students."

Therefore, in their ability to comprehend what the teachers are going through in the rural context, it appears that the principal is afforded esteem by the teacher. The inverse is evidenced by the statement of 'R' who believed her principal "did not know what was going on in the class or what was actually going on with the teachers." Aggregated together, the mirror statements suggest that rural principals can position themselves to effectuate a higher degree of motivation toward teacher's commitment to improve if they are afforded esteem by their teachers. The affordance of esteem, in one way, is achieved through sharing the lived experiences within the rural context.

Another way in which accessibility was construed was through the expectation that the rural school leader be friendly and foster camaraderie equally among the teaching collective. Illustrating the point is the statement of 'R[1]' who stated the following:

> So if you are trying to motivate people and stuff and so …I believe that people should have friends outside of school as well, outside of work as well, and your leaders need to--your leader can have friends, I am not saying they cannot have friends, but then, try to do something for everyone, not just for the small group or something. It is very visible when your leader is hanging out with just specific people.

The topic of accessibility and friendliness of the leader was connected to the rural teachers seeing the principal as being part of the team, one of them. In the words of participant 'M': "I feel that school leaders or, my leader, he is like sharing with me a part of him as a human being." Hence, the friendliness and accessibility is construed as a rapport-building behavioral attribute; that friendliness positively affects teachers motivation to improve the professional self is evidenced by the following statement of participant 'M' who states that "I believe that if someone has done something great with me and good with me, I need to do more with him and give something great as well." Participant 'I' stripped the friendliness matter to a fundamental imperative of the workplace by saying "[a]cting friendly is basic in my mind; if some leader is not friendly, I will quit."

Further evidencing that friendliness acts as a camaraderie enhancing mood setter that affects teachers' motivation to improve is noted by 'M' who comments:

> This can affect their motivation and can affect the mood because of course when you feel good somewhere, when you feel comfortable, you will do more. And this can help you

> have a kind of good motivation to improve and this can affect your students, and also your team, the people that you work with.

An interesting ideation regarding accessibility being one and the same as friendliness is proposed by participant 'D' who conflated the two behavioral attributes of the principal and stated the following:

> Well, acting friendly is very important, again, going back to what I said earlier. Dr. R, he is accessible. We could always go up and just talk to him. He is in the classroom. He knows what is going on. The fact that he was friendly and accessible, that is really the same idea.

Participant 'D' further emphasized the relevance of his principal's accessibility and stated that "…accessibility makes it easier to bring problems to him, and to tell him, and to get problems in the classroom fixed."

However, the data analysis surfaced a caveat regarding friendliness, or more accurately stated, the degree of friendliness a school principal shows toward teachers. On this topic participant 'R' stated: "I feel that if a person is always constantly friendly, then you cannot take them seriously, and that the person is not serious with you in order to help you to improve and to become better." The statement prompted further probing of other participants but there was inconclusive evidence that could help define the point at which too close is too close. In other words, there was no way to ascertain whether what is perceived as too friendly hinders professional relationships to the extent that it adversely affects motivation for improvement. For example, while participant 'J' (late 20s, female) said "[h]e did not act like my boss; he was more like a friend" she did not expound on whether or not her principal being like a friend adversely impacted her motivation to improve as a professional practitioner. However, participant 'J' did

elucidate on how a principal being “bossy’ could adversely affect her by noting the following: “You feel like you can talk with them about the problems you have because if they are acting like very bossy to you, then you do not want to like talk with them about your problems.”

A glean into what could be used to define the point at which a school leader goes too far in effort to be friendly, or in fostering camaraderie, is proffered by participant ‘T’ who notes the following:

> I would not necessarily be motivated at all if my leader went beyond his, as we were talking about really defined roles before of what a leader is, and tried to in some way, you know, force some sort of, you know, out of work relationship with other colleagues.

Perhaps the statement of ‘R’ explains how a balance between being friendly/accessible and professional ought to be made in order for rural principals not to risk being too friendly so as to diminish esteem granted them by teachers. In this vein participant ‘R’ provides an apt summary of this section of results through the following:

> I think you have to find a middle ground between being friendly and approachable but also still being professional and earning respect. You cannot be all friendly, because then people get worried and think ‘this is someone that does not have the strength, the professionalism to take care of things.’ So, I think there is definitely a balance, but you have to be approachable. You cannot be just a robot or a sergeant. You have to be able to have your employees come to you and say ‘I need to talk to you about this’ or, ‘I am worried about this’ or, ‘I want to try this.’ So, I think that is a balancing act for sure.

Communication is Imperative

The largest theme is related to meaningfully purposeful communication, which the data evidenced as having direct impact on teachers’ motivation to improve professional practice. The

theme bifurcates into (a) clearly communicating roles, responsibilities, and expectations, and (b) considering teachers' ideas and input, and trusting teachers' expertise. The two bifurcated elements naturally dovetail into one another as they both relate to communication.

Clearly Communicating Roles, Responsibilities, and Expectations Promotes Motivation for Improvement

Evidencing what can occur in the absence of clarity in defining teachers' roles and responsibilities, participant 'J' noted that "it is not best for the school if they do not define the job for every teacher because everything will get very, very messed up." Conversely, in responding about clarity of understanding about roles and responsibilities, in relation to motivation to improve practice, participant 'M' stated how confusion is dispelled when teachers' roles and responsibilities are clearly understood. He went on to state: "This is really helpful. If the leader can make it very clear and easy to understand, no confusion, and gives the teacher some guidance about these things, it will be very very helpful." He went on to expand on the topic and stated:

> So, at least, you know what you have to do, and you know what you should not do; you know when you have to do it and not to do it. So, you can manage your time. You can do better and you can like—how to say it—it can be easy for you, so it can give you more motivation [to improve practice].

Relatedly, participant 'D' created a unique analogy in responding to how motivation for improvement is affected by clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Namely, 'D' used the analogy of guardrails as being parameter-setting delimitations; he stated:

> If you know where the guardrails are, if you know where the limits are, you know what you can and cannot do. You know what the limits are. If somebody who cannot

> communicate those limits and what is expected, you will have a difficult time working with them regardless of your cultural background, but someone who is able to communicate what they expect and what requirements of your position are, it is going to make it easier on you to improve. It is going to make it much easier because you know what you need to do.

Participant 'D' further noted that clearly defined roles and responsibilities affect teachers' motivation because that allowed him to know "…what you are supposed to be doing; if you have a defined role, this is what your job is, his is what you are expected to accomplish—then you have something to work towards." Participant 'R[1]' confirmed more of the same by stating that: "If you communicate effectively and I understand what is expected of me, if I understand what [the leader] wants me to do then yes, that motivates me to improve professional practice." In a similar vein, participant 'R' expands on the benefits of role and responsibility clarity through commenting on her rural school where she also notes how such clarity can also improve teamwork. 'R' states:

> I think our school has got a really good structure where they do define positions of responsibility. People know what they are meant to do, what their role is, and I think it increases motivation because you know your job, and I think it also encourages teamwork.

Participant 'T' corroborates the connection between motivation for rural teachers to improve practice when role clarity is present, but nuances the ideation by noting how clearly defining roles is bi-directional meaning that teachers also need to know what the principal's roles and responsibilities are:

> I think that if the school leader, you know once again is able to have that

> that clearly defined understanding of what he or she is meant to do …of course that is, you know, is good for motivation because it allows the leader to be an individual right; it, you know, it encourages a manner of respect and not only that but an understanding of the job itself.

Participant 'M' independently confirmed the above nuance and goes into more detail about how the leader clearly defining his/her role impacts motivation of practitioners to improve. The following was stated:

> For example, my last leader when he is talking about himself, he is always saying, 'Okay, this is my job, this is my role, this is what I have to do, this is what I am going to do.' So, you will feel that he is doing something extra that you are doing and you feel that okay, so this is his job and when he will try to give each of us what he should do or what he should not do, that is also is like—it can give you a part of the motivation. So, you know exactly how it is working. It is not like you are lost. So, you do not know what the leader can do or what he cannot do.

The above statement also permits interpretation as to the delineations of duties between the rural school leader and teachers. It also connects to the "guardrail" analogy of participant 'D' who deploys the analogy to convey the importance of knowing where limitations and delimitations of one's role is set. The above statement of 'M' also permits the inference that the participant corelates motivation to how above-and-beyond the principal went in carrying out duties. The inference finds support in the following statement of 'M':

> These small things can give you good motivation [for professional improvement] and you feel that you are working in a professional environment and you have to do more, just

> kind of appreciate the hard work that your leader is doing trying to make your work easy and fluid.

Participant ‘T’ noted how the ability to plan for improvement is adversely affected in the absence of role and responsibility clarity. On the issue ‘T’ stated that “when you do not know and when you are not given clear information …you automatically sort of lapse into, well, like, ‘I cannot do anything. I cannot make plans. I cannot structure this’." Further unpacking how clarity of understanding regarding roles and responsibilities feeds into motivation to making improvements in practice is the statement of ‘J’ who stated that

> A lot of time, [the principal] was very effective in communication with others; like any events, we will discuss it ahead of time and make sure that everything is in charged by someone. We schedule the whole process so that [clarity] is very important and effective for making things better.

The clarity of role and responsibilities, according to participant ‘R^1’ helped with not only motivating teachers but it also, in his view, made the collective of teachers have confidence in the leader. This is evidenced by the following statements made by ‘R^1’: “So, the leader was organized …everything was stipulated very well, and everybody knew exactly what they needed to do. So, there was a lot of confidence in the leadership.” Participant ‘R’ notes a similar ideation of clarity when having responsibilities clearly communicated to her and notes “For me when my boss gives me a detailed list it helps me feel less [confused]. It is focusing.” Participant ‘R’ further elucidates on the matter by providing a metaphor thar encapsulated the essence of how clarity of understanding roles and responsibilities contributes to motivating her to improve professional practice. She stated that understanding what her role and responsibilities are akin to

a “mind path of mind thoughts that have been laid out, and everybody knows what's going on and stuff, and so, then yeah, it definitely motivates you.”

The above statement dovetails, and provides a natural segue, into another element identified is important to having an energizing impact on motivation for rural teachers’ improvement in professional practice: The need for the school leader to clearly communicate expectations for professional performance. Namely, the relevance of the topic is aptly baselined by the following statement of ‘T’ who stated: “Any professional environment needs to have clearly defined expectations of professionality that everyone is aware of okay.” Participant ‘R’ stated that there is substantial utility in knowing what is expected of her and how the clarity serves a vital role in guiding her improvement. She noted the following:

> It helps a lot because if my leaders are telling me exactly what I need to do, or what is expected of me, it gives me clear guidance and clear guidelines. And then I can develop and improve on around those areas. It's definitely very, very important.

The above statement was independently corroborated by ‘J’ who also noted how being clear on expectations motivated her improvement: “[The principal] always makes sure that we understand the standards and rules before …so that certainly motivates me. I also do that with my students.” Participant ‘I’ dovetailed into both of the above statements and noted how clarity of understanding on expectations criteria not only helped with motivation to improve her practice but also dispelled confusion. In this vein, ‘I’ stated:

> If I can understand the criteria. I think it is also helpful to be more specific details and about how to improve my work and what should I do to achieve the standard. It is good. If can ask the leader, maybe the leader can give more explanation or examples. It will be helpful. Without that, maybe make me confused.

The ideation of clarity of expectations dispelling confusion finds independent corroboration in the statement of participant 'R[1]' who also went a step further and highlighted the decisive role expectations clarity had on his improvement. He noted the following: "I think that's, that's the most important, I think, yeah, it absolutely definitely motivates you if people are clear, and they know what to explain what is expected of them and then know what they have to do and stuff." Participant 'R[1]' used an analogy to illustrate the point by noting how having clearly communicated expectations delivered by the school leader "it's like walking into a restaurant and they give you a menu." Another analogy explaining the utility in having clearly communicated expectations, and how they relate to teachers' motivation to improve professional practice in her rural context, is the analogy used by 'R' who stated:

> Give them a road map of how to get there. You do not give them all those individual steps that you tell them, you know, this is where we are going, and this is how we are going to get there. Yeah, it definitely helps.

Participant 'R' also noted that the school leader clearly communicating expectations impacts teachers' motivation to improve professional practice and serves a goal-setting function that promotes teachers' accomplishment of improvement goals. The following was stated on the matter:

> If they know what is expected of them, they are going to be motivated to accomplish that. If they know what the leaders are looking for and how they are going to be assessed on their performance. It is all going to go to helping them improve their own practice.

She further explained that the "road map" allows her to "…know where we are going; we know what is required, you know. Again, there is a path we are following. We are not yet running around widely."

Both the “road map” and “restaurant menu” ideations point to the notion that the school leader clearly communicating professional performance standards and expectations serves as a guiding blueprint that motivated the participants to improve practice. The school leader clearly articulating improvement goals gave the participants goals to work toward.

Shared Agency Empowerment: Considering Teachers’ Ideas and Input, and Trusting Teachers’ Expertise

Establishing the baseline for this section is the concept of shared agency, which occurs when individuals within an organization are connected to the "wider hole" wherein the problems of practice and corresponding responses are responsibilities that are shared (2010, p. 64). Further explication is given by Wagenaar (2015) who notes that shared agency necessitates understanding practices through a shared framework of understandings, which requires a dialogical give-and-take between institutional actors. Hence the ideation of shared agency is aptly designated for this section’s title with the give-and-take ideation represented in the results through the notions of consideration of teachers input, ideas, and trust in their expertise as practitioners. On the topic of being motivated to improve practice by the school leader and engaging in a dialogical process, participant ‘J’ noted the following:

> That is helpful for sure because if you go for something and then he kind of agrees with you, then next time when you have something good to suggest, you do not feel reluctant to speak out. Whenever I say something, he would comment like, ‘That is a good idea. That is great,’ even though that idea had some problem, but he will point out later and explain to you. But at first, he always appreciates it. That is very important. That makes me and my colleagues, like, open to him. Whenever we have any problems, obviously

> any problem, we have any suggestions, we do not feel bad to put it forward. Again, it is very important.

'J' went further and explicated the details of how the dialogical process with her leader worked: "We can talk about these things very openly and he would try to give suggestions, and he would ask for our opinions about his suggestions, and we can talk about these things together." In a similar vein, participant 'R' stated how her leader "…was willing to take suggestions, willing to discuss things, not a micromanager." Evidencing the idea of being part of the "wider hole" was the statement of participant 'M' that denoted an awareness of having agency, responsibility, and membership within the overall school as generating significant motivational capacity for improvement of professional practice:

> I work with these people, it means I am a part of school and I need to make that school great, in somehow. I will do a small part; the others will do small parts and we will all make a greater contribution. It means, I am a part of that school and I am responsible as well.

The above statement was given independent corroboration by participant 'I' who incorporated the notion of family into explaining how important being heard was to creating a sense of community:

> Even sometimes, some teachers, when they will give not clear suggestions or something that maybe it is not going to work and when the leader will take it and consider that, that is also good. It can show that you are not just working and have like such a few hours that you have to teach every day and you should go home. But you are a part of that family, you go to that school, you contribute for that school.

The above statements evidence how strongly participants felt about their rural school principal considering their input through engaging legitimate dialogic discourse and how the opportunity to be heard motivated practitioners to improve professional practice. Conversely, not having one's input and ideas considered by the leader had a strong adverse effect on motivation for improvement, which is explicated through the following statement of 'R^1':

> I did not really want to be involved. I did not want to be involved in improving my career or going out or improving myself or whatever. I just wanted to like 'You know fine, if you think you have it under control, if you guys are doing such a great job and you do not need any suggestions or any feedback or nothing then I am just going to do my job and that is it, then so be it.' And that is exactly what I did.

In explicating the root causes of how he was disaffected owing to the lack of shared agency not afforded to him, 'R^1' stated:

> I feel that I did not get a lot of recognition or so or the moment. For example, if I would say 'Don't you think that we should do XY and Z' and then reply would always be 'Yeah, we thought about XY and Z, but we thought it would not work.' So, it is always like …it is never like 'Yeah, you know, that is a good idea' or it is never 'Yeah, we did not think about it. We did not do that.' So, what happened is that …the one thing just--I do not want to say that bothered me, but it is the one thing that just made me like 'You know what I am going to …I am just going to stay under the radar, do my job, if people need me I will be there. But if you do not really want my help then I have other things to do.

The above statement lends credence to the argument that teachers can disengage from the collective and become nominal in their performance once the force of disparagement—owing to lack of agency—takes effect. Hence, rural leaders actively listening to teachers and considering

teachers' ideas has substantial motivational utility for improvement of professional practice and fostering a sense of emotional well-being. That leaders simply keeping an open 'dialogic channel' is enough to positively impact motivation for practitioner improvement is evidence by the following statement of 'I' who stated:

> To take in others' decisions in consideration, just to take it in consideration, this is also good. Just like to say 'okay, I will take that', 'I will check that out and I will let you know', it is also okay, even if you will not do that, but it is also okay, you know what I mean?

More of the same is noted by 'M' who stated the following when commenting how having his suggestions heard and considered by the leader impacts his motivation to improve professional practice:

> So, when we are making—kind of trying to solve a problem together—that is also good and gives you more motivation. So, you will feel that you are a part of the organization, you are part of the school, and you are doing something besides just like teaching your subject.

The data further suggested that the dialogical process of give-and-take, when it comes to the principal considering teachers' voices, appears to be important to the joint process of calibrating improvement in the rural context where changes can occur more frequently. 'T' noted the following on the topic: "I understand smaller day-to-day operations are much more likely to change in rural contexts than an urban one." Some participants believed that the rural context made incorporating various suggestions that much more important whether it was on a simple issue like where to go on a trip or whether it had to do with more complex academic matters. Evidencing the former is the statement of 'J' who stated:

> For example, if [the leaders] want to go to organize some team building activities, for example a short trip to somewhere, they will listen to teachers' advice. We will submit our options to them. They will make a good decision; they balance each person's wishes.

Evidencing a more complex process of the school leader trying to incorporate teachers' ideas and experiences into forming a school's academic culture in a diverse rural context is the statement of 'D' who noted:

> The school in [location sanitized] is a new school; the first real year and we had teachers from all over, we had some teachers from England, we had teachers from America, we had Australia and we even had a Chinese national who had gone to Australia and had an Australian passport and he came back. So, trying to bring all of these people into a faculty and have them work together, you cannot impose that from the top, because they are all going to have different experiences, and they all have different, slightly different, ways of teaching. You have to be able to incorporate those different methodologies into the school and then try to blend them together somehow. Which is difficult. I mean, you have to take into account your teachers and their experiences and what they have done and just realize that your ideas maybe are not always the only way of doing something.

In summarizing the above statements it is perhaps prudent to use the statement of 'M' who in a single statement captured the essence of shared agency's potential for being a motivational catalyst for improvement by stating the following: "Yes, and also the communication, like, 'okay, this is the plan, this is how it should be; so, what do you think?' And then we can discuss this and try to find the best way."

The data extend the arguments on the importance of the rural school leader considering teachers' ideas and input to the more profound notion of the leader trusting teachers' expertise.

The idea of trusting a teacher's know-how, expertise and being able to defer to the better judgement of the teacher while being flexible with giving improvement directives is a notion the data analysis surfaced as a result of recurring mentions by the participants. The flexibility is construed as the rural school principal deferring to the expertise and judgement of teachers on matters related to classroom-based routines, policies, and methodologies.

While having clearly communicated guidelines on performance standards (explicated in the previous section) may appear in contradiction to the notion of teachers not desiring too much guidance or 'interference' in classroom-based matters, the dichotomy is one related to the domain of application. Namely, on classroom-based matters where the participants believed to be the primary experts, the sentiments expressed note the belief that the classroom teacher's determination is most applicable when making decisions about the same. Hence having clearly communicated performance standards and expectations can be construed as an overarching macro domain whereas the classroom-based matters can be construed as a micro domain that participants' feel protective of and as being exclusive to them. Participant 'J' proffered the following on the topic:

> But, sometimes, when your leader, for example, he does not know that much about your subject or he does not know that much about your relationship between you and your students in your classroom …because for me, the classroom, it is something very special that when I do lock the door, when I do close the door of the classroom, and I am inside with my students, I feel like we are together and there is nothing outside or like we are in our world. So, sometimes, the leader should be a little bit flexible and not try to provide the plan. It should be kind of like this flexibility that, 'okay, this is what you have to do, this is the plan for how the work is to be done but in case that you need to do any

> modification or there is something that you need to suggest or you want me to do or change…'; this is the motivation for me [to improve professional practice].

Participant 'T' stated more of the same indicating that within the dialogical process the rural school leader ought to account for his (the participant's) expertise and experience:

> Okay, you know there needs to be a dialogue. Okay? You know, especially from someone in a management position; you know earlier I had talked about the fact that that I've done this for 11 years and I'm quite you know, I'm quite sure about about the way I do things, the way I don't do things, but that doesn't mean that that I can't improve at all.

Noted within the above statement is the balanced viewpoint of the participant who indicated that there is room for improvement of professional practice meaning that just because he is experienced it doesn't mean that he cannot improve. The statement can also be interpreted as the participant merely wanting the school leader to pay deference to the experience and expertise of the teacher/participant.

More participants specifically addressed the need of their rural school leader to be flexible in giving suggestions (sometimes orders); participant 'D' espoused the notion of "hierarchy" to designate the aforementioned macro-micro dyad related to setting improvement goals and objectives. On the topic participant 'D' stated the following: "So, it is a hierarchy of responsibility. Okay?" So, that says [leaders] should be setting the high level objectives and then allowing members to decide or to work to meet that objective. Rural principals' potential to negatively affect motivation for improving practice is illustrated by particpant 'R[1]' who commented on a previous rural school context he characterized as lacking a dialogical process of considerating teachers' input: "In [school name sanitized], we had a situation, we had a principal, where it was very, very, very bad. It was a dictatorship, it was very, very authoritarian; you must

do this, you must do this, you must do this." That rural school leaders being invasively instructive and ignorant of teachers' expertise can be deleterious to motivation for teachers' improvement is evidenced by the of spirited comment of participant 'M' who stated:

> I do not want the leader to tell me what I should do with my job because, well, unless the leader is teaching the same subjects with me and all he has more experiences in my subjects, I do not want him to say anything.

Participant 'T' struck a poignant note regarding trusting a teacher's expertise and deferring to the expertise of teachers: "[T]eacher needs to be trusted. If a teacher is worthy enough to be hired, then they're worthy enough to understand how to develop." Participant 'T' went deeper into elucidation on how rural leaders being too invasive and micromanaging on the minutiae of the micro domain of classroom-based matters can negatively affect practitioners' motivation to improve by using a metaphor: "[E]very teacher has their own, their own sort of strings, right, you know; so if a leader starts to try to manipulate the day-to-day practices of in-class than that will ultimately affect motivation. Thus, allowing teachers to exercise judgement in a sphere of practice known well to them is confirmed by participant 'R' who stated that "I think teachers should have their own thinking, their own creativity of how to do something" and by participant 'T' who concluded: "[I]f the leader is too restrictive and if the leader is ultimately saying that you need to do things this way and by this manner they're ultimately missing the entire point of teaching."

Leader Consistencey and Predictability Motivate Practitioners to Improve

The literature review in Chapter 2 established that rural schooling contexts face a multiformity of challenges. Reiterating the notion of challenges is a primer for the results presented in this theme section because the data evidenced how the rural contexts in which the

participants were situated were also facing their own challenges. The challenges placed that much more value on leader consistency which participants noted as motivating them to improve practice as it evoked feelings of calm and fairness.

Establishing an overall baseline of rural contexts challenges was ‘T’ who is the one participant that worked mainly for rural schools throughout his professional career as a teacher. ‘T’ highlights the issue of (in)consistency related to lack of planning, which he characterized as placing the rural school leadership in a reactive mode that overburdens the teachers:

> What I have found with rural schools is that the determining entity whether it's the government or whomever is leading the school, is that they're not doing [strategic planning]. Well, okay, and so because of that they're very highly overworked and take their vacation time very seriously …yeah, and so because of that decisions are often made ad hoc and last minute so here all schools the plan isn't necessarily very elaborated upon.

The benefits of rural principal behavior being consistent are explicated by participants who tied consistency and predictability to motivation to both improve professional practice and feel good about their work in general. The finding is supported by ‘R’ who states: “If your leaders are consistent, if there are consequences and things like that, and if they do not change their minds even so ...if there is stability, that is extremely important and that definitely motivates me.” Participant ‘M’ dovetails into the above statement and goes into more detail:

> If the leader keeps changing the policies of the school or some rules or some management policy, things about how to manage the class, if such things keep changing, we will make the people, the followers, feel confused a lot. Honestly, we will have no motivation to

> work because it keeps changing the direction, it makes people feel hard to follow the person.

Participant 'J' also notes how consistency helped improve outcomes in addition to motivation for rural practitioners' improvement by noting that "[if leaders] do things very consistently, then the outcomes are always better compared with those situations under inconsistency. So that motivated me to improve." The idea of improved outcomes is supported by participant 'T' who associated consistency to harmony that helps motivation for improving professional practice; he stated the following: "Once again, it has to do more with the idea of everything working in harmony. So if everything is working in harmony then your performance in the classroom is improved."

Another finding that surfaced was that the rural school leader's consistency and predictability prompted feelings of comfort and perceived fairness, which positively affected motivation to improvement of professional practice. In this vein 'R' noted:

> I think I would argue that consistency and predictability come back to making people feel comfortable and fairly treated. If you know that if I have a problem, this is the procedure it follows, and that is something my school leader is very good about is there are operating procedures in place for everything. I think that comes back to comfort. You know I have a path I can follow to resolve this or to get the help I need for this. And I think it comes back to being fair.

The absence of a rural school leader's consistency, according to participant 'R' didn't just demotivate teachers but also hurt their feelings:

> In my experience, because what I have experienced is that you have people that are asking the same question and then your leader responds in different ways. I found that it

> actually hurts a person's feelings and it depended really like, what is the word, demotivates them or really causes problems.

The preceding verbatim responses interface with the core precepts of the theoretical framework, which delves deep into the types and nature of leaders' 'energizing behaviors' and the influence on practitioner self-transformation. The deep exploration of the nature of leader behaviors is satiated with the pathos-based tone of the preceding verbatim responses as they evidence the profound emotional effect a school leader's inconsistency *and* consistency has on teachers' motivation for improvement.

In a similar vein, and further commenting on the effects of leader inconsistency as related to lack of fairness when dealing with same 'questions' that are responded to differently, participant 'R[1]' states:

> All leaders always just need to be consistent. I mean we did not really have—the only thing that I said in the start was, is that, I think that the moment when I address the issue that [the leader] was replying differently to me, compared to when someone else was addressing the same issue.

In denoting how important leader predictability is in promoting improvement-motivating fairness participant 'R[1]' stated the following: "My leaders must be predictable, and the staff members or colleagues must understand what are the consequences, and all the rewards for the hard work and things like that." That consistency not only motivated teachers to be better but also evoked calm was evidenced by the statement of participant 'R': "You have to, I mean you have to let people know what is coming, what is happening, and where they stand, because, otherwise, people get panicked."

Hence, leadership consistency and predictability are copacetic behaviors. The two promote teachers' motivation to improve professional practice by making teachers feel they are led by a leader that forward plans, treats them fairly, and instills a sense of calm. Thus, predictability and consistency can be viewed as integral factors to motivating rural teachers to improve professional practice and the inverse adversely affects teachers on a deep emotional level.

Summary

Confronting rural teachers is a plethora of quality of life and well-being issues, which the study participants noted as being paramount concerns their principal needed to address in order for the teachers to be motivated to improve practice in their respective rural contexts set in various locales in China. The close-quarter community of the isolated context thrust the principals into a role whereby the core leadership behaviors most appreciated by teachers—and directly related to teachers' motivation to improve professional practice—were related to behaving in a manner that showed genuine care and concern for the wellbeing of teachers. The two behavioral attributes formed the first theme of the results exposition and contributed to answering the first research question, which set out to form the overarching structural description of the observed phenomenon related to how teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative professional practice relates to the school principal's leadership behavior.

Also interfacing with the first research question is the finding that overarching genuineness of concern on the part of the school leader is a decisive augment to friendliness and accessibility (the second theme) of the leader that had substantial relevance in the rural context. The relevance was amplified by cause of the rural contexts combining students with unique challenges and Chinese and expatriate teaching faculties that formed the distinct school cultures.

Thus, friendliness and accessibility on the part of the participants' school leaders were ascertained as energizing to teachers' motivation to improve through making teachers feel appreciated, needed, and part of the school community. The behavioral attribute of school leader friendliness was nuanced by the qualification that it not be excessive. Although not specifically defined by degree, by nature excessive friendliness was noted as counterproductive to the faculty affording their rural school leader with esteem.

The third theme interfaced more substantially with the second research question that set out to uncover the specificity of principalship behaviors that affect teachers' motivation to engage in efforts directed toward transforming professional practice. The third theme, forming the textural description of the studied phenomenon, surfaced the ideation of communication as being integral to clearly communicating professional performance standards and expectations to teachers in addition to considering teachers' ideas and valuing their expertise. The presentation of results evidence that, without clarity of communication and understanding of what is expected of teachers, scarcely can the teachers be motivated to improve. The presentation of results surfaced a vital component of the communication process, which is the participants' expectation and appreciation in having opportunity to exercise agency in the decision-making processes that impacted operational and academic matters within their respective rural school contexts. The shared agency effectuated motivation for improvement on the part of the teachers as they felt appreciated, empowered, and able to effect positive change. Moreover, the dialogical process is one that the results identify as having a beneficial effect on motivation for improvement of professional practice. The dialogical process made the participants feel that their expertise was trusted and that the school leader was able to recognize the value in deferring to knowledgeable practitioners, especially on classroom-based routines for which the participants felt strongly

about, and even protective, as evidenced by (select) spirited verbatim responses. Hence, not welcome within the dialogical process was the behavioral attribute of leaders being too invasive in giving minutiae-based mandates to teachers regarding the micro-domain of classroom-based matters. Also unwelcome was school leaders not engaging in a give-and-take process of jointly discussing the best ways forward. Therefore, dogmatic, uncooperative, intractable, and micro managerial rural school leader traits were rejected and ascertained as counterproductive to teachers' improvement efforts.

The fourth theme circled back and interfaced with both research questions as it uncovered the unique challenges of the rural context in which participants placed a premium on their leaders being consistent and predictable. The two behavioral attributes were found to contribute to motivation to improve professional practice through inspiring teachers' confidence in their school leader in addition to creating a sense of calm whilst dispelling confusion. The additional benefit of leader consistency and predictability was found in its capacity to create the perception of teachers being treated fairly and equitably. Conversely, the absence of perceived fairness and equity was detrimental to motivation for professional improvement.

Therefore, aside from the above themes answering the study question, the exposition of themes also fulfills the study's purpose which was to uncover and understand the school leader behaviors that influence teachers' motivation to improve professional practice in a rural setting. The results are also consistent with the precepts of the conceptual framework that structured the data analysis on behavioral elements of principalship influential in motivating teachers to improve practice and delved deeper into the types and nature of the identified 'energizing behaviors' and how they influenced practitioner self-transformation. Saliently summarized, the rural school leader behaviors—and nature thereof—germane to teachers' motivation to improve

professional practice were determined to be the following: genuine care and concern for teachers' well-being, accessibility and tempered friendliness, consequential dialogical discourse, articulated communication of school-based expectations and initiatives, avoidance of dogmatic micromanagement on classroom-based matters, perceptible consistency, and appreciable predictability. The preceding results attest to the successful leveraging of the theoretical framework that set out to illuminate the behavioral attributes of school leaders found to be motivational—and contagiously energizing—to teachers in relation to their professional practice improvement. Stated otherwise, the rural school leader behaviors listed above are granular articulations of mandates set by the theoretical framework (and research questions).

The subsequent, and final, Chapter 5 delves deeper into the interpretation of findings in relation to the established literature. In addition, the findings' connection to the conceptual framework is explored. Moreover, practical implications for professional practice and recommendations for further study are also elucidated through explications on how the study can be improved and how future studies in the field may contribute to extending the boundaries of research-based knowledge in relation to the examined phenomenon.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents the study summary and important conclusions drawn from the presentations of results in Chapter 4. The chapter begins with an introduction, which is an overview of the problem along with the purpose statement and research questions. The review of methodology and major findings are also featured and precede the section on implications connecting the findings to prior research. Finally, the chapter presents a discussion on the implications for further action and recommendations for further study.

The problem of leadership practice focuses on school leaders' influence on teachers' efforts to motivate and engage them in processes intended to improve professional practice. The problem relates to the dearth of granular understandings of the mechanisms by which teachers' motivation to improve in rural schools in China is affected by school leaders. Hence, the purpose of this study was to examine rural teacher perceptions of the ways their school principal's behavior affects motivation for engagement in ongoing improvement of professional practice. The study presented here focused on two research questions:

RQ1: How does teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative professional practice relate to the school principal's leadership behavior?

RQ2: What do teachers perceive are the principalship behaviors that affect their motivation to engage in efforts directed toward transforming professional practice?

The study was qualitative and leveraged the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to delve into the nature of participants' lived experiences that helped to answer the research questions. A substantive component of the study's conceptual framework was the

theoretical framework that functioned as the inquiry lens focusing on behavioral aspects of rural school principals to ascertain effects on teachers' motivation to improve professional practice. The behavioral theory of leadership and social contagion theory comprised the theoretical framework while the researcher's personal impetus to help rural educational contexts achieve parity with urban counterparts was a mooring component of the conceptual framework.

The research study was conducted in the Fall of 2020 and involved seven teachers from rural schooling contexts in the mainland of China. Four of the participants were male and three were female. Two participants were Chinese nationals, three were American, one Moroccan, and one South African. The participants' age range was from 24 to 63 years of age. The data collection process was carried out through two rounds of semi-structured interviews, the questions of which were informed by the Leadership Behavior Questionnaire (Northouse, 2016) (Appendix C). Ex post facto data collection, a structured and disciplined data analysis was carried out. The findings revealed that rural school leaders' behaviors germane to teachers' motivation to improve professional practice were genuine care and concern for teachers' well-being, accessibility and tempered friendliness, consequential dialogical discourse, articulated communication of school-based expectations and initiatives, avoidance of dogmatic micromanagement on classroom-based matters, perceptible consistency, and appreciable predictability.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings presented in Chapter 4 affirm the research of Huggins et al. (2017) and Jacques (2017) who find correlation between distributed leadership and improvement in teachers' self-efficacy, instruction, and organizational engagement levels. The findings in Chapter 4 confirm that leaders taking measured steps to engender shared agency through taking in teachers'

input and ideas relates to teachers' motivation for improvement. The literature pieces of Shave and Ndebele (2016) and Brown et al. (2017) confirm the ideation of principals' deliberateness in exercising distributed leadership as promoting shared agency and participative behavior. The findings of this dissertation extend the understanding of existing literature on the topic of distributed leadership and shared agency through the notion of engagement in the give-and-take of the dialogical process that constituted communication and interaction between the study participants and their school leader. The findings showed how the dialogical process is one where the principals and teachers listen to each other's ideas where the back-and-forth process helped determine the optimal path forward. While the canon of literature does leave room for inference to be drawn as to the dialogical process, it does not specifically deal with the subject matter. Relatedly, and further contributing to the corpus of literature, is this dissertation's finding that teachers' willingness to consider leaders' input and suggestions is contingent on the school leaders' level of expertise within the subject domain area(s) in which advice is given. The notion is one that fills a gap in the body of literature that does not delve into leader expertise as being an antecedent to teachers' openness to communication and engagement in the dialogical process that shared agency necessitates.

Culture building is another idea surfaced in the review of literature. Fullan (2011) explicated how developing a shared-agency culture helps organizations ignite passion and spur commitment toward accomplishing more. While the literature review in Chapter 2 deals with vision casting and mission socialization as culture-building aspects of rural schools, the findings presented in Chapter 4 dovetail into the culture-building ideation through the notions of concern and care, and accessibility and friendliness as being twin couplings that power teachers' motivation to improve the practitioner self. Hence, it is within reason to interpret vision casting

and mission socialization as macro aspects of culture building while the twin couplings of concern and care, and accessibility and friendliness can be construed as micro elements that play a role in building culture in rural schools and motivate teachers to improve professional practice.

The corpus of reviewed literature surfaces the problematic nature of culture-building on the part of principals who do not possess soft skills. Namely, Ärlestig et al. (2016) confirms that principals who combine practitioner know-how with soft skills are leaders who typically are most competent. Relatedly, Liu and Hallinger (2017) confirm that authoritarian-centered leaders predominate in Chinese rural schooling contexts, which does not foster a shared agency climate. The consequence of the authoritarian leadership disposition is summarized in the words of Participant 'I', who designates the matter of the principal's soft skills, as related to friendliness, to a fundamental imperative of the workplace by saying "[a]cting friendly is basic in my mind; if some leader is not friendly, I will quit." The preceding statement integrates with this dissertation's theoretical framework which features social contagion theory's proviso of individuals tending to gravitate toward energizing behaviors of others. Thus, in the statement of participant "I" it is apparent that the absence of the energizing behavior of friendliness acts as a dispiriting centrifugal force that has potential to deject organizational members. The dejection interpretation features in the findings of Chapter 4, which evidenced how the absence of school leaders' ability to promote a participative culture of inclusiveness and equity adversely affects teachers' motivation to the extent that dejection and disengagement ensues. The dejection and disengagement are attributed, in large part, to the feeling of marginalization from the culture-building processes, and not just the absence of a leaders' friendliness as exercised through soft-skills prowess.

The literature also interfaces with the findings of Chapter 4 through the body of knowledge that shows the need for school principals to have an awareness of challenges rural schools face. The literature converges on the notions of principals' role duality (as teachers and leaders) being a challenge causing rural principals to not have sufficient time to devote to helping teachers improve instructional practice (Hardwick-Franco, 2018; Lynch, 2016; Parson et al. 2016; Wallin et al., 2019). However, the study findings evidence that it is precisely the role-duality of (some) rural principals that afforded them esteem and respect by the teaching faculty because they were 'in and of' the same context. The role duality enhanced the motivational gravitas of the principals owing to the shared lived experience with teachers. Moreover, the shared lived experience of the leaders provided increased cognizance of participants' quality of life challenges. In understanding the nature of the challenges and showing care and concern for helping the rural teachers resolve said challenges, it was stated that the principals motivated faculty to give more back to the school vis-à-vis improvements of professional practice. Hence the finding in Chapter 4 on the topic of role duality diverges from the literature in that it cautions against construing role-duality as detrimental to teacher improvement (and school improvement by extension).

Implications

The presentation of results identified salient themes that form the core of findings responding to the study problem and align with the purpose of the research. The study problem relates to the dearth of granular understandings of the mechanisms by which rural teachers' motivation to improve is affected by school leaders, which is addressed through the saliency and minutiae of findings. The findings also satiate the purpose of the study, which was to examine rural teacher perceptions of the ways their school principal's behavior affects motivation for

engagement in ongoing improvement of professional practice. Hence, the granular nature of findings renders multifaceted implications.

The concern and care behavioral attributes of rural school principals imply the need for those who staff the rural principalship to, *ab initio*, consider principalship candidates that already possess the attributes. The twin ideations directly related to the study's conceptual framework that sought—within the scope of the theoretical framework—to uncover the leadership behaviors that energized followers' motivation for improvement. Further in line with the theoretical framework, related to uncovering contagious behaviors toward which followers gravitate, was the finding that pointed to the need for principals' care and concern to be genuine. The genuineness component attributed to principals had a centripetal force effect on teachers that afforded their 'genuine' principal esteem, which motivated teachers to give back more to the school and improve the professional self. Hence, the implication for staffing rural principalship posits a challenge: How can human resources professionals (or district leaders) unequivocally discern such behavioral attributes in potential school leader candidates? The charge appears simple if we consider that all humans want to care and be cared for (Noddings, 2013); however it is within reason to argue that ascertaining whether an individual is able to exhibit genuineness of care can be a progressively difficult task. Thus, the issue implies a committal on the part of individuals tasked with staffing the principalship to devise substantive ways to ascertain potential for genuine care and concern.

Further connecting to the theoretical framework's mandate of ascertaining the leadership behaviors that motivate teachers to improve professional practice is the care and concern coupling that dovetails with the second theme presented in the findings identifying accessibility and friendliness of rural school principals as key to teachers' motivation to improve. While

accessibility was mainly construed as the principal being available to the teachers, the attribute of friendliness carried with it the caveat of excessive friendliness being detrimental to teachers' motivation for improvement. The challenge arising from the results is that there was no depiction by participants as to what they construed to be an excessive degree of friendliness. Thus, the implication for rural principalship professionals is that in the absence of a rural principal being able to comprehend to what degree to temper displays of friendliness, s/he will be placed in a precarious situation. The precariousness of the predicament may place significant pressure on the school leader to gauge the adequate tempering of friendliness behavior. The issue is one where the theoretical lens used for the data analyses surfaced, as a counter indicative by-product, a leader behavior that is contagiously adverse and deleterious to motivation for practitioner improvement.

The third theme, the theme of communication, bifurcated into building a shared agency culture and communication related to the rural principals promoting clarity of understanding of roles, responsibilities and expectations for teachers. The identified behavioral elements are directly connected to the theoretical framework's mandate for understanding the specific types of behavior that play a role in influencing teachers' motivation to improve professional practice. Moreover, the mandate of the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) of delving into the nature of a lived experience is satiated to the degree that the identified behaviors were differentiated not only by type but also by their nature. Namely, the shared agency findings cluster delineated how participants appreciated, valued, and were motivated by the opportunity to engage in participative and meaningful dialogical processes that produced optimal ways by which their schools were shaped. The findings also indicated that in the absence of being able to exercise participative agency, some teachers were motivated to disengage from improvement

processes and become nominal performers. Drawing an implication from the finding, it is within reason to propose how teacher disengagement, owing to lack of participative agency, may adversely impact retention rates. Considering that the literature review revealed that rural schooling contexts are under-resourced (Brewer & Klar, 2014; Young, 2018) and have difficulties in attracting teachers (DeFeo & Tran, 2019) the implication regarding adverse impact on retention rates is of utmost importance and caution.

On the topic of shared agency, it is relevant to highlight the macro-micro compartmentalization of shared agency processes where the findings indicated teachers had strong feelings about a principal's 'encroachment', into the micro domain of classroom practice. Namely, in line with the theoretical framework's charge of uncovering contagious behaviors that energize followers, the results were clear that teachers were energized by their school principals who aimed to involve teachers in school-based macro processes and routines. The teachers also appreciated having roles, responsibilities and expectations articulated and performance standards clearly communicated. However, when it came to making granular decisions related to classroom-based matters (the micro domain), the results indicated the participants believed their expertise needed to be deferred to in the absence of a principal's mastery of knowledge of the same subject area. The implication is a quagmire as principals can scarcely be expected to be experts of equal or higher expertise level than teachers who are trained in a specific subject area. Hence, the argument of rural teachers expecting to exercise final decision-making authority over classroom-based routines is one that rests on the appeal to *ethos*. Stated otherwise, the implication is one of superiority of a teacher's input on matters directly related to the classroom-based micro domain, which is commensurate to the degree to which the school principal lacks expertise in the subject area.

The fourth and final theme the theoretical framework helped illuminate in the data sorting and analysis process was the theme of leader consistency and predictability. The two behavioral attributes were identified in the results exposition as contributing to teachers' motivation to improve professional practice through engendering feelings of calm, comfort, and feeling positive toward work. It was also found that school leaders being consistent and predictable made teachers perceive that they were being treated with fairness and equity, which powered teachers' motivational impetus for professional practice improvement. Conversely, the implication was made that the absence of leader consistency was as worrisome and destabilizing as it was de-motivating. Thus, the implication for rural school educational leaders is that leader consistency and predictability can be construed as an overarching behavioral attribute that promotes stability and reduces anxiety among teaching faculty. The absence thereof may invite disorder, disarray, and prove to be ultimately disquieting.

Recommendations for Action

This section aims to make recommendations that are tenable and practical. Consciously refrained from are recommendations that may belong to the domain of 'lofty ideals', which rural contexts may not be able to execute or even aspire toward. Hence, the recommendations are moored in the conceptual framework's literature review that is combined with the findings of this study to extend judiciously feasible recommendations for professional practice.

The first recommendation is related to principalship training programs. As indicated in the literature review of Chapter 2, there is a call for creating customized professional training programs for rural school leaders. The suggestion is for leadership training andragogy to be anchored in contextual realities of rural schooling locales. In this vein, the literature piece of Klar et al. (2019) suggested that valuable informants of professional development training andragogy

are rural principals. Hardwick-Franco (2018) ascertained the same as they found that leveraging rural school principals as professional andragogy co-creators is effective for providing rural principals with professional development opportunities specific to their rural contexts. Hardwick-Franco (2018) echoed the argument of Liu and Hallinger (2017) who, based on a body of global research, found that the need for rural principals to adapt professional practice to constraints and opportunities inherent in their rural settings is vital to promoting effective school leadership. All three (Hardwick-Franco, 2018; Klar et al., 2019; Liu and Hallinger, 2017) direct focus toward the ideation of phronesis, which according to Marshall and Rossman (2016) is practical and contextualized knowledge aimed at being responsive to its environment.

Klar et al. (2019) extend the idea of rural principals being co-creators of professional andragogy by determining the structure of effective customized training programs for rural school leaders as entailing job-embedded exposure to leadership learning communities (LLC) that permit interaction and networking across districts. Expanding the notion of the value of peer network accessibility was the research effort of Silva and Miranda (2015) who found that the success of an initiative, inaugurated in the form of the Agrarian Residence Program, was a core driving force behind "emancipatory" transformations in rural schooling contexts in Brazil. Hence, as the findings in this dissertation uncovered the challenges perceived to be integral to the participants' motivation to improve as professional practitioners in rural contexts in China, the author suggests that the ideation of customized rural principalship programs extend to the formalization of such training at the school level in China's mainland rural schools. Formalization may take the form of school-based training as part of 'leader onboarding' whereby the customized programs would be delivered and designed by current rural school principals. The training program could be construed as a peer-to-peer network exchange where current rural

school principals volunteer their training services at the behest of schools hiring first-time rural leaders. The suggestion is tenable and would promote capacity enhancing peer collaboration at the leadership level while promoting a mentor-mentee relation between rural school principals.

The second suggestion directly relates to the domain of practical implications derived from the presentation of the four themes in Chapter 4. Namely, recommended for action is the need to differentiate rural principalship candidates according to their capacity to exhibit empathetic behavior, which the findings revealed are manifested through concern and care for teachers' well-being and quality of life. The implication is one of pre-figuring the candidate selection process whereby (perceived) capacity toward empathy is deemed a key factor when making determinations as to potential fit for the schooling context. The findings indicate that absent a principal's care and concern, the teachers feel less motivated to improve in addition to feeling less valued and appreciated. Hence, the implication for professional practice carries a causal connection to not only teacher improvement but also faculty retention.

Upon staffing the principalship position with a suitable school principal, mainland rural schools in China, and their respective governing boards, are advised to leverage the findings in this study. In other words, endowing rural school leaders with the knowledge that being accessible and friendly, communicating clearly, promoting shared agency, and being consistent and predictable are behavioral attributes of rural school principals perceived as energizingly motivating to teachers in relation to improvement of professional practice. The knowledge is vital for individuals occupying rural principalship roles to the extent that it serves as a heuristic guide for leaders to structure their behavioral profiles in a manner that is most conducive to motivating rural teachers toward becoming better practitioners. Hence, the findings can be

construed as being a reflexive ‘mirror’ used by rural school principals to evaluate their behavior as they juxtapose the professional self against the results presented in this study.

Recommendations for Further Study

Included in the proposition to improve this study is the recommendation for expanding the timescale of the research. Creswell (2015b) notes how longitudinal research provides scope for comprehending the extent to which an observed phenomenon changes over time and in different settings. By expanding the timescale of the research, the results yield could extend to additional findings that may deepen the understanding of the nature and types of principalship behaviors—in relation to teachers’ motivation to improve—and how the perception thereof undergoes alterations over time. The longitudinal elements would position the researcher(s) to ‘follow’ a set of participants throughout an academic year whereby qualitative interviews would be recursive along the entirety of the school year and be complemented by observational instances. Extending the timescale and adding observational elements to the research would also provide the longitudinal effort with increased scope for enhancing validity and reliability.

An additional proposition for further research is to isolate a singular aspect uncovered in this study that did not lend itself to deeper probing as it would have skewed the trajectory of the research away from the primary focus. The aspect is related to the notion of principal friendliness noted by the participants as being integral to teachers’ motivation to improve. However, the caveat that was surfaced by the results showed that excessive friendliness was detrimental to teacher motivation. The problem regarding the ideation of friendliness was in the inability of the author to ascertain the appropriate degree of friendliness or how “excessive” friendliness was defined. Hence, the research presented does not delve into the ascertainment as to what constituted excessive friendliness on the part of the participants’ school principals. Thus, the

degree of intensity of the principals' behavioral attribute of friendliness is not characterized within the presentation of results. Having future research delve into the matter of rural principals' friendliness for the purposes of disambiguation, as to degrees of intensity, would allow rural school leaders to comprehend the boundaries between what is perceived as excessive versus adequate by teachers.

A final recommendation for future research centers on the notion of engaging in a quantitative research study that would utilize a large sample size to quantify the enumerated behaviors (presented in Chapter 4) for the purposes of rank ordering them according to impact to rural teachers' motivation to improve professional practice. The data generated from the large sample size would produce results that could either corroborate, refute, or somewhat align with the findings presented. In either of the three scenarios, the quantitative research effort would ultimately benefit the field of educational leadership in rural schooling contexts by enhancing clarity of understanding on specific principalship behaviors most germane, by order of impact, to assisting principals in motivating teachers to become better professional practitioners in rural schooling contexts in China.

Conclusion

Granular understanding of mechanisms by which rural principals motivate teachers to improve professional practice presented a problem of practice and gap in the corpus of established research-based knowledge in the field of rural educational leadership. Guided by two research questions this study filled the gap and thickened the understanding of how rural teachers' motivation to engage in regenerative professional practices was related to the school principal's leadership behavior and what teachers perceive were the principalship behaviors that affected their motivation to engage in transformational efforts. Through deploying an

interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), the qualitative research design leveraged the theoretical framework that included the behavioral theory of leadership along with social contagion theory to provide a lens by which to sort, array and analyze data geared toward accomplishing the research aims and answering the research questions. The findings presented evidence that the research questions were answered and attest to the integration with the theoretical framework. The findings revealed how teachers related their school principal's behavior to motivate and improve professional practice and enumerated the specific rural school leaders' behaviors germane to teachers' motivation to improve professional practice. The behaviors included genuine care and concern for teachers' well-being, accessibility and tempered friendliness, consequential dialogical discourse, articulated communication of school-based expectations and initiatives, avoidance of dogmatic micromanagement on classroom-based matters, perceptible consistency, and appreciable predictability.

The concluding chapter also highlighted this study's integration and extension of literature pieces that comprised part of the conceptual framework, which prompted a disciplined approach toward guiding the author's research. Affirmed was the value of distributed leadership featured in the literature, which illuminated, along with the findings presented, the potential of rural principals promoting shared agency and inclusiveness as being powerful motivators that prompt feelings of being valued and appreciated. The implications further extended to adding richness to the existing corpus of knowledge by amending the established literature's contention that rural principals' role duality is predominantly a detrimental factor to school improvement. Instead, the implications presented in this study on the topic of role duality found that rural principals could leverage their role duality to motivate practitioners because of the lived experience shared with the teachers whom they led.

Moreover, the final chapter presented tenable recommendations related to involving rural principals in professional development andragogy on a volunteer basis through networking with nationwide rural schools, which would also promote developing mentor-mentee relationships among rural principals. Recommendations for differentiating rural principalship candidates by capacity toward empathy was also a substantive recommendation for those tasked with staffing the rural principalship.

In recommending options for further study the concluding chapter outlined a general blueprint for expanding the author's study and designing a longitudinal study that would allow for changes over time to be investigated regarding the phenomenon of principalship behaviors that motivate rural teachers to improve professional practice. A suggestion for a separate study was also made to study principal friendliness to ascertain the degrees of intensity perceived as excessive and detrimental versus appropriate and motivating. A final recommendation was to engage in a quantitative study to rank order the enumerated principalship behaviors presented in the results section of this study for the purposes of rank ordering, by degree of perceived impact, principal behaviors most impactful to influencing teacher motivation to improve professional practice.

In concluding this chapter, final insights were contemplated on the entirety of the research process. The most poignant revelation was related to the augmentation of the author's opinion on rural contexts, which included the notion that rural contexts were under-resourced and inadequately staffed. While the corpus of literature confirms this in certain rural contexts, the author has not had this experience in the context of this research experience. Namely, it is through the experience of interacting with the research participants that this author has come to understand that each teacher had the utmost earnestness and genuine desire to be a better

educator and none utilized the unique challenges of their rural context toward rationalizations as to why improvement would be impossible. Hence, this author has amended his opinion on rural contexts being under-resourced and inadequately staffed to the opinion that rural schooling contexts are under-resourced and inadequately staffed only to the extent that the individuals effectuating change are willing to capitulate to the adverse contextual factors they face.

The devotion and inclination with which the study participants spoke of their profession and their impetus to improve as they sought meaningful communication, clarity, counsel, comprise, consistency and care from their school leader was evidence of their enduring desire to be better and seek meaning. The realization derived from the research experience prompted the final insight regarding the transformational force bearing influence on rural schooling contexts and the leaders, teachers, and students within. The closing insight is proffered through the eloquently articulated words of Martin Heidegger: Anyone can achieve their fullest potential, who we are might be predetermined, but the path we follow is always of our own choosing.

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Appendix A

Participant Consent Form

APPROVED FOR USE BETWEEN

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Version 8.22.18

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
CONSENT FOR PARTCIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title:
Rural teachers' perceptions of school principals' leadership behaviors affecting motivation to improve professional practice.

Principal Investigator(s): Zeljko Micevic

Introduction:

- Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document that choice.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this research study being done?
The study is done to expand the body of knowledge on how to improve rural schooling, especially in terms of how to create optimal rural principalship profiles with potential to influence rural teachers to improve professional practice and professional learning.

Who will be in this study?
A group of rural schoolteachers and the principal researcher.

What will I be asked to do?
Attend, via ZOOM or WeChat, virtual interviews. The interviews number three in total, completed virtually with the principal researcher every two weeks until completion of the third, and final, interview.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?
There are no risks involved. Interviews will be conducted from the privacy of your own home and the researcher is ensuring confidentiality and privacy (outlined on next page).

Appendix A (continued)

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

The immediate benefits include an enrichment of knowledge about the professional self and understanding of the mechanisms by which a school principal can help teachers improve practice. The knowledge gained can also help participants to develop leadership capacity that may help with becoming an educational leader in the future. More benefits may be obtained by reading the findings and discussion sections of the principal investigator's dissertation.

What will it cost me?

There are no monetary costs. No travel is involved, and no other expenses will be incurred. The only cost is in terms of the time spent doing the three interviews and communicating with the researcher on scheduling of the interviews.

How will my privacy be protected?

Privacy is protected by ensuring that interviews are conducted with the utmost regard for ethical considerations regarding research involving human subjects. No other individual other than the principal investigator will know of your participation in the study. Participants are known only by the researcher. No personal identifiers will be contained in the interview transcripts. All transcribed data will be sanitized to remove any identifiers related to participants, the schools, and the school principals. As an added measure some transcripts may be inoculated with false or misleading identifiers. No damaging information about research participants' schools or school principals will be included in any presentation or publication. The participants' schools will not be identified even by region; they will merely be identified as rural or micropolitan schools.

How will my data be kept confidential?

Confidentiality is insured through a strict data management and protection plan for the data collected as a result of the research. The interview audio recordings will be stored in an encrypted password-protected cloud. After sanitization and inoculation, data will be uploaded to password-protected, military-grade encrypted cloud-based archive that utilizes Amazon stack security features. Data will be destroyed after successful conferral of researcher's EdD diploma.

What are my rights as a research participant?

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University.
- Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with Zeljko Micevic.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.

Appendix A (continued)

- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
    - If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.

What other options do I have?

- You may choose not to participate.

Whom may I contact with questions?

- The researcher conducting this study is Zeljko Micevic.
    - For more information regarding this study, please contact Zeljko Micevic at zmicevic@une.edu.
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Dr. Cynthia Kennedy, Lead Research Advisor, University of New England.
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or irb@une.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

_____ _____

Participant's signature or Legally authorized representative

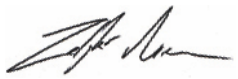
Date

_____

Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.



Researcher's signature | Date

ZELJKO MICEVIC

Printed name

Appendix B

Social Media Posting: Invitation to Potential Participants

Subject: Doctoral Research Study Seeking Participants

My name is 'Zack' Zeljko Micevic and I am a Doctoral student at the University of New England in the Educational Leadership program. I am seeking research participants for my dissertation research study: "Rural teachers' perceptions of school principals' leadership behaviors affecting motivation to improve professional practice." I am looking for eight to ten volunteers for three rounds of interviews; each interview will be approximately 60 minutes. The criteria for participation include:

- Current employment as a teacher in a rural or detached micropolitan locale from China's Mainland with at least one year of employment tenure in the current school.
    - Past employment in a rural or detached micropolitan locale from China's Mainland is also acceptable if the potential participant has spent the past academic year in such a school.
- English language fluency.
- Available for the (three) interviews during the Fall of 2020

Interviews will be conducted through an online video software such as Zoom or WeChat. Prior to beginning the interviews, the researcher will review a consent form to ensure volunteer participants comprehend the aims of the study, their rights, data protection protocols and other relevant information. Participants will be asked to affix a signature to the Participant Consent Form using an electronic signature or a photo of a signed printed copy of the form. Participants will be given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts in addition to the compiled data to ensure accuracy of gathered information. The researcher is committed to protecting the identity and privacy of participants.

Your participation in this study would be sincerely appreciated. Your participation can benefit rural non-metropolitan schools, most notably teachers and leaders in such contexts. If you would like more information about this study or have an interest in scheduling an interview, please contact me at the following e-mail address: zmicevic@une.edu or WeChat: 2381737824.

Thank you,

'Zack' Zeljko Micevic

Appendix C

Leadership Behavior Questionnaire

(Not given to participants. Only used as generative idea template for researcher to formulate interview questions)

Instructions: Read each item carefully and think about how often the person you are evaluating engage in the described behavior. Indicate your response to each item by circling one of the five numbers to the right of each item.

Key: 1=Never 2=Seldom 3=Occasionally 4=Often 5=Always

1. Tells group members what they are supposed to do.	1 2 3 4 5
2. Acts friendly with members of the group.	1 2 3 4 5
3. Sets standards of performance for group members.	1 2 3 4 5
4. Helps others in the group feel comfortable.	1 2 3 4 5
5. Makes suggestions about how to solve problems.	1 2 3 4 5
6. Responds favorably to suggestions made by others.	1 2 3 4 5
7. Makes his or her perspective clear to others.	1 2 3 4 5
8. Treats others fairly.	1 2 3 4 5
9. Develops a plan of action for the group.	1 2 3 4 5
10. Behaves in a predictable manner toward group members.	1 2 3 4 5
11. Defines role responsibilities for each group member.	1 2 3 4 5
12. Communicates actively with group members.	1 2 3 4 5
13. Clarifies his or her own role within the group.	1 2 3 4 5
14. Shows concern for the well-being of others.	1 2 3 4 5
15. Provides a plan for how the work is to be done.	1 2 3 4 5
16. Shows flexibility in making decisions.	1 2 3 4 5
17. Provides criteria for what is expected of the group.	1 2 3 4 5
18. Discloses thoughts and feelings to group members.	1 2 3 4 5
19. Encourages group members to do high-quality work.	1 2 3 4 5
20. Helps group members get along with each other.	1 2 3 4 5

Scoring

The Leadership Behavior Questionnaire is designed to measure two major types of leadership behaviors: task and relationship. Score the questionnaire by doing the following: First, sum the responses on the odd-numbered items. This is the task score. Second, sum the responses on the even-numbered items. This is the relationship score.

Total scores: Task _____ Relationship _____

SOURCE: Northouse, P. G. (2016). Leadership: Theory & practice (7th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Appendix D

Interview Script with Questions

--Round 1 interview script with questions--

Principal investigator: Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research. I value the time and attention you are dedicating to this. Before we begin the interview session, I would like to invite you to ask any questions you may have about any aspect of this study.

---Principal Investigator pauses and answers any questions asked---

With your permission, I would like to proceed with the interview session and the audio recording.

Interview Questions:

Semi-Structured Interview Questions (Spread out over two separate sessions/rounds)

Round 1 of Semi-Structured Interviews
Question 1:
Talk about your professional relationship with your school leader.
Question 2:
How do you think your school leader's behavior relates to teachers' motivation to improve professional practice?
Question 3:
How has your school principal affected *your* motivation to improve professional practice?
Question 4:
What leader behaviors do you find most affect your motivation to improve professional practice?
Question 5:
Look at the below list of leader relationship behaviors. How do you think each of these behaviors affects your motivation to improve your professional practice?
a. Acting friendly with group members.
b. Helping others feel comfortable.
c. Responding favorably to suggestions made by others.
d. Treating others fairly.
e. Behaving in a predictable manner toward group members.
f. Communicating effectively.
g. Showing concern for the well-being of others.
h. Showing flexibility in making decisions.
i. Disclosing thoughts and feelings to group members.
j. Helping group members get along with each other.

--End of Round 1 interview questions--

Appendix D (continued)

Principal investigator: Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research. I value the time and attention you are dedicating to this. Before we begin the interview session, I would like to invite you to ask any questions you may have about any aspect of this study.
--*Principal Investigator stops the audio recording—*

--*End of Round 1 interview script*--

--*Round 2 interview script with questions*--

Principal investigator: Once again, I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in the research. I value the time and attention you are dedicating to this endeavor. Before we begin this second-round interview session, do you have any questions you may have about any aspect of this study.

---*Principal Investigator pauses and answers any questions asked*---

With your permission, I would like to proceed with the interview session and the audio recording.

Interview Questions:

Round 2 of Semi-Structured Interviews
Question 6:
Look at the below list of leader task behaviors. How do you think each of these behaviors affects your motivation to improve your professional practice?
a. Telling group members what they are supposed to do.
b. Setting standards of performance for group members.
c. Making suggestions about how to solve problems.
d. Developing a plan of action for the collective.
e. Defining role responsibilities for each group member.
f. Clarifying the leader's role within the group.
g. Providing a plan for how the work is to be done.
h. Providing criteria for what is expected of the group.
i. Encouraging group members to get along with each other.
Note: group members = teachers
Question 7:
What leader behaviors do you find detrimental to affecting your motivation to improve professional practice?

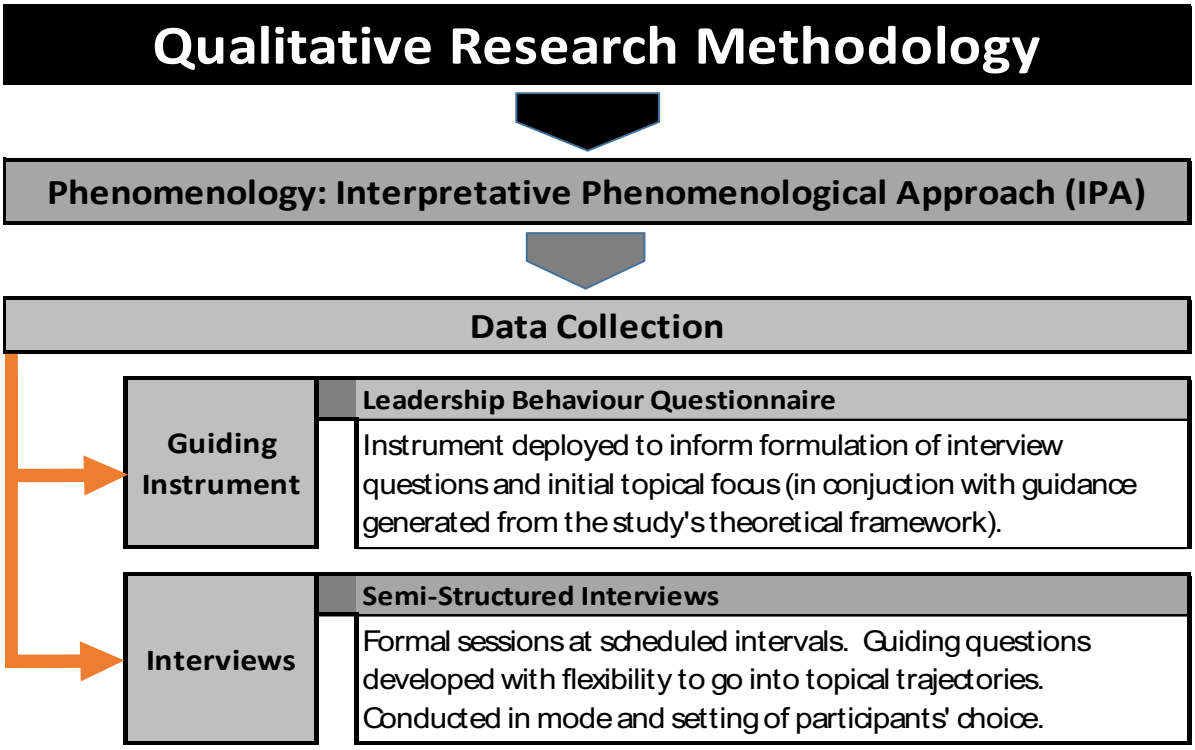
--*End of Round 2interview questions*--

Principal investigator: Once again, I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in the research. Your time and dedicating are much appreciated and highly valued. I may be contacting you for a third-round interview if data analysis warrants further probing into certain aspects. Again, thank you very much for your time.
--*Principal Investigator stops the audio recording*—

--*End of Round 2 interview script*--

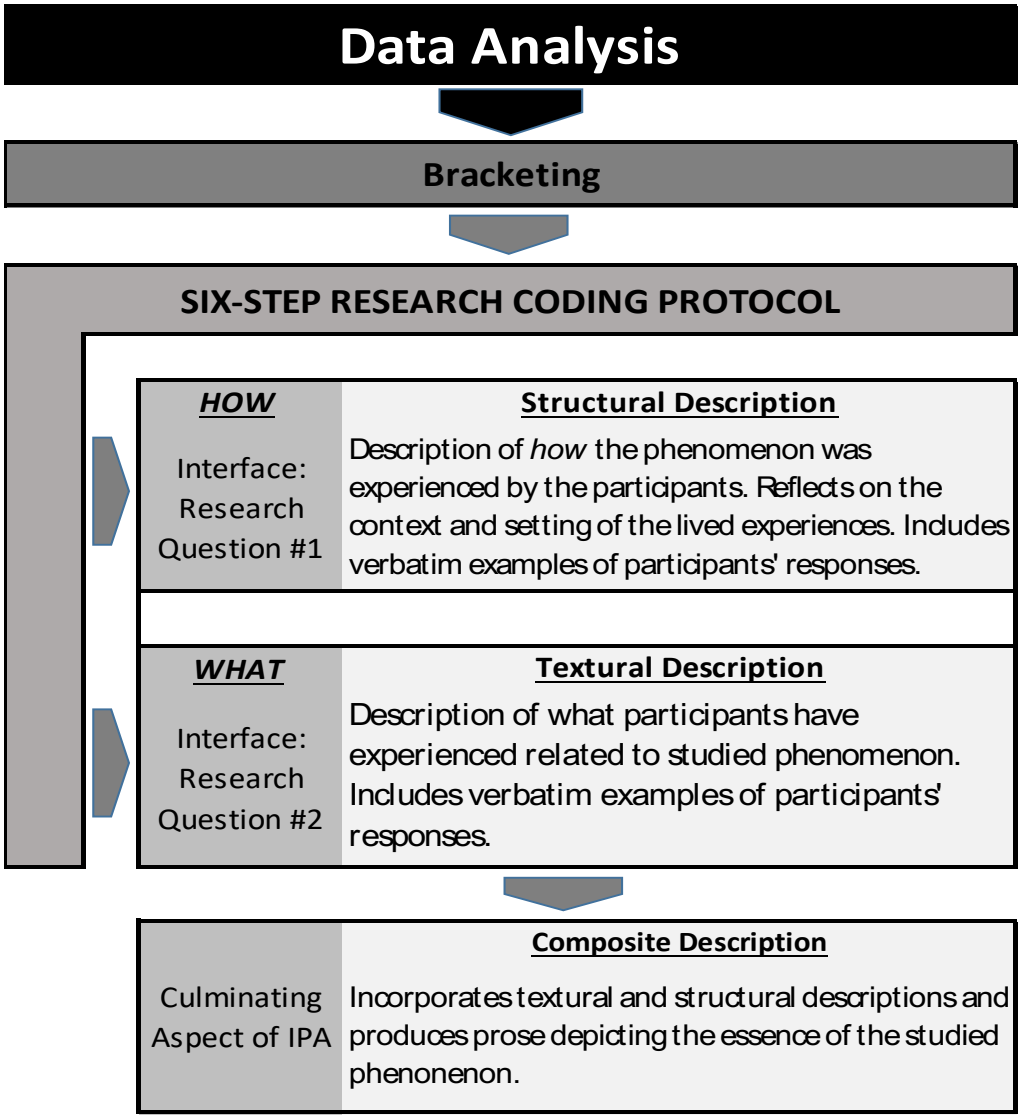
Appendix E

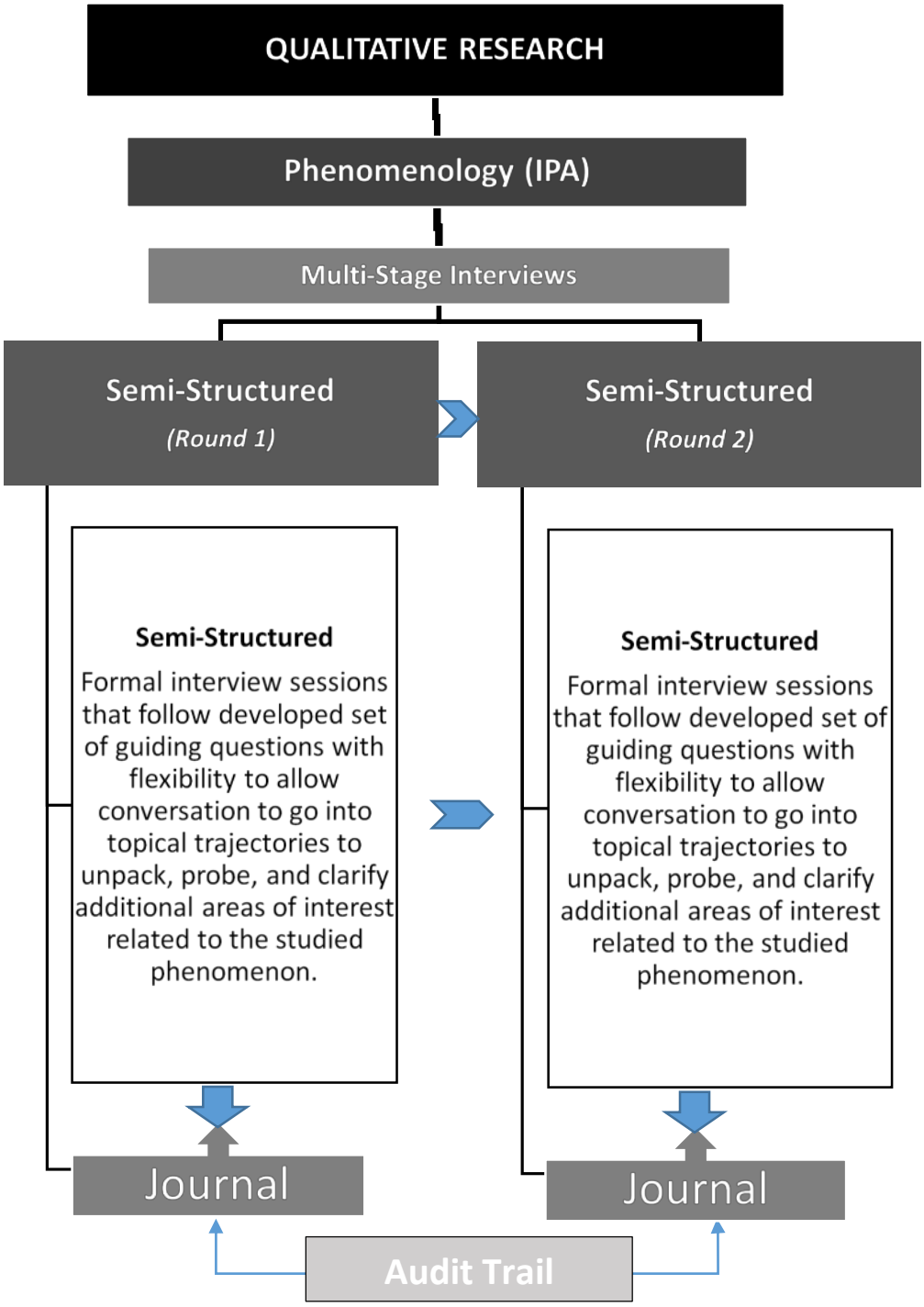
Visual Illustration of Data Collection Process



Appendix F

Visual Illustration of Data Analysis Process



Appendix G

Visual Illustration of Multi-Stage Interview Process