Winter 1-5-2024

Transformational Leadership For Rural School Improvement

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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR RURAL SCHOOL IM-

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fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education

& Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representa-

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TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR RURAL SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

by

CHARLES D. MEYER

Under the Direction of Dr. Will Rumbaugh, Ed.D.

ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions of rural principals and faculty members about the principals' use of transformational leadership practices to lead school improvement efforts. Based on Transformational Leadership Theory and the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, the study explored how school leaders and faculty view the principals' leadership as they tackle improving their rural schools. By examining the perceptions of the school leader and their staff members, key attributes that may lead to improvements in rural schools where limited human and fiscal resources are available have been identified. This qualitative study analyzed data collected through interviews with eight leaders and staff and publicly available school improvement plans and other documents to identify themes and patterns. The findings suggest that when principals used transformational leadership practices to convey their vision, the scope of their influence widened. In doing so, the principals built trust, inspired their teacher-leaders, and created a collaboration that allowed both groups to work together to improve schools.

INDEX WORDS: Transformational leadership, rural schools, school improvement, principal leadership

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A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education & Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2023

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving and supportive family. Without your support and

encouragement, this would not have been possible. My love to each of you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Will Rumbaugh, my dissertation committee chair, for his guidance, support, and patience throughout this work. I also extend my gratitude to the other members of my committee, Dr. Nick Sauers and Dr. Robert Hendrick, for their encouragement. To Dr. Sheryl Cowart Moss, thank you for providing leadership and support to our cohort group as we worked our way through the COVID-19 pandemic. And, to Cohort VIII, thank you for your humor, collaboration, and friendship.

To my wife, Sonya, thank you for continuing to push me. You never doubted my ability to succeed. To my parents, Charles and Judy Meyer, longtime educators who inspired countless children, including me, to be lifelong learners; without their support, none of this would be possible. To my son Dylan, follow your dreams to be whatever you want, wherever you want. I will forever be proud of you.

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1 THE PROBLEM

Leaders look for opportunities to lead. In education, school leaders face numerous daily obstacles. They may have an upset parent in their office, an emotional student in the hallway, or a frustrated employee in the breakroom. They deal with a discipline issue one minute and a broken air conditioning unit the next. Each day brings new challenges and new responsibilities. No matter the situation, good or bad, the school's students, teachers, and staff rely on the principal to lead.

While there are scores of leadership responsibilities as part of every principal's job, very few are more important than creating a positive learning environment for students and a productive working environment for staff. When considering these conditions, the mindset of the principal cannot be focused on simply keeping the status quo. They must be looking to make a change for the better. More specifically, a change that makes a measurable positive impact. Whether the principal is leading in a large urban, a medium suburban, or even a small rural district, they all share the one primary responsibility of school improvement. In over 2,303 schools in Georgia, principals lead in the planning, constructing, and implementing new or revised school improvement plans each year (Georgia Department of Education, 2019). The process is never easy and almost impractical to do alone. To make these changes possible, the principal must be able to lead a team that shares the same vision, mission, and desire to see the goals of the improvement process come to fruition.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines rural locations as those based on distances between urbanized areas and population clusters (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Due to Georgia's large geographical size and scattered population centers, school districts defined as rural make up 115 of the state's 181 local educational agencies (LEA)

(Georgia Department of Education, 2022b). Many of these districts are not only away from population centers but also are not located near heavily traveled transportation arteries. Therefore, these districts cannot readily rely on a large property tax roll or a substantial sales tax base like their suburban or urban counterparts to fund their operational accounts. As a result, some school systems in rural areas operate on limited budgets. This fiscal constraint contributes to their struggle to recruit and retain quality school-level staff or to provide a robust instructional support system. As such, these rural districts find leading significant school improvement challenging. This study was developed to gauge school principals' use of transformational leadership practices to lead the school improvement process in rural Georgia schools. Specifically, how are these leaders using transformational leadership practices to guide school improvement in schools with limited financial and material resources?

Guiding Questions

The guiding questions in this study were designed to explore how principals used transformational leadership practices to lead school improvement within small rural schools.

> *RQ1: How do principals describe their use of Transformational Leadership practices to shape school improvement within their rural schools and communities?*
>
> *RQ2: How do teacher-leaders perceive the administrators' use of Transformational Leadership practices to shape school improvement?*

Purpose

This case study explored the transformational leadership practices of principals and their teacher-leaders' perceptions of using those practices for school improvement. Principals serve as the central leaders of the school building by setting the vision, developing the culture, and impacting the effectiveness of the school (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). They have been traditionally

seen as role models for teachers, staff, and students (Patterson & Patterson, 2004). Therefore, it is essential to examine how teacher-leaders perceive their leaders and their actions as the lead for positive changes in the school.

Another purpose of this study was to chronicle how school leaders shape the school's culture to encourage participation and maintain resilience in their staff through the school improvement process. School improvement can be a long and arduous undertaking that requires patience and the determination of those involved through accomplishments and setbacks. The teacher-leaders must have a certain level of self-confidence, initiative, and grit that prevents them from being easily discouraged if their efforts fail. Leaders' accountability is founded on communicating a vision, the ability to lead change, and the transformation of teaching and learning (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). As such, the school leaders' practices, and their teacher-leaders' perceptions were examined to determine if and how transformational leadership practices shaped the culture to build tenacity, persistence, and perseverance among the staff through motivation and influence.

Significance of the Study

This qualitative study adds to the body of literature on principal practices, school improvement, and rural schools through the lens of transformational leadership. This case study's significance is led by the duality in which both the actions and perceptions of these constructs influence positive changes within schools. By its very nature, this study extends the research on how modeling transformational leadership practices by principals can shape teacher-leaders' perceptions of school improvement. The choice of this topic stemmed from the importance of high-quality school-level leadership coupled with school improvement, especially in rural areas in Georgia.

Key Terms

School leader

A school leader is defined as the person who holds the role of the principal. The school leader can influence the faculty and staff toward a shared vision, goals, and values.

School improvement

School improvement is defined as making schools better places for student learning. The idea of school improvement was broader than academic achievement and may include other aspects of the school that foster a better student experience.

School climate

School climate is defined as the teacher-leaders' perceptions of their work environments as influenced by the school's leadership. These perceptions would be from interactions with school leaders in situations where school improvement is discussed directly and indirectly.

Teacher-leader

A *teacher-leader* is defined as an individual who participates in leadership through a role as a department chair, grade-level chair, or content team lead. The teacher-leader can influence those in their immediate sphere, including other teachers, support staff, and students.

Overview of the Study

Qualitative research aligns with the intent of this study as it explores individuals and their perceptions. This approach allowed for a better understanding of the relationships and interactions between principals and teacher-leaders. This dissertation employed the Stake (1995) case study method to explore rural principals' use of transformational leadership practices. To accomplish this task, a study design was developed using interviews and document analysis. The data

collection process facilitated the exploration of the principals' practices and teacher-leaders' perceptions.

This study aimed to look at the practice of rural school principals using transformational leadership to lead school improvement. Burdened with limited budgets and fewer faculty members than many of their urban and suburban peers, these principals often suffer hardships when attempting to improve the schools trusted with their care (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2022a). Since teacher-leaders are vital to the school's success, identifying any connection on how their perceptions of transformational leadership may influence their focus on school improvement is also productive. The study addressed this gap by exploring the principals' actions and teacher-leaders' perceptions in using transformational leadership practices such as inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, and idealized influence on impact school improvement (Bass, 1995). Chapter Two of this study was developed to review the related literature. The literature review is broken into the following sections: a) transformational leadership practices, b) school improvement, and c) aspects of rural education.

Chapter Three of this study explains the case study methodology used for this study (Stake, 1995). Data was assembled during the investigation using document reviews and interviews with principals and teacher-leaders in four rural schools chosen based on their experiences with training through the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI). The focus of the study involved how those principals, as transformational leaders, set a vision, inspired those around them, and influenced how the school improvement process was implemented in their schools. The study results are presented in Chapter Four to identify themes from the data analysis, followed by an explanation of this study's conclusions, recommendations, and implications in Chapter Five.

Summary

Understanding the actions of school principals and the perceptions of teacher-leaders can be a significant tool in how the interactions of both groups impact the school improvement process. The opportunity to tie successful leadership practices to the school improvement process was the catalyst in seeking answers to the questions posed in this study. This study shares findings for future implications regarding the importance of using transformational leadership practices in the school improvement process, especially in smaller, rural school systems across Georgia.

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Rural Georgia and the schools that serve it are extraordinary entities with unique challenges. The NCES defines a rural area as more than five miles from urbanized areas or more than two and one-half miles from an urban center (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The small communities that make up a rural area can be complex for educational leaders looking to implement systemic change while facing fiscal limitations, dealing with deep political histories, and maneuvering close family ties (McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017; Sanchez et al., 2017).

This scholarly literature review will begin by focusing on transformational leadership to bring about positive changes in schools. The review then shifts to examining the importance of school improvement, both academically and culturally. Lastly, the chapter delves into various aspects of rural life and rural school leadership, including the financial implications, political struggles, and recruitment and retention challenges, before ending with leadership qualities and models that breed success in rural areas. This literature review discusses these themes as a prelude to a study on using transformational leadership practices to improve Georgia's rural school principals and the perceptions of the teacher-leaders who work for them.

Theoretical Framework

As school improvement has become a focus of the Georgia Department of Education through its continuous improvement system, more schools and school systems have had to look hard at their improvement practices. To address this action, this study will examine how the tenets of Bernard M. Bass's transformational leadership framework can improve rural schools. By exploring the four pillars of transformational leadership, the study will discover how principals use each to bring positive change within their schools. The subject of rural schools and school

systems has been chosen because over 60% of all LEAs (Local Educational Agencies) in the state qualify as rural (Georgia Department of Education 2022b). These schools face various issues, from limited property and sales tax bases to challenges across multiple demographic categories, including minority-majority and economically disadvantaged populations (Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2022b; National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

Transformational Leadership

Leithwood et al. (2020) indicated that school leadership impacts student achievement. There are many leadership frameworks in use across the globe in education. Two of the most common ones recently have been transactional and transformational leadership. The pair are often confused with each other and many times conflated as simply one framework. However, each framework is unique and should be treated as distinct. This separation will help better understand why transformational is crucial to making a deep-seated educational change.

Transactional leadership is based on an exchange process based on fulfilling obligations. This leadership style provides followers material or psychological rewards for meeting certain expectations (Kurland et al., 2010). Transformational leadership, however, is based on motivating followers by raising awareness of goals and inspiring them to put aside their self-interest for the sake of an organization (Marks & Printy, 2003). This motivation is often based on a vision and builds upon someone's desire to achieve together.

Transformational leadership has been shown to improve student incomes across multiple environments (Braun et al., 2021). Implemented through professional development training, results showed a significant positive increase in student learning for those previously underserved. Additionally, the use of transformational practices was vital in changing the perceptions of

school improvement strategies and fostered better student attainment in schools across England

(Day et al., 2016)

Bass (1995) offers four pillars of transformational leadership that best describe its meaning: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Each of these plays a role in how school leadership can affect change within the organization and is an integral part of this study in affecting the perceptions of teacher-leaders in rural schools. Using transformational leadership practices, principals could create a work environment with beliefs and values, a shared vision of high expectations, innovative programming, and recognition of talent by those within the organization. As Leithwood (1994) describes, articulating a vision, performance expectations, role modeling, and intellectual stimulation give transformational leadership the edge when bringing change to an organization.

Table 1

Transformational Leadership - Four Pillars

Transformational Leadership - (Bass, 1995)
Idealized influence - Vision, role modeling, beliefs, values **Inspirational motivation -** Shared goals, performance expectations **Intellectual stimulation -** Innovative programs, problem-solving **Individualized consideration -** Individual support, professional development, recognition

Idealized Influence

The influence of a purposeful vision must be addressed when exploring transformational leadership. Kurland et al. (2010) point out that having a vision that can be translated to others motivates people to higher organizational performance levels. This vision also shows that the leader knows the core values and tasks required to achieve whatever goals are set. Quin et al. (2015) describe a shared vision as created collectively and may help stakeholders make informed decisions about current and future practices.

The values espoused by these leaders are transparent and set positive examples for followers to use as they move forward through organizational change. Jovanovic and Ciric (2016) point out that by appealing to their followers on an emotional level, a clear set of values must be in place to achieve trust. Leaders must build this trust on a solid ground of ethical and moral attributes. They conclude that the leaders' moral values direct any organization's behavior, including the efforts toward change.

Inspirational motivation

Charisma can sometimes be perceived as using one's charm to inspire others into devotion; however, charisma can only go so far in helping lead to real change. Building coalitions of the stakeholders is a better aim of inspirational motivation. Marks and Printy (2003) describe this motivation as raising the consciousness of their followers about the importance of goals while setting aside their self-interest. Kurland et al. (2010) show that motivation through optimistic ideals, an achievable vision, and ambitious goals can inspire followers to work towards a shared end.

Sadeghi and Pihie (2012) also emphasize the importance of leaders using the aspects of optimism and meaningful challenges to their employees' work. Employees seeking meaning in their experience may benefit from being pushed to open their minds to innovative ideas and ways to think about doing their jobs. Motivating teacher-leaders and others within the school organization helps create an atmosphere of creativity and outside-the-box thinking to solve problems and positively change the existing conditions.

Intellectual Stimulation

The challenging work product described by Sadeghi and Pihie (2012) leads to the idea of intellectual stimulation for employees. As Money (2017) accentuates, leaders may stimulate their

followers to achieve extraordinary results and, in the process, develop their leadership capabilities. To accomplish these results, leaders need to recognize their followers' stimulation, creativity, and innovation and how a leader's actions can inspire those around them to grow.

This stimulation can help build collective teacher efficacy, which can help develop a more robust faculty and staff. Transformational leaders provide teachers with the autonomy to try new things and the courage to do so with the understanding that failure could be an acceptable outcome. If teachers and staff cannot determine this safety net, any expectations of change from the status quo may be minimized.

Individualized Consideration

Leaders must recognize the talents of their followers and find opportunities for others to build their leadership capabilities. Leaders can ensure followers' trust by providing advice, support, and attention to individuals' needs (Kurland et al., 2010). In this way, individualized consideration gives others professional learning opportunities to become more effective in their job (Kirby et al., 1992). Principals must be able to identify the teacher-leaders within their buildings and consider how to harness those leaders' strengths to bring about the necessary school improvements.

Transformational leaders typically know what their followers value as necessary in their lives and careers. Catering to these needs and wants can help impact the performance achievements of the individual and the group (Jovanovic & Ciric, 2016). Followers feel that they are growing in their own lives to help impact the lives of others. While many give up self-interest for the group's growth, transformational leaders consider aspects of individuals to garner the trust needed to succeed.

School Improvement

School improvement is essential to education as a conduit for quality school outcomes (Kalman, 2020). The process requires a collaborative effort to support the growth and learning of the organization (Zepeda, 2013). Because student achievement can be seen by many as a critical indicator of school quality, a leader must manage change so that it is viewed positively by the staff, students, and community (Şen et al., 2020). School improvement practices can influence a school's operations by designating certain funds or prioritizing schedules (Bohanon et al., 2021; Klar et al., 2020). The school improvement process focuses on developing a program, identifying measurable goals, selecting appropriate strategies, and conducting evaluation criteria (Slavin, 2007).

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration has determined that school improvement is such an essential part of school leadership that it included an entire standard on the topic as part of its Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) (see Appendix A). Developed in 2015, the standards were meant to address the evolving nature of school leadership (National Board Policy for Educational Administration, 2015). These standards focused on ethics, curriculum, family engagement, cultural responsiveness, and school improvement. While each is critical in leading an organization, the focus on the actions of leading school improvement is the center of this study.

Standard 10 of the PSEL standards is set aside to guide school improvement. Within the standard, educational leaders are asked to consider many aspects to lead the improvement process within their schools. Constructed of ten sub-standards, Standard 10 encourages building effective schools, promoting student readiness, engaging others in continuous improvement, and

developing leadership from teachers and staff. Bass's transformational leadership tenets align well with these sub-standards.

As agents of continuous improvement, leaders are called upon to act on specific sub standards for PSEL 10. Sub-standards A and B call for the leaders to make the schools effective for all stakeholders and promote core values. These tie into Bass's pillar of *idealized influence* by building a vision for the organization. Next, sub-standards C and D promote using goals and expectations, just as *inspirational motivation* suggests. Sub-standards E through H discuss concepts of problem-solving and employing systems of change, as shown through the pillar of *intellectual stimulation*. Finally, sub-standards I and J call for leaders to build capacity within their schools and promote leadership among teachers and staff, just as the pillar of *individualized consideration* calls for those who want to lead with transformational leadership traits (National Board Policy for Educational Administration, 2015; Bass, 1995).

Leading change and improvement in schools is complex and highly emotional (Park & Dantow, 2022). However, principals play a pivotal role in developing a culture that supports high-performing schools as they face internal and external pressures. Understanding the conditions of students, families, and communities, especially in rural areas, can significantly influence school and student outcomes (Hesbol, 2019).

Issues Impacting Rural Education

The idea of ruralness means different things to different people in Georgia. Some may see it as less population density and fewer public and private services. Others see it as a slower, less hectic lifestyle than urban-suburban centers in and around Atlanta, Macon, or Savannah. Even rural education has different meanings. Some see a small elementary school serving the students of a tiny farming community. Others see a singular K-12 school teaching everyone in

the LEA. As far back as 1939, John Brewton wrote about the importance of education in rural America. Though he described a collection of one-room schoolhouses across the South, the significance of those children's education was just as significant as those in the urban areas of the time (Brewton, 1939).

America's rural landscape continues to change. Gone are the days of the agrarian lifestyle, where countless families lived in rural towns and farms. As of 2020, approximately 14% of the U.S. population were considered rural residents compared to 19% in 2010 (United States Department of Agriculture, 2019; Dobis et al., 2021). Expanding employment options and access to additional quality-of-life opportunities within larger urban and suburban areas have become factors as counties deemed persistently poor continually lose their residents (Dobis et al., 2021). Within Georgia, these population shifts have caused 67 of its 159 counties to decrease in population during the decade between 2010 and 2020. Almost all of those identified counties are designated as rural. In some cases, the decline has been significant. In both Dooly and Terrell counties, the loss was slightly less than 25% of their population during the decade (Lee, 2021).

Georgia has various pockets of rural counties around the state. These regions and the local educational agencies they include are the focus of this study. In Georgia, 23 counties are classified as 100% rural by the Census Bureau (United States Census Bureau, 2018a). These counties have less than 9,000 residents and, in some, as few as 5,000, and none contain a rural-urban cluster of at least 2,500 residents (United States Census Bureau, 2018b). Also, 91 of the 159 counties in Georgia have anywhere from 50% to 99% of their population living in rural areas. This type of geographic isolation can pose problems for schools and school districts as they need help with various areas of operation, including transportation costs due to long distances within the district boundaries (Curran & Kitchin, 2019).

Within rural county populations, there are significant demographic challenges. Currently, 41 counties designated as rural by the USDA are majority-minority or persistently impoverished (Georgia Office of Student Achievement, 2022b; Dobis et al., 2021). These counties are heavily concentrated in the mid-eastern and southern regions of the state. In contrast, another 45 rural counties are not designated as majority-minority or persistently impoverished. These counties are concentrated in north Georgia, with a large cluster along the South Carolina and Tennessee border (Dobis et al., 2021).

Financial

The rural principal tends to be seen as the school's face and may be the first to receive complaints on anything despite their lack of control over specific issues (Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018; Farmer, 2009). As the leaders, they deal directly with various concerns, from national and state mandates to local special interest groups, competition with private schools, and budgetary matters. (Farmer, 2009). Rural school leaders must weigh decisions on tax dollars in spending for additional staff, classroom supplies, technology upgrades, and other equipment. Although urban leaders do the same, it is typically under different scrutiny than rural areas where funding seems so finite given the tax base. While trying to be good stewards of local tax dollars, rural leaders must be aware of the perception of that spending by the public. Items such as furniture, computers, and even professional learning choices can disrupt the community's trust in how money is spent.

Georgia allows schools to raise local funds through a property tax millage (Ga. Code Ann. § 48-5-400, 2010). This millage rate is based on the evaluation of property within the county as the rate calculates the revenue generated per $100,000 of property value. Many counties within the state have a double-digit rate, up to a maximum of 20 mills. This collection of

counties includes some around suburban Atlanta that have used special elections to raise their millage above that designated amount (Vinters, 2008; Georgia Department of Revenue, 2022). However, rural counties struggle to generate revenue in the same way. Sometimes, this is due to the influence of large landholders or tax shelters the state offers, such as farm conservancies and land trusts. Despite 70% of NCES-designated rural-distant or rural-remote school systems having ad-valorem millage rates of greater than 15 mills, the property has been assessed at such a low value that the revenue that is earned is minimal compared to urban and suburban centers (Georgia Department of Revenue, 2022).

The Georgia legislature also provides money through the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE). The QBE uses a concept called Full Time Equivalence (FTE) to determine the funding based on services provided by districts to students. Some rural schools in the state have so few students that FTE does not cover the actual cost of the student's education. Additionally, the state offers sparsity grants to rural-remote districts. However, the initial allotment in the state QBE funding for FY2022 was just over $7,000,000 to be shared with over twenty systems (Georgia Department of Education, 2022a). Even if the financing were split evenly among those systems, each system would only receive at most $350,000. This amount may only support three to four additional staff positions, given both the salary and the insurance costs paid for by districts. This disparity in funding and the local influence over millage rates by local politicians and other forces causes some school systems and their students to suffer significantly compared to suburban and urban peers. Miller (2012) points out that lower teacher salaries place rural districts at a competitive disadvantage compared to non-rural ones, and these funding mechanisms do not help bridge that gap. As it is constituted currently, the Georgia funding model fails to help those districts move towards a more level playing field (McKillip & Farrie, 2019).

From a federal government standpoint, the creation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provided an opportunity for some additional funding for rural schools. As Brenner (2016) points out, the Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP) that was established as part of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) still exists inside the new legislation. This grant program can be helpful to districts seeking additional funding for projects or initiatives. Within the legislation, the word "rural" is expressed over 50 times, implying the importance of rural education as part of the nation's continued growth and economic development (Brenner, 2016). However, smaller rural school districts may be unable to dedicate certain staff members to write the necessary grant requests. Due to limited human resources, these staff members are often needed for more pressing issues within the school buildings and classrooms.

Political

No one knows an area better than those in the local populace. This statement is far more accurate in a rural area than anywhere else, as the community provides a sense of connection for students between their school, home, and regions beyond their reach (Morrison & Ledger, 2020; Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Local citizens are empowered to build a robust school-community relationship and, in doing so, help lead to greater community stability (Collins, 1999). With this connection, an effective school is designed to meet the needs of those they serve; in doing so, they become forces to improve rural areas (Brewton, 1939). However, groups within these rural areas compete to influence the staff, students, and schools.

Any urban, suburban, or rural leader will experience local politics promoting competing values as special interest groups are common in every setting (Surface, 2014). However, they significantly impact rural school leadership (Farmer, 2009; Cervone, 2017). Georgia has a tradition of competitive high school football programs, and in many rural areas, athletics serve as a

social glue for communities (Brenner et al., 2020). With this tradition comes the issue of overly influential individuals and booster programs who, while well-meaning in their actions, sometimes want to control athletic and instructional personnel's hiring and firing. This type of outside influence can impact the stability of the school's staff. As principals look to lead school improvement, the ability to continually build year-to-year off an initiative is hampered by the constant flux in staff.

Due to the limited population base, rural areas may have a more vocal religious community than their suburban peers (Cervone, 2017). These groups can influence how educational standards are introduced and taught within a district. This situation is apparent when these factions encourage and support specific candidates running for the local school board. Even when unsuccessful through the ballot box, the zeal of these candidates on issues may impact how principals and school leaders prioritize school improvement initiatives that could be perceived as controversial in the community. In addition, these same religious blocs can push for the opening of private schools and other charter schools within the district. These new schools would result in competition for students, which may not be healthy for the community and may damage relationships between teachers and parents (Smarik et al., 2014). Understanding how to handle these interest groups and other local political situations is essential in rural leadership. Failure to recognize the problem or the critical political players can be detrimental (McHenry-Sorber & Provinzano, 2017).

As America grows and its need for specific natural resources changes, rural schools see increased student diversity. The politics of rural areas with a growing ethnic diversity adds additional stress to leadership (Surface, 2014). McHenry-Sorber and Provinzano (2017) highlight the impact of local politics on rural educational leadership in a Pennsylvania community. In their

analysis of a rural boomtown, the district's leaders were unprepared for the fast-growing school system's demographic changes and resulting political fallout. School and central office leadership were slow to react to the increase in students with whom English was a second language. Leaders failed to prepare schools or respond well to E.L. students' needs. The district leadership lacked the understanding to make appropriate decisions to meet the needs of both longtime residents and newcomers without succumbing to the politics of fear and racial undertones.

As described earlier, few know better about a situation than those immersed in it. This pedagogy of place influences whether leaders should come from the inside or outside the community to capitalize on or neutralize local politics (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). While being an insider has advantages in rural areas, it may be optional to ensure success. An outsider who can connect with the local community can be just as effective as someone from the inside. Taking the time to know and understand the marginalized communities within the school system can help outsiders become more trusted and lead to longer-term success (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). In addition, developing a rapport with students, teachers, and community leaders can help (Ashton & Duncan, 2012).

McHenry-Sorber and Budge (2018) emphasize insider/outsider politics in their study of rural superintendents. As part of their research, they investigated how the pedagogy of place or place-conscious constructs play a role in the success or failure of a leader compared to their status of being an insider or outsider of the community. The authors found that while being an insider can help ensure community leaders' acceptance in rural areas, it is not absolute.

As rural areas develop, leaders will find preparing for the future advantageous. Whether it is demographic shifts or economic fluctuations, leaders can anticipate multiple changes to the status quo. Even in rural areas where significant economic development is not expected, leaders

must push their faculty and community towards modernization of ideas and thoughts of ways to better prepare students for college or technical school. Politics, particularly handling multiple interest groups and understanding a pedagogy of their place, are crucial to the rural leader's success.

Recruitment

Rural school districts in Georgia struggle to recruit teachers and leaders yearly (Georgia Department of Education, 2022b). Issues attributed to this problem include low salaries, fewer resources, social isolation, and preconceived notions about potential students and parents and their backgrounds (Tran & Smith, 2020; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019; Rose et al., 2017; Brenner et al., 2015). Many states, including Georgia, have looked at several ways to combat both the recruitment and retention of teachers.

One of the most common suggestions has been for states and local districts to promote monetary rewards. Some districts have found that financial incentives may provide a means to recruit and retain teachers (Curtin, 2018; Castro & Esposito, 2021). Along with signing bonuses, Curtin (2018) suggests paid internships for college-aged non-education majors to attract them to the classroom as small-group support teachers or mentors. Another recommendation has been to provide local housing stipends or loan forgiveness programs for those agreeing to work in rural schools (Williams et al., 2022; Lowe, 2006). In addition, Nguyen et al. (2020) suggested that retention bonuses and merit pay programs may help with initial recruitment and reduce the number of teachers leaving the field of education or changing school districts. Within Georgia, the state's legislature proposed providing a $3,000 tax credit for new teachers interested in teaching in rural areas with the passing of H.B. 32 during the 2021 legislative session. This tax credit could be

used over five consecutive years by both new teachers and experienced ones joining the staff at quality schools (Ga. Code Ann. § 20-2-251, 2022)

Many states have developed non-traditional routes to certification to help alleviate some of these issues in rural areas. Both Brenner et al. (2015) and Miller et al. (2019) discuss Mississippi's solution to its teacher shortages. This program allowed more than half of the new teachers in 2013 to earn their certification through an alternate route, including online options. South Carolina also instituted a similar state-wide program seeking potential teachers through an alternative route (Tran & Smith, 2021). In response to the need for an alternative route, Georgia has begun implementing a paraprofessional-to-teacher certification grant program. This grant program uses money allocated from the American Recovery and Protection Act (ARP) to pay for the tuition, books, and certification exams of candidates as a way for local districts to "grow their own" from existing staff (Georgia Department of Education, 2021).

Leadership models

The traditional hypothesis within the real estate field is location, location, location. Regrettably, location can bring challenges to the leadership styles of rural principals. Parson et al. (2016) described that the challenges and opportunities at the rural level differ from those at the urban and suburban levels. Whether it is the isolation of being a singular leader in a school, the low enrollment of many rural schools, or working with limited staff, principals in rural schools tend to have less opportunity to focus on instructional leadership and more on just keeping the lights on. In their study of North Dakota principals, Parson et al. (2016) found that almost all subjects had to use a transactional leadership style to achieve success due to their rural nature. As described earlier, this transactional style requires one side to give something to the other to

achieve an outcome. Principals could not use shared or participative leadership models, sometimes seen in suburban and urban schools, to accomplish their goals. Instead, they had to rely on their negotiation skills to complete tasks.

However, other researchers have found that models using collective leadership styles may be productive in driving school improvement in rural areas (Eckert, 2019). Ni et al. (2018) found that when principals use collective leadership principles, they tend to have more influence over those in their schools. These leadership styles require buy-in from those within the building and can lead to positive results in school improvement, even in small rural settings (Player et al., 2017). These styles push to ensure everyone, not just a single person, shares the school's vision. Mitchell (2019) found that it typically requires a collective effort if there is an opportunity to transform how students are taught. More importantly, success at a rural school can only be possible if leaders move away from working alone (Ashton & Duncan, 2012). Identifying the contextual factors that make up a location may help principals implement the proper style to change the inequities in rural areas. The tenets of transformational leadership developed by Bass could give rural school principals a tool to lead school improvement in their buildings. Understanding how school leaders use these practices and the perceptions of the faculty can increase awareness of their value for others wanting to improve rural schools significantly.

3 METHODOLOGY

School improvement can mean many things. To some district offices, it is an improvement on state-mandated indicators; to parents, it may be an increase in graduation rates, and for teachers and staff, it could be a more inviting workplace environment. Each stakeholder's definition of school improvement is vital, and each plays a role in the perception of the school in the community and the state. Transformational leadership provides a mechanism to lead to these changes. This case study was developed to understand rural school principals' use of transformational leadership practices for leading the school improvement process and the perceptions of teacher-leaders on their staff. Specifically, are these principals applying transformational leadership practices to guide rural schools?

This chapter will describe the methodology chosen for the case study and justify its choice. The section will also explain the study's design with detailed information on selecting the samples of school principals and teacher-leaders. In addition, details are provided on how the data was collected, analyzed, validated for trustworthiness, and ethical considerations were given.

Guiding Questions

The following guiding questions were used to drive this qualitative case study:

RQ1: How do principals describe their use of Transformational Leadership practices to shape school improvement within their rural schools and communities?

RQ2: How do teacher-leaders perceive the administrators' use of Transformational Leadership practices to shape school improvement?

Research Methodology

The methodology presented is a qualitative case study of rural principals' use of transformational leadership practices to lead the school improvement process. Stake (2010) describes the concept of a qualitative case study in four ways. First, it is interpretive. Things can have multiple meanings based on various views. Sometimes, those meanings do not become readily apparent, and the researcher must have an open mind to recognize them. Secondly, the case study is experiential. It emphasizes observation and experiences. Thirdly, it is situational. Each location is unique and may work against generalizations. Finally, it is personalistic. It looks to find perceptions and points of view.

Within qualitative research, interpretation is emphasized. As observations occur in the field or through other means, the researchers must assert what they saw as they form the basis of what the reader will perceive. The researcher must also draw on those descriptions to build relationships and themes. Qualitative research reveals these perceptions through the study's planning, data collection, analysis, and final writing (Stake, 2010).

The researcher extracted these elements from the interviews and interactions with eight participants in this study. The four principals and four teacher-leaders provided information used to infer the overall meaning of the identified themes. Each subject was open and frank in response to the questions. This level of response by the participants allowed the researcher to understand the subject's replies better and convey the meaning to the readers of the study. It is essential, however, to see things from different perspectives.

Human activity has two realities: one of the individuals and one of the group or society (Stake, 2010). Individuals provide unique experiences that researchers can only capture through

qualitative studies. In school leadership, participants will bring their experiences within education to develop perceptions of those employed in their school districts. However, while some of these experiences may be similar, they will not be something that can be generalized to all participants. The micro-level perception of the individual is more important than the macro-level perception of the whole (Stake, 2010).

Within this case study, the eight individuals provided unique experiences in the school improvement process. Likewise, due to the nature of the selection process with multiple members of the same school staff, they also brought a group aspect. This merging of experiences allowed the researcher to compare the perceptions of each study participant to their school counterparts. This action also allowed the researcher to understand better how each subject looks at the school improvement process from the lens of both the principal and the teacher-leader.

Each situation is different. While the subjects may have some similarities, their conditions are their own. The qualitative study gives voice to those circumstances. It provides a means to express the participants' experiences and how those have shaped their thinking and influenced future choices. Each position's uniqueness offers a rich texture of what has happened in the past (Stake, 2010).

Furthermore, each district and school was unique in its own needs and circumstances despite all four being characterized as rural. Principals and teacher-leaders in this study serve in three districts in the southern region of Georgia, and all four principals have different years of experience and educational backgrounds. The variety of teacher-leader subjects was driven by years of experience, subject content knowledge, and leadership roles. This diversity ties back to Stake's tenet of situational individuality and its place in his concept of qualitative study (Stake, 2010)

Because of each of the three previous characteristics of a qualitative study, the last one takes shape. Qualitative research is personal. The interpretations, experiences, and uniqueness are brought together for the subject and the researcher. This methodology allows the researcher to determine what is happening in the subjects' minds as they experience various aspects of their lives and careers (Stake, 2010).

This case study allowed the researcher to see how personal each subject saw their roles in school improvement. Each of the eight participants expressed their thoughts on where they felt their contributions occurred within the school improvement process and that of others across their team. These beliefs provided insight as to how each subject was experiencing the part they were playing within the school. The uniqueness of each research participant provided for an overall more robust study.

Epistemological Framework

A constructivist qualitative approach was chosen to identify a shared meaning from the aspect of the participants involved in the study (Brown, 2008). As the constructivists claim that truth is relative, the participants' perspectives helped build this study (Boblin et al., 2013). The constructivist lens provides the opportunity to explore the lived, multiple experiences of a select sample of individuals to make sense of the world (Brown, 2008). With this opportunity, re-searchers can use the experiences to develop a complex description of the perceptions (Hays & Singh, 2012). These perceptions can become a foundation for a qualitative research study.

A research design is described as the overall strategy of a study. This qualitative study dealt with subjects' perceptions, so a case study design was chosen. The case study design allows for a bounded system where others' descriptions and interpretations are obtained while utilizing information and data to interpret findings. (Stake, 1995; Brown, 2008). To complete this study,

interviews and documents were used to investigate, after which the data and notes collected were transcribed, coded, and themed before being used to write a final narrative report.

Interviewing the individuals allowed the participants to verbalize their thoughts and experiences. The interviews were at most an hour for each participant and were semi-structured to allow for some consistency. Each interview used the same open-ended questions, which allowed the interviewees to share their thoughts and experiences. The information collected from the interviews was one piece of the study.

Reviewing school improvement documents permitted the researcher to see how the participants communicated their plans and ideas for school improvement. As such, the ease of reading and understanding of these school improvement documents is vital in the communication process with the stakeholders in the local communities. These documents were publicly available on schools and system websites. The data collected from the documents became the other piece of the study.

This case study was bound to eight school principals and teacher-leaders in rural Georgia who participated in leadership training through the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI). However, it may not be generalized to the population. Still, it could provide insights into behaviors and events that shaped those subjects' perceptions of school improvement.

Sample and Data Collection

A purposeful sample was developed to build a manageable case. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to identify and select individuals with specific knowledge or experience (Palin-

kas et al., 2015). This sample was chosen from participants in a single cohort who were provided training conducted by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI). GLISI instructs school and teacher-level leaders in aspects of transformational leadership practices and professional learning to promote school improvement. The organization's mission includes uplifting school leaders (inspirational motivation), transforming mindsets (idealized influence), creating cultures of innovation (individual consideration), and working with others to build excellent and equitable schools (intellectual stimulation) (Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement, 2022). GLISI also partly states its vision to pursue success for all students regardless of race, geography, or income. Their vision statement purposely employs geography to emphasize that principals and teacher-leaders from schools in rural areas can benefit as much from their training as those in suburban and urban areas. The decision to select a single cohort was due to the ever-evolving curricula presented during their training seminars. A cohort takes part in training over three days twice a year. Typically, there are approximately six weeks between the initial and subsequent sessions. Using a single cohort ensures all participants were exposed to the same training modules.

A meeting was held with GLISI personnel to discuss the basis for the study and potential benefits to educational leadership. It was determined that due to the ever-evolving curriculum and the necessity that the likely subjects were still involved in school-level leadership, a choice was made to limit the list of names to those who had participated in the last two years. The organization provided a list of 91 school principals across 22 districts who had participated in their training as part of one of four separate cohorts over the previous two years. After reviewing the district names, only 14 fit the description of rural. This action reduced the number of po-

tential principal participants to 37 candidates. A participatory interest questionnaire and demographic survey were sent to the school principals participating in these GLISI cohorts. The survey included questions about leadership experience at the school level, whether they would self-report themselves as transformational leaders, and if they believed their work with their faculty promoted aspects of transformational leadership (see Appendix B).

Each principal was asked to provide the names of up to four prospective teacher-leaders who attended the same training as additional participants. The process of acquiring other sample participants through recommendation is classified as snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is when one participant identifies and recruits different study participants (Parker et al., 2019). While there may be considerations about using this technique, it provides an understanding of how principals identify those that they consider as teacher-leaders in their buildings. An interest survey was then sent to the recommended teacher-leaders to gauge their interest in participation in the study.

A link to the survey was distributed in an email to principals whose names were from a roster of participants across multiple GLISI cohorts. A question was included to identify the diverse range of rural schools throughout Georgia. This question collected geographic location information about each school district. The geographic information helped the researcher understand the influence of GLISI training in various areas of the state. Participants and school data were collected and disaggregated to select principals with a broad range of experience, demographics, and location best to clarify the question (Stake, 1995).

The initial principal and following teacher-leader questionnaires were developed to take 8 to 12 minutes to complete. All questions were select-choice and did not require additional typing except to add names and email addresses. The information collected during this survey was confidential and properly secured electronically in a password-protected folder.

After receiving multiple responses from the various cohorts, only Cohort 63 could provide adequate responses for consideration. Cohort 63, which took place across the 2020 - 2021 school year, therefore became the basis for this study. This initial sample consisted of four school principals, who provided names of potential teacher-leader subjects. The subsequent teacher-leader surveys sent to those identified by the principals resulted in six responses. The four teacher-leaders were chosen to provide for variability in the interviewed population, focusing on their teaching experience and content area as critical markers in the decision.

Table 2

Participating Schools

School District	School	Geographic Location	County Population Range
Lily County Schools	Lily County Academy	South Central Georgia	10,000 – 15,000
Rose County Schools	Rose County Middle School	Southeast Georgia	20,000 - 25,000
Tulip County Schools	Tulip County High School	Southeast Georgia	10,000 - 15,000
	Tulip County Elementary School		

Table 3

Participants

School District	School	Participant Names	Role
Lily County Schools	Lily County Academy	Mr. Baker Ms. Dawson	Administrator ELA Teacher
Rose County Schools	Rose County Middle School	Mr. Atkinson Ms. Dade	Administrator Science Teacher
Tulip County Schools	Tulip County High School	Mr. Camden Ms. Clayton	Administrator ELA Teacher
	Tulip County Elementary School	Ms. Gordon Ms. Greene	Administrator Teacher

Sources For Data Collection

The perceptions of both the principal and the teacher-leader were vital in understanding the impact of transformational leadership practices on school improvement. One key aspect was the climate created by the principal and staff relationships (Kelley et al., 2005). The study used teachers' responses to the Staff Development and School Climate Assessment Questionnaire (SDSCAQ) to determine a school's climate. The SDSCAQ covers areas of school climate, including communication, innovation, advocacy, decision-making process, evaluation, and attitude toward staff development.

Items within the SDSCAQ also tie in with aspects of the four pillars of transformational leadership. Kelley et al. (2005) found a positive correlation between effective leadership through vision sharing (inspirational motivation), encouraging teacher development (intellectual

stimulation, individualized consideration), and building a positive work environment where staff members feel appreciated (individualized influence).

The interview questions used in this study were developed utilizing the SDSCAQ as a guide. Other educational professionals reviewed and workshopped the questions created by the researcher for clarity and understanding. The interview questions needed to be logical and un-complicated to ensure the answers provided by the subjects were straightforward. This clarity would allow the subjects' responses to better capture the study's intent.

Interviews

Data were initially collected through personal interviews; each of these semi-structured interviews took no more than an hour. The interviews were created to include fourteen open-ended questions for principals and thirteen for teacher-leaders. The questions were developed to probe for a description of the linkage and explain the participant's perception of the issue (Stake, 1995). The questions concentrated on the tenets of transformational leadership within each subject's school and the link to school improvement. These questions referenced leader-ship styles (idealized influence), a sharing of inspiration and vision (inspirational motivation), working with others in problem-solving (intellectual stimulation), and the encouragement of others in the faculty to grow professionally (individual consideration).

Table 4

Principal Questions

Question	Transformational Leadership Framework Alignment	Research Question Alignment
1. Describe your journey to becoming a principal.		Background knowledge

Question	Transformational Leadership Framework Alignment	Research Question Alignment
2. How do you view the role of the principal in school improvement?		Background knowledge
3. Describe your leadership style.	Idealized Influence	RQ 1
4. Do certain aspects help you when discussing school improvement and the school improvement process with your faculty?	Inspirational Motivation	RQ 1
5. Describe what school improvement looks like in your school.	Intellectual Stimulation	RQ 1
6. How do you communicate decisions with faculty?	Inspiration Motivation	RQ 1
7. How do you create buy-in?	Inspirational Motivation	RQ 1
8. How do you include teacher-leaders in the decision-making process?	Individual Consideration	RQ 1
9. Describe how you support the school improvement process in your school	Inspirational Motivation	RQ 1
10. What are some specific steps you use with your faculty to keep them focused	Intellectual Stimulation	RQ 1

Question	Transformational Leadership Framework Alignment	Research Question Alignment
11. Describe how you motivate teachers and staff to participate in the school improvement process.	Inspirational Motivation	RQ 1
12. Are any incentives or tips that have worked better than others?	Individual Consideration	RQ 1
13. Tell me about your plans for school improvement beyond this year.	Intellectual Stimulation	RQ 1
14. Is there something on the horizon that you are looking forward to working on?	Idealized influence	RQ 1
15. Do you have any questions for me?		

Table 5

Teacher-Leader Questions

Question	Transformational Leadership Framework Alignment	Research Question Alignment
1. Tell me about yourself.		Background knowledge
2. Describe your role as a teacher leader related to school improvement.		Background knowledge
3. How does your principal communicate expectations to you about your role?	Inspirational Motivation	RQ 2

Question	Transformational Leadership Framework Alignment	Research Question Alignment
4. Describe how you interact with your principal.	Intellectual Stimulation	RQ 2
5. How do they communicate with you about school improvement?	Inspirational Motivation	RQ 2
6. Describe your expectations of your principal related to school improvement.	Idealized Influence	RQ 2
7. Describe how your principal shares their vision of school improvement.	Inspirational Motivation	RQ 2
8. As a teacher-leader, how do you set high expectations for your team concerning school improvement?	Intellectual Stimulation	RQ 2
9. How do you know the expectations of school improvement?	Idealized Influence	RQ 2
10. How do you communicate the expectations?	Inspirational Motivation	RQ 2
11. Who do you see as a role model for your leadership in school improvement?	Idealized Influence	RQ 2
12. Describe how your principal supports school improvement within the school	Individual Consideration	RQ 2
13. Tell me about your ideas for school improvement within your team or school.	Intellectual Stimulation	RQ 2
14. Do you have any questions for me?		

As Stake (1995) recommended, these interviews occurred in areas and locations familiar to the participants with the thought they may feel at ease when expressing their opinions and answering questions. This task was accomplished remotely with the use of WebEx video software. The software allowed principals to remain in their offices and teacher-leaders in their classrooms.

The interviews were developed to probe the principal's understanding of transformational leadership practices and their relationship to the school improvement process. Additionally, the teacher-leader interviews were designed to evaluate the perception of those teacher-leaders regarding the principal's use of transformational leadership practices. Before an interview, a consent form was provided electronically for the subject to review, sign, and return (see Appendix C).

Transcripts were generated within a few days of the interviews. These transcripts were then offered to the interviewees as a member-checking device for clarification. If a subject did not respond to or recommend any changes, the transcript was used as written. If the subject requested that changes be made or their interview not be used in the study, plans were made to honor them. However, no such requests were made.

An electronic journal was kept during the study to capture details about each interview. These details included thoughts on the interview itself and notes on reactions by the subjects to questions addressed to them. This information was used to help with self-reflection on the interview's success and if any changes to the order or delivery of the questions would be necessary before beginning later interviews. All paper copies of survey information, transcripts, and notes

were kept in a locked file cabinet. Any electronic data was stored on a password-protected com-

puter secured in a locked cabinet when not in use. All information from this study will be de-

stroyed three years after the study's conclusion.

Document review

A comprehensive review of the school improvement documents was completed to provide

additional information for the study. For ease, the chosen documents were readily accessible on

the school and district websites. These documents were scrutinized for evidence of the four pil-

lars described by Bass: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and

individualized consideration (Bass, 1995). The analysis of the documents offered a means of

how the transformational practices were present in the organization and its day-to-day functions.

The data of documents included vision and mission statements, school improvement plans, and

state accountability records. The documents were reviewed and marked with evidence of the pil-

lars of transformational leadership.

Table 6

Document Review Notes

Document	Transformational Leadership Framework Alignment	Research Question Alignment
School's Mission and Vision	Idealized Influence Inspirational Motivation	RQ 1
School Improvement Plan	Inspirational Motivation Intellectual Stimulation Individualized Consideration	RQ 1
Accountability Report	Individualized Consideration	RQ 1

Examining the public-facing documents provided a window to the message conveyed to the parents and the community supporting the school. The analysis reviewed how the four pillars of transformational leadership are woven within their public records. Taking information from multiple sources, such as the interviews and the document reviews, helped develop a more comprehensive picture of how the principals incorporated transformational practices to lead the school improvement process.

The review of the school documents, including mission and vision statements, school improvement plans, and state accountability reports, showed what aspects of the overall education of the student body were principled by the staff and the school leadership. Also, the interviews with the principals and teacher-leaders gave ample information into the use of transformational leadership practices and insight into how they are perceived. Tying both together and acknowledging the theoretical framework chosen, themes concerning transformational leadership, such as vision, trust, inquiry, and collaboration, were becoming apparent. The use of these multiple sources allowed for a merging of ideas into a singular truth.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is vital in understanding the research at hand. A systematic approach provides for a consistent analysis of the data and provides a level of confidence in the subsequent results. This analysis process looks within the data for potential indicators to help flesh out patterns that could lead to thematic ideas. Working through each aspect of a thematic analysis process makes a clearer picture of what is occurring. Within this study, those themes involved transformational leadership and its use in the school improvement process.

Braun and Clarke (2006) provide six phases of thematic analysis to understand. Phase one required the researcher to become familiar with the data. In this study, these were the interview transcripts and the document review. These artifacts were coded with the data to identify repeated patterns and themes as part of phase two. Phase two also provided an opportunity to identify meaningful quotes from the interview that could be used within the final narrative. Phase three began with sorting the codes to help develop themes with the information, including overarching and subthemes.

Following Braun and Clarke's phases, phase four allowed the researcher to review and refine the identified themes and combine or separate certain subthemes. The fifth phase allowed naming the pieces and linking them to the codes. The last step, or sixth phase, involved the production of the report and helped tell the story of the data involved.

The data analysis process of the study was accomplished using NVivo software. With the software's advanced capabilities, including audio and video transcription, many functions necessary for a qualitative research study were completed electronically. NVivo prepared transcripts, assisted in coding, and summarized data. Each of these actions helped streamline the qualitative writing process.

After each interview, WebEx's audio and video digital files were uploaded into NVivo. The software's transcript function created rough transcripts of the interviews. These transcripts were reviewed, and corrections were made through hand transcription. Since each interview was structured similarly, coding features within NVivo helped identify keywords appearing within the interviews. The auto-coding feature of the program provided a means to highlight initial themes. These algorithm-based coding features can do things quicker; however, the transcripts were reviewed again by the researcher and hand-coded to check for consistency before creating a

consensus for analysis and interpretation. Lastly, this consensus was used to develop the findings of the research.

The public-facing documents and any notes taken while reviewing the documents were uploaded into NVivo for ease of theming and coding. As with the transcripts, the auto-coding features were used as the initial tool to identify specific keywords within the documents. However, a second review by the researcher was necessary to ensure that the computer-generated results accurately account for the information found within them. The knowledge gleaned from this analysis was combined with the data gathered from the interviews. Using the combined findings, the researcher addressed the purpose of the case study on how principals use transformational leadership practices to lead school improvement in rural schools and how those practices are perceived by the teacher-leaders who serve them.

Trustworthiness and Reliability

Trustworthiness refers to the credibility of the data within the qualitative study. Shortly after each interview, the transcription of the interview was forwarded via email to the subject. This use of member-checking helps build trustworthiness in the data and is a good practice for ethical research. Member-checking allows participants to review the transcripts of their interviews, confirming the information's credibility and allowing them to correct any errors in statements made (Boblin et al., 2013; Stake, 1995).

Proper preparation helped ensure that the interviews were conducted as similarly as possible. This consistency helped in the data collection and analysis process. The questions used in the interviews were workshopped against non-participants to determine if the delivery and the meaning were understood, even by individuals unfamiliar with educationally based terminology.

This step helped clarify the questions and developed a more focused question sequence to reveal the necessary data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were considered throughout this study. The fundamental principles of the Belmont Report findings of respect, justice, and benefits were each part of the study process. This study involved working with adult human subjects, so specific standards are considered, including confidentiality, privacy, and consent.

Participants were guaranteed confidentiality in the views that they expressed. All documents concerning a particular participant were given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Quotes within the study that were attributed to them included a fictitious name or a generic title.

Any materials developed during this research, including data collected, recordings, written transcripts, and subjects' questionnaires and identities, were stored in a locked cabinet to ensure privacy. All digital information was held on a password-protected laptop computer and secured in a locked cabinet.

Initial informed consent documents were part of the original selection survey. The wording told potential participants that they consented to their answers being part of a sample selection process at the beginning of the study. The form also allowed participants to withdraw from the study should they feel the need to do so. A second consent form was provided to participants before conducting the interviews. This consent form was delivered electronically to the subjects to be signed and returned.

Summary

The case study methodology provides the best opportunity to explore individuals and organizations through multiple means (Stake, 1995). The case study allows the asking of "how"

and "why" questions to understand how a phenomenon is influenced within a situation (Baxter &

Jack, 2008). The case study helped understand rural school principals' positionality and perspec-

tives on the school improvement processes and whether it can prepare and inspire teacher-leaders

to drive the school improvement process to better the educational experience of the diverse

groups of students in their schools.

4 RESULTS

The following guiding research questions were developed to explore the perspectives of both principals and teacher-leaders on how transformational leadership practices lead to school improvement in rural schools.

RQ1: How do principals describe their use of transformational leadership practices to shape school improvement within their rural schools and communities?

RQ2: How do teacher-leaders perceive the administrators' use of Transformational Leadership practices to shape school improvement?

Four cases were reviewed for this study, including principal and teacher interviews and an appraisal of external documents. The study concentrated on the interviews for the abundance of the data generated, then referred to field notes and school improvement document analysis. Each of the four cases examined presented differences and commonalities among the group. While all four schools have tried to adopt transformational leadership practices to lead to school improvement, each offers something different concerning the school principal/teacher-leader experience and the educational needs of the students. The study seeks to provide insight into the choices made by school principals as they lead their schools.

The findings of this study will be organized in three ways. The first portion refers to the cases. The case details section provides a thorough background of each participant, the school, and the communities they serve. The second part discusses the data's connections provided by the participants to the four pillars of transformational leaders. Finally, a third section will identify the themes of shared vision, mutual trust, collective inquiry, and whole collaboration that emerged during the data collection, document review, and analysis phase.

Case Details

The cases will be examined first to establish an understanding of each local community, school, and principal included in this study. Looking at each case will allow the reader to develop a unique perspective of the challenges of the principals. Each case detailed is a rural community with a school system whose principal attempts to use transformational leadership practices to lead school improvement processes successfully. Tables 2 and 3 provide an overview of each research site, participants, and county population range. This study used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participating school districts, principals, and teacher leaders.

Lily County Schools

Lily County Schools is a school district in south-central Georgia with a county population between 10,000 & 15,000 residents. The school system comprises three schools with a combined enrollment of 1,000 and 1,500 students. There is only one traditional high school in Lily County, and all schools in the district receive Title I funding. The primary industry in Lily County is agriculture, especially row crops of cotton and peanuts. Lily County is along a major interstate highway and may earn additional school funding through a special tax levy that would draw from the tourism industry passing through the community.

Mr. Baker has been Lily County Academy's principal for three years. He comes from a remarkably diverse background across many distinct levels of education. His experiences include work in urban, suburban, and rural schools in Georgia and other southern states. The current school year marked his twenty-fifth year in education. He began his career as a classroom teacher for eight years before moving into leadership. He has served as the principal at multiple middle schools and as an executive director for another school system.

Mr. Baker's experience across various environments gives him a unique perspective on achieving school improvement goals compared to others in the study. He believes in consistent messaging and constant monitoring of the school improvement plan so that all team members know the progress toward the set goals.

Ms. Dawson is a teacher-leader at Lily County Academy. Ms. Dawson currently teaches seventh-grade language arts. Her roles include supervising three other staff members and a full complement of students as part of her team. She has been with Lily County schools for three years after serving in a teaching role for the state of Georgia's juvenile justice system and leading the early learning center in an adjacent county. She has been in education for twenty-one years.

Ms. Dawson serves on the school improvement team. She is the lead seventh-grade teacher and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) leader. Her role as an English Language Arts teacher calls on her to lead the implementation of pieces of the school improvement plan's action items across all grade levels within the academy. She describes herself as being "everywhere."

Rose County Schools

Rose County Schools is a school district in southeast Georgia with a county population between 20,000 and 25,0000 residents. The school system comprises five schools with an enrollment of between 3,500 and 4,000 students. There is only one high school in Rose County. It receives Title I federal funding to support low-income students and Title III funding due to its English language learner population. The state of Georgia is the largest employer in Rose County, with industries such as manufacturing and agriculture present.

Rose County Middle School is led by Mr. Atkinson, who is beginning his fifth year as principal and his nineteenth year in education. Before assuming the principal role at Rose County Middle, Mr. Atkinson was a principal in two surrounding districts. Before serving in leadership, Mr. Atkinson was a high school language arts teacher and an athletic coach in multiple sports. He describes himself as an experienced educator who understands school improvement through leadership teams.

Ms. Dade is a fourth-year teacher leader at Rose County Middle School. She has fifteen years of experience teaching the subjects of science and mathematics. Rose County Middle School is only the second middle school where Ms. Dade has taught after spending eleven years in another school system in southeast Georgia. She has extensive knowledge of math and science standards due to her time as an instructional coach with the previous system. She believes this depth of math and science knowledge helps her when working with her students and other content teachers.

Ms. Dade describes herself as an employee who joins every committee because she wants "to be in the know." She also states that she wants to be the one that helps make change. She said she is not a "yes person" but does not tend to disagree with others. She says she is always willing to help, especially if the outcome is expected to be positive for students.

Tulip County Schools

Tulip County Schools is a school system in the central part of southeast Georgia with a county population between 10,000 and 15,000 residents. The school system comprises four schools with a total enrollment of between 1,500 and 2,000 students. There is one high school in Tulip County, and it receives Title I federal support. The significant economic industries in Tulip County are agriculture, manufacturing, and health care.

The principal of Tulip County High School, Mr. Camden, has been in his role for five years while completing his twenty-fourth year in education. His leadership journey included some time in private business before entering the field of education. His educational experience consists of seven years in the classroom, seven years as an assistant principal, and five years as a leader in the adult education program at a local state technical college. His wide range of experience is distinctive in looking at leadership roles inside and outside the classroom.

Mr. Camden describes himself as an instructional leader but recognizes his shortcomings and weaknesses. As a former physical education teacher, he chose to build his school leadership team to include members more experienced in other academic content areas. As principal, he recruited his assistant principals and instructional coaches in mathematics and other core subjects to help complement one another's skill sets. Mr. Camden explains that he does not consider himself a laissez-faire leader but does encourage his staff to find solutions independently. He believes this helps his staff work more collaboratively because he and his leadership team can only be in the classrooms occasionally.

Ms. Clayton is a Tulip County High School teacher-leader. She has eight years of experience teaching English Language Arts. Ms. Clayton joined the teaching profession without a teaching certificate or university training. She has a degree in communications and a master's degree in leadership. She has spent her entire career with Tulip County schools.

Ms. Clayton describes her first experiences as a new teacher as poor. She was "thrown in the deep end" by the previous principal. Due to her lack of university-based teacher training, she was unfamiliar with writing lesson plans or classroom observations. During her first few years at Tulip County High School, Ms. Clayton was not part of the school improvement team but has

joined in the last two years. She describes herself as bringing the special education voice to the conversations through her leadership on the Response To Intervention (RTI) team.

Ms. Gordon is the principal at Tulip County Elementary School and has been in education for almost thirty years. She has been at Tulip County for four years after spending twenty-four years at another district in south Georgia. Ms. Gordon began her career teaching elementary school children before moving to a curriculum coordinator position with the district office. She left the district office position to return to the school-based role of assistant principal. After two years as the assistant, she was offered the principal position she currently holds.

She brings her experience from the classroom and her time in the central office to her role as principal. Ms. Gordon is open to building strong relationships with her staff to lead the school improvement process. She encourages her staff to participate in the school improvement process and believes the principal should have the "big ideas" but not all the answers. She wants to help her people develop those ideas independently as they work through the school improvement process.

Ms. Greene is a teacher leader at Tulip County Elementary School. Ms. Greene has been in education for six years and is in her second year at Tulip County Elementary. She has previously taught in a significantly larger district in southwest Georgia. Ms. Greene is currently the leader of the third-grade English Language Arts team. She has only taught third grade but has worked with many students with different abilities, including special education, gifted, and English language learners.

Ms. Greene did not participate in the school improvement process in her previous school system. She said she was unaware of a school improvement process in the other school district. Her experience at Tulip County has enlightened her on the importance of data teams and shared

responsibility in working together on school improvement. This past year was Ms. Greene's second year on the school improvement team as the Professional Learning Team (PLT) lead for English Language Arts.

Ms. Greene describes the school improvement process as one where the PLTs create a content-specific goal related to the general school-wide improvement goal. The PLTs then generate a series of action steps to help achieve the goal. Throughout the year, each member of the PLT collects and monitors data before presenting results to the central office staff. Part of the presentation includes reflecting on what was successful and what was not. This step is crucial in developing and implementing next year's plans.

Connections

The connections section provides an opportunity to examine the findings broadly and make relationships across all cases. The connections detailed in this section are based on the four pillars of transformational leadership. Each will include quotes from the interviewees and references from the publicly available documents on the school's websites. An interviewee's responses may have included commentary across multiple pillars throughout the coding process. As a result, input from the interviewees in this section may consist of parts on numerous pillars and provide a synthesis of the connections between the findings.

Idealized Influence

Transformational leaders can have considerable influence over their followers regarding the educational setting, including the students and faculty. Any leader's values, vision, and focus must be clear and concise. These include displaying moral and ethical attributes when working with teachers, staff, and students and sharing a vision everyone can adopt quickly. This vision directs faculty members toward school improvement efforts (Kurland et al., 2010).

Ms. Gordon understands her influence over those in her building. She sees herself as an instructional leader and wants everyone to see themselves as one, too. Ms. Gordon describes her desire to help others. She said, "I want to build capacity within my building so they can be leaders, too." She says this helps her focus on others and sets positive examples for those around her. She believes her faculty can positively influence the students regarding discipline and restorative practices within their building. Over the next two years, one of the school's improvement goals is to use the vision of a proactive and less draconian discipline practice to stem some of the unusual discipline incidents that have become more commonplace since returning post-pandemic.

Mr. Atkinson sees his impact in sharing his vision of doing things efficiently and effectively through his interactions with his staff. Mr. Atkinson said, "I imagine a share pile of cash sitting in the middle of the room. Does what I am saying have enough value to justify my actions." He believes this helps staff see that he values their time, and therefore, they trust what he says as significant to their educational practice. This trust has also helped him share his vision of reducing absences within his school. His plan, which includes using a "house model" like that of the Ron Clark Academy with a positive reward basis, is a drastic change from previous administrations. His conviction in making these changes and the belief of his staff in his foresight can provide a better classroom experience for the students of Rose County.

Lily County's Mr. Baker sees his influence through his focus on being a collaborative leader. He said, "I feel like you can't know everything, but it's imperative to know a little bit about something and ensure that you've got people in place, the right people in the seats on the bus." Mr. Baker uses the analogy of the bus in many instances. He mentioned always seeking ways to implement a strength-based model in his schools: "You have people on your team with certain strengths. Hopefully, this is enough to meet the school community's needs." He describes

his vision of one as a continuous improvement for himself and those on his staff. He says he always seeks improvement and encourages others to do the same.

Ms. Dade describes her principal as one whose influence and vision can be witnessed firsthand. She commented:

> So, we can sit in meetings and talk all day, you know, we are going to do these things. It sounds great, but my big thing about him is that he puts things into action and does not waste our time or energy. His vision puts students first. He will try to make it happen if he thinks it is for the student's benefit.

Ms. Dade holds that having a leader with a vision and one who listens thoughtfully to their teachers can influence the staff and students within the building and the community.

Ms. Greene has her definition of a transformational leader. She describes them as "One who sets high expectations for the school, the students, and the teachers." This direction influences everyone. Ms. Greene describes her leader as seeing the big picture and planning to take the next step in improving the school. With this, Ms. Greene recounts a professional learning experience that included many staff members and different departments throughout the school. As the leader, the principal was incredibly open to her expectations of the group. This openness helped positively change how teachers served students' needs in the classroom.

Ms. Clayton sees the influence within her school through the leader who creates personal relationships with staff and students. Ms. Clayton said, "These relationships with students help her hold their feet to the fire because they know she loves them, and they know she is going to push them." This student accountability ensures that goals are being met and excuses are limited.

At the same time, this leader advocates for her teachers and fights to secure the necessary resources for them. These actions have helped build influence on the future activities of students and staff because of the trust and respect earned.

The public-facing documents provided evidence of idealized influence through the mission and vision of the schools and the districts they serve. These actions can be seen within the websites, handbooks, and school improvement plans developed by school and district staff members. The emphasis is on sharing and modeling these beliefs so that others will follow.

Lily County Schools has emphasized "excellence" across its organization. The word plays a part in the mission statement's instruction, operations, culture, and professional development strands. The school threads the belief within its plan to improve student performance in literacy and numeracy. Aspects of the mission statement are present in many of the action steps in the school improvement plan.

Rose County Middle School highlights the word "all" in both its mission and vision statements on its websites. Within the statement, they commit to ensuring a quality education while affirming the value and worth of each student. This word is also found in their school and district's improvement plans, where inclusivity is emphasized for teaching a diverse student body, including minority and economically disadvantaged students.

The two schools within Tulip County use a shared county-wide student handbook to communicate the mission and vision with parents and community members. Like Rose County, Tulip also places significant meaning on the word "all." Tulip believes that preparing all students for success in college or career will help them positively contribute to society. This belief also focuses on providing opportunities and support through partnerships within the community to

help develop the students. Both school improvement plans identified overarching needs that impacted "all students" and wrote action steps to address these needs.

The ability to influence can have positive and negative effects, but for the transformational leader, the positives must outweigh the negatives when looking to lead school improvement. Building a shared vision with the organization and securing the trust of those working with the leader was expressed in multiple interviews with the teacher-leaders. Participants also stressed the need for staff to function collectively to meet the needs of the students better and improve their educational experience over one that does not work as efficiently.

Inspirational motivation

Motivating adults, especially those long into their careers, can challenge any leader. Inspiring those who work for a leader is vital to bringing change to a situation. Transformational leaders in a school must be able to use their personality and charisma to help bring about the improvement they seek. The school leader who can use optimism and positivity to inspire teachers and students to grow professionally and academically has a better chance of succeeding than those who do not. Employees will work harder for someone they feel sees the value in the work and is willing to challenge them to improve (Sadeghi & Pihie, 2012).

Mr. Camden uses the relationships he built between himself and his staff to keep moving forward. He expressed:

> I have conversations with teachers about being a teacher-leader. I do not have anybody in my teaching ranks working on leadership certification, which concerns me. You want to try to build from within, and I think I have some strong ones, which would be some follow-up conversations.

Mr. Camden also looks to motivate by passing along specific resources that he believes will strengthen individual teachers. Many times, these are instructional or student interaction strategies. At first, he felt that the teachers were not reading the articles he provided to them. However, he began to see the implementation of these strategies when doing walk-throughs and heard references from them while in casual conversations with staff members. Mr. Camden said, "I'm trying to challenge them to think differently and grow them, whether they stay in the class-room or step up to leadership."

Mr. Baker believes that a school leader's attitude and relationships with staff play a role in their teachers' motivation. He stated:

> So, I think it is important to put your best foot forward as a leader. Knowing your teach-ers' wants, desires, and needs and rewarding them for their efforts. Showing the enjoy-ment, you get from work, and for those that do not enjoy it, getting to know them so you can also encourage their work.

Other times, Mr. Baker uses details and facts to motivate his teachers. He said:

> So, I believe in providing folks with information. Providing the data, I do what is right with evidence. There will be a reason if I am asking you to do something. It is not about me but about the children. You have to be resourceful as a leader and share the infor-mation to explain the why behind certain decisions.

He believes that this action helps create motivation and buy-in, which helps build a better under-standing of the entire vision he has in mind for the school.

Ms. Gordon claims her success is due to her openness toward her faculty concerning communication. While she had felt that she had a great relationship with her staff, it was discov-ered that not everything discussed among the leadership team was getting back to the teachers,

and she felt some distress. This issue was causing a lack of success in getting buy-in from those influential teacher-leaders she thought she needed to drive the school improvement process. Ms. Gordon commented:

> You do not have to get complete buy-in because if you wait for complete buy-in, you will never get anything done. It is more about establishing that need and the why and then having folks understand that there are certain decisions we collaborate on, but certain decisions are up to your discretion.

The correction made with the communication channels provided an easier and quicker way for her to get feedback from her staff on issues concerning the school. The openness helped foster the motivation Ms. Gordon sought as she led the school improvement process.

Ms. Dade describes her principal as charismatic and maintains an open-door policy. She said, "He is always trying to build relationships with his staff and is very interested in any concerns or issues we may have about the school." He has built his team's trust regarding school improvement by ensuring that academic improvements are always the first goals set. Ms. Dade describes him as persistent when discussing each school improvement goal, constantly revisiting, reviewing, and reminding everyone about the goals and their impact on the student's success. She believes this dogged behavior toward meeting certain school improvement guideposts motivates staff and students to see the goals are accomplished.

All four schools and their supporting districts look for shared goals and express performance expectations as part of their mission and vision statements and school improvement plans. Words such as productive citizenry or preparation for tomorrow are commonly found in public statements. While the goals within the mission and statements are not always readily quantifiable, such as what constitutes success post-high school, they could be qualifiable through

feedback from parents, students, or the community at large. These statements would intend to set aspirations that the schools and the societies could act on.

Tulip County Elementary has three overarching goals expressed in its school improvement plan. These can each be measured quantitatively through some summative or formative assessment process. The communal sharing of these by the faculty and staff is littered within the action steps to meet the performance expectations, as the responsibility for accomplishing these steps is spread across multiple content areas. These action items highlight the development of content knowledge for the staff across various categories, from the new literacy and mathematics standards to implementing a more defined Response To Intervention process. The entire staff must be interested in accomplishing these goals, as this shared responsibility helps develop ownership for their success.

Tulip County High School looks at its goals slightly differently than its counterparts teaching at Tulip County Elementary. While their goals are also set up to address some aspects of student achievement, only one is looking at being measured through a quantitative approach. Because of the nature of high schools and the tendency to keep contents in silos, the overall emphasis is on the goal of student engagement and less on state-wide testing scores. The action steps addressing student engagement call for understanding how technology, student support services, and the student's educational futures can be harnessed to make a difference. These steps have been assigned to faculty members who are experts in their fields but are not always designated as contributing members in school improvement plans.

Administrators and teachers are addressing the technology action steps with the self-selection of various technology sessions the central office staff offers. The progress of implement-

ing these new skills is being measured by peer-to-peer observations to develop a shared responsibility. The instructional coaches, school counselors, and work-based learning coordinators are addressing the action steps related to student support services. These steps focus on helping students and staff understand the importance of social-emotional learning, cohort groups, clubs, and student advisory to maintain classroom engagement and engagement with the whole school. Lastly, the educational future of students' action steps is being championed by the Career Academy coordinator. This person is tasked with working with teachers and staff to address employability skills and career explorations for students to remain engaged and understand the importance of high school graduation.

Lily County Academy addresses the inspirational motivation aspect of transformational leadership within their school improvement plans through performance expectations that speak to student achievement and school climate and culture. Mr. Baker and his team involve the community in their resolve to meet shared goals and performance expectations. Within each goal, numerous action steps call on parents and the local citizenry to work with the school district to play a part in setting the goals and assisting in reaching them.

One example is the climate and culture goal. As with many school districts, a positive behavior intervention and support team has been set up in Lily County to address climate and discipline. Lily County has taken things a step further by adding community resources to aspects of the program. These include multiple community events to provide information on the program's impact and connections with agencies that may assist with issues beyond the scope of the school. These collaborations help all parties understand the importance of a positive school climate for teachers, staff, students, and parents.

Rose County addresses the challenges of students in poverty as a shared goal among its faculty and staff. Within their school improvement, there are goals to better understand the implications of poverty on their student body as they look to address behavior, academic achievement, and attendance. This goal includes an action step involving the entire staff through a book study. To ensure the goal's implementation and success, the book's information is expected to be part of each professional learning community, grade level, and department meeting. A discussion on the implications of improving the relationship between teachers and students and their parents is highlighted as critical to the success of the action step. Including all staff members with a singular focus on impacting the largest demographic category of students could help decrease behavior incidents, improve state-mandated test scores, and increase attendance.

Inspiring and motivating others can be among the most challenging things facing leaders. The staff and students often think that the positivity is fake or that ulterior motives are behind some of the leader's actions. The principals in this study appear to have avoided this because of the trust they have built with their staff, as many mentioned trust and openness in their interviews. This trust leads to the commitment found in these schools to take on some of the challenges as a member of their chosen staff. Holding each other accountable also helps the teams work together to meet shared goals. In addition to inspiring others, the leader must be able to stimulate their thinking regarding school improvement.

Intellectual stimulation

An educational leader's use of intellectual stimulation can help build a strong faculty, the type of staff willing to take on any challenge. Transformational leaders give teachers the autonomy to be innovative and try new things (Money, 2017). This encouragement allows teachers to

use their creativity when developing action items in the school improvement plans. The understanding that failure may occur but will not be penalized stimulates employees who may have otherwise stayed on the sidelines and not participated in the school improvement process.

Ms. Gordon's school staff receives feedback from her leadership team to help challenge their thinking about what is going on in the classroom. Ms. Gordon stated:

> We are in the classrooms doing our observations. We provide feedback to keep everybody focused on this, which is what we are about at this school. We still have some shoring up to do there, ensuring we are in the classrooms as much as we need.

Ms. Gordon also asked her staff to think about restructuring classrooms and grade levels. She explained:

> We are looking at maybe restructuring the first and second grades. We will continue our small group reading but look at whole group instruction as part of our literacy block because we see a disconnect between the two and the student's actions.

This openness to innovative ideas and request for creativity from the staff allows them to look for new ways to deliver content that may not have previously reached specific learners.

Mr. Atkinson challenges his teachers and staff to constantly ask questions and dig deeper into what they see on the surface when looking at school improvement. He believes that this constant questioning helps stimulate their conversations in meetings. Mr. Atkinson said:

> We can only control our time and when they are with us. Is this something that we can do to grow kid by kid, group by group? Kids are not just test scores, but I like to see improvement in the data.

Mr. Atkinson encourages his team to be creative and not to dismiss any idea. He also wants his staff to be able to come to him at any time an idea strikes them, even if the meeting has been over for a few days or even weeks.

Mr. Camden uses short-cycle progress monitoring to keep his staff on point with the school improvement plan. He stated:

We do a 20-day check and then meet with our district quarterly to discuss those goals. Now, data is just one piece, but when we get into leadership and PLTs, we want them to discuss it. I can read the numbers off a sheet, but I want them to discuss it. Tell me what is happening with these students. We are breaking it down beyond just the numbers and trying to make sure our strategies are working. We have broken our entire faculty into working groups, so everyone is contributing and on the same page with our shared focus.

Mr. Camden and his leadership team have found that effective feedback with teachers also stimulates their growth and mindset with school improvement. He continued:

Overall, you know, teachers want to have feedback, and that is an area that we are trying to strengthen and giving them effective feedback consistently. This feedback makes them more aware of what is happening in their classrooms, their impact on students, and, in turn, the school improvement plan.

Ms. Clayton sees the use of intellectual stimulation through her principal's constant push for teachers to try new things and be creative in the instructional strategies they use in the classroom. She encourages the sharing of those ideas. She explained:

So, we meet weekly in our professional learning teams. We talk about specific goals that we want to achieve and break them down and what strategies we have tried that have

been successful. I push into all three ELA classes to see what is working and what is not.

So, having those conversations keeps everyone on the same page regarding expectations.

Ms. Greene shared that she and the staff have been challenged to look at instructional

practices as they prepare for the coming year. She stated:

> I think we are in a really good transitional place right now. We do not truly have any Tier
>
> Two re-teaching happening in our building. We have a whole lot of Tier Three interven-
>
> tions going on. So next year, we plan to add Tier Two, re-teaching and holding our stu-
>
> dents accountable to those grade-level standards. We focus a lot on Tier Three this year
>
> because we are trying to play catch up.

According to the documents, each school and district looks to stimulate its students, faculty, and

staff through activities that promote innovation and critical thinking. Schools should not be mun-

dane places where the day-to-day activities are uninspiring or boring. The opportunity for every

stakeholder to provide expertise and operate autonomously, within reason, allows for out-of-the-

box thinking.

Mr. Atkinson and the Rose County Middle School stakeholders seek to allow teachers

and staff to use their knowledge and skills to work with struggling students. Within its first

school improvement goal, the action steps call on teachers to address students' needs through

data collected through formative and summative processes. Within one action step, the school

commits to providing more paraprofessionals in classrooms across all contents. Including a sec-

ond adult in the classroom allows teachers to create pods to help them work with students in

small group settings. By breaking students out into small groups, teachers can be creative in de-

termining solutions for students with specific needs that may not be necessary for large-group

instruction. This allowance for flexibility helps build mutual respect between teachers and leadership. When teachers and staff feel that respect is part of the school culture, they are more likely to be innovative in their solutions.

Tulip County High School allows staff to explore opportunities to incorporate digital technology into their daily classrooms. It is essential to understand that the learning styles of today's students are significantly different than most of the school's staff members. Given this, Tulip County encourages its staff to work with learners to use digital tools and technology to conduct research, solve problems, and create original works as part of their learning process. Teachers are also asked to help students use technology to communicate and work collaboratively. Due to the evolving technology medium, teachers and staff must constantly work to find new ways to incorporate these devices or programs into the learning process. These decisions allow the teachers some flexibility to determine the best use of those resources to accomplish the task and meet the needs of individual students.

Tulip County Elementary has emphasized students and their need for an active learning environment as part of the third of the school goals. They motivate the staff to implement a program that emphasizes critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication within their action steps. Designated in the school improvement plan as the four C's, it is to help foster student engagement within the classroom. Teachers are encouraged to find unique ways to implement these skills within the school so they can model each of the four words. This action allows teachers to work independently and collaboratively to determine how to introduce and teach these to their students. This action enables teachers to think creatively about using them in their content.

The leadership team at Lily County looks to create collective teacher efficacy through action steps to increase student achievement. They encourage collaborative problem-solving when meeting to discuss student data and progress. The team also encourages teachers to be open in expressing their needs for professional learning, which could also impact student growth. Using surveys, the principal and his team ask their staff to identify potential opportunities for professional development based on the results of quarterly student benchmarks. This action allows teachers to think creatively about specific needs and be open to looking for new practices they may not have previously considered. Using the teacher's voice and being honest and open about needs is only possible through the trust built between teachers and the leadership team.

As a leader, one person can only generate a limited number of ideas and still be successful. Allowing the staff to be creative in their classrooms and using their knowledge to best focus on what needs to be done provides transformational leaders with staff preparing to become future leaders. This freedom to be innovative helps teachers discover their passion and allows individual growth. Understanding the individual is also vital in getting the best out of a staff member. This individualized consideration accounts for what helps drive each member of the staff.

Individualized consideration

Transformational leaders use their knowledge of the habits and interests of their followers to build relationships that benefit both the leader and the followers. In the case of school leadership, this includes tapping into staff members' specific interests and passions. Each person on the faculty can contribute to school improvement. Discovering the talents and expertise of those who serve the school can be crucial in achieving the goals set collectively.

Mr. Camden describes situations where tenure in the school building had been the means to assemble his leadership teams in the past. He now recognizes that this method may have

sometimes been less beneficial than he hoped. He said, "I have some teachers with some more tenure, but they weren't getting it done or weren't productive and had to have frank conversations with them." However, the inclusion of a newer teacher with a particular passion made an immediate impact on his team. He continued, "It's not always easy, and a lot of times, it is their leadership ability and how the team works together." Mr. Camden uses a non-traditional faculty meeting process to see how faculty members interact with those not in their content area. He explained, "We break them into groups with some criteria to interact with each other. It is like how teachers create their small groups in their classrooms." He uses these as opportunities to observe and hear how they share their feelings about subjects that impact the school day.

Ms. Gordon characterizes her team as one with multiple individual pieces but with a general focus. She wants their openness in meetings and not just their thoughts and ideas but those of their teammates. She mentioned using an off-site conference to build relationships with each member individually and collectively as a team to become more efficient and build capacity throughout the group and the school.

Ms. Dade mentioned that her principal always considers each staff member when discussing the school improvement goals, even teachers who may not be directly involved in those goals. In her school, the focus has been on English Language Arts and literacy. Ms. Dade said, "He is constantly communicating, especially with those teachers, but he is not leaving the others out because, like, in other areas or subjects. Reading is not just isolated to, like, an ELA teacher."

The tenet of individual consideration is the most common in school improvement plans. Principals at all four schools are concerned about their faculty members and aware of their needs to grow professionally and personally. Each plan mentions some aspect of professional development based on individual needs and school-wide implementation of other initiatives. Principals

who know what their followers value and look for ways to harness those values to improve student achievement may create an even stronger bond between themselves and their staff members.

Tulip County Elementary highlights the importance of individual consideration by emphasizing professional development across all three school improvement goals. Not only do they want to build professional learning teams, but they are also looking to build leadership capacity within the building. Specifically, they call for teacher-leader training to be more effective in facilitating grade-level and content-based meetings. They also call for the continuing development of teachers who work with specific populations, such as special education and English language learners, to become more attuned to the practices that breed success among these populations.

Tulip County High School spotlights its commitment to individual consideration as it develops teachers through their specific needs through classroom observation and personal feedback. Highlighted within both school improvement goals is the desire to help teachers become better at using learning targets, success criteria, learning intentions, and student self-assessments to help promote student engagement. Additionally, Tulip High School looks to build future leaders by encouraging problem-solving among its staff and fostering data analysis, root cause identification, and solution-driven processes for its content-level teams in their professional learning communities.

Lily County focuses its attention on individual consideration through a system of support to sustain effective professional learning. Using focused walkthroughs, observations, and teacher feedback, the school allocates resources best suited to help staff members meet their individual needs as teachers and the learning needs of their students. Woven between the school's improvement goals are opportunities for teachers to identify their wants as instructors to improve their

practice. Unique to Lily County, an action step is in place to celebrate individuals and their professional accomplishments. Recognizing these triumphs could build collegiality among members of the staff and their leaders.

Rose County dedicates an entire improvement goal to the individual consideration of its teachers and staff. Understanding the need to recruit, hire, develop, support, and retain school and district members, the school participates in a New Teacher Academy induction program. This program provides mentors to support teachers new to the teaching profession and those new to the county and school. This program supports the new employees' learning environment and professional capacity. Rose County uses exit surveys and retention data to monitor its success and adjust the program's curriculum if necessary.

Rose County also encourages staff to add additional endorsements to their current certification through the reimbursement of coursework. These endorsements include working in gifted, reading, and ESOL. Rose County also develops plans with teachers and other staff members seeking in-field certifications in additional content areas. These staff members can also receive repayment for any costs of state-mandated certification testing.

Identifying and harnessing each staff member's gifts to foster school improvement can be challenging. The transformational leader looks for ways to find those hidden talents and passions. As the teacher-leaders pointed out, the principals are constantly asking staff members probing questions to see where they could contribute to the betterment of the school.

Table 7

Summary of Connections by Participants and Documents

	Idealized Influence	Inspirational Motivation	Intellectual Stimulation	Individualized Consideration
Principals	Positive influence	Challenge to grow	Challenges	Autonomy
	Role model	Providing the data	Creativity	Team development
	Trust	Openness with information	Feedback	
Teacher-leaders	Approachability	Building relationships	Creativity	Inclusion
	High expectations	Persistence Teamwork	Challenges	
		Consider all students		
Documents	Excellence	Shared responsibility	Critical thinking	Professional development
	All students	Elevated expectations	Exploration	
			Collective efficacy	

Themes

The four pillars of transformational leadership (idealized influence, inspirational motiva-

tion, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) formulated the conclusions on

principal leadership practices concerning school improvement. Through careful analysis of the

data collected, four significant themes emerged. Each theme reveals certain aspects of traits and

actions that could be put in place by principals who want to adopt transformational leadership

actions to lead to school improvement in rural schools.

Shared Vision

Setting a vision allows principals and other leaders to express their belief systems and expectations to the organization. In the cases within this study, the organization is the school community, both staff and students. Principals and teacher-leaders discussed the importance of a vision and belief system where both groups recognize values such as growth mindsets, team effectiveness, and trust (idealized influence and intellectual stimulation). The vision was a vital tool in shaping how members of the organization moved in the direction laid out by the leader with shared goals (inspirational motivation). As staff members joined the principal in sharing their vision, a collective belief system grew within the school.

Using an open-door or open-communication policy helped teachers become more familiar with the leader's vision as they could spend time one-on-one (individual consideration). These personal conversations made it easier for teachers to see and understand the commitment of certain beliefs of the leader (inspirational motivation). In addition, the principal's visibility in the building and classrooms also helped them put their vision on display and into practice. The principal's interactions with teachers and students provided genuine indicators of their identity as role models. These authentic measures helped build the subsequent finding of mutual trust.

Mutual Trust

Teacher-leaders expressed those principals built their trust through the accessibility and approachability of their communication practices (idealized influence). This trust helped grow the loyalty of the staff so that principals could ask teacher-leaders to take on roles within the school improvement process that they may not have considered or been comfortable with before (individualized consideration). Trust was described as a two-way street as leaders said that they could trust their teachers to have the autonomy to make decisions, and teacher-leaders expressed

their trust towards the principal to have the whole school in mind when making decisions or rec-

ommendations towards school improvement with their shared goals (inspirational motivation).

One principal mentioned his choice to build a leadership team of experts in their fields. The principal said he trusted those he considered experts because he lacked knowledge of some contents (individualized consideration). Having that trust and, as a leader, the willingness to cede his authority went a long way in letting teacher-leaders know that they had his confidence. Like-wise, teacher-leaders expressed that their principals always considered the impact of a decision on the entire student body and not just a select few (inspirational motivation). Teachers who worked with marginalized populations mentioned this as a point in knowing that their principal valued all students equally (intellectual stimulation). Having the mutual trust of those within and across the teams of teachers led to a better working relationship that helped harness a collective inquiry into best practices for teaching and learning.

Collective Inquiry

Developing an inquiry-based mindset was vital for this study's schools. All expressed at some point the concept of being challenged to look for unique ways to bring about change to benefit school improvement (intellectual stimulation). Each teacher-leader and principal talked about working with others, within their content or sometimes outside their scope of interest, to ask questions about what current data showed and how they could improve on the findings. The principals acted as role models to push this inquiry approach to build each staff member. These actions helped the teacher-leaders develop skills outside their traditional educational training (in-dividualized consideration and idealized influence).

By challenging the traditional thought process of school improvement, principals could stimulate the creativity of their teacher-leaders (intellectual stimulation). These teacher-leaders,

who saw the needs of students on the ground level, used a "bottom-up" approach to help their principals with school improvement. In making an inquiry approach, the teacher-leaders collaborated to solve problems and develop shared expectations from students (inspirational motivation). This collective efficacy of the teacher-leaders on each staff member helped lead to the fourth finding: whole collaboration.

Whole Collaboration

The principals and the teacher-leaders commented on the dynamics of the school improvement teams they were part of. The effect of the collaboration fostered by the transformational leadership practices of the principals was felt by both groups as it brought confidence and a sense of teamwork (inspirational motivation).

The understanding that as teacher-leaders, they were not working in silos but as a compliment to each other helped forge a togetherness when tackling the school improvement plan. Principals were very conscious of who they were putting on their teams as one used an analogy of bus riders traveling together, and another mentioned having to replace or supplant former members who could have been more effective in the team setting when compared to others (individual consideration). The belief in having their staff work together and not alone to tackle school improvement problems was vital in building a school culture that could achieve the desired results (intellectual stimulation and idealized influence).

The four themes of the study provided a shared understanding of each school's journey into transformational leadership practices in the school improvement process. School improvement cannot simply happen overnight and requires time for changes to take hold and become

part of the school culture, not just a passing fancy or the newest shiny object. Leaders who implement aspects of transformational leadership appear to gain the trust of their staff to make those long-term changes to benefit the school and the rural community that supports it.

Table 8

Summary of Themes by Participants

	Shared Vision	Mutual Trust	Collective Inquiry	Whole Collaboration
Principals	Authenticity	Autonomy	Challenge	Finding the correct fit
	Beliefs	Ceding to experts		Effectiveness
Teacher-leaders	Direction	Accessibility	Stimulate	Confidence
	Communication	Approachability	Bottom-up	Teamwork
		Loyalty	Collective efficacy	

Summary

Principals described the importance of communicating shared goals and vision as part of their leadership traits. The teacher-leaders described their principal's constant communication and their principal's focus on working towards goals. Both the principals and the teacher-leaders mentioned that developing and building relationships generated a sense of teamwork and unity among the staff. They felt that trust between the leader and teacher was essential in achieving their goals. To create the culture necessary to drive school improvement, principals expressed that recognizing individual talents and placing the right people in critical positions helped make an enormous difference in success or failure.

Teacher-leaders mentioned many of the same aspects of the themes expressed by the school leader. In some cases, both groups referenced similar school-based situations or goals and how the school improvement group looked at them, but from different lenses. The teacher leader's perceptions aligned with the principals as to a culture of a shared vision, trust, accountability, and individual consideration.

Each of Bass's four pillars was interwoven within the publicly available documents across multiple goals and action steps. While the pillars were not expressed directly by name, their characteristics were found in school improvement plans across all grade-level bands. These examples demonstrate that transformational leadership is compatible throughout all levels of schools, from elementary to high.

Focusing on interpreting the perceptions of principals and teacher leaders and the goals and action steps of the school improvement plans, it could be concluded that transformational leadership practices may impact the school improvement process in some schools within rural Georgia. In the closing chapter, this paper will revisit the struggle of rural schools and address how the results found in this chapter are vital to lead school improvement in this case.

5 DISCUSSION

This study was initiated because of the need for more evidence surrounding the use of transformational leadership practices to lead school improvement in rural Georgia schools. Interviewing several rural principals and teacher leaders within Georgia schools provided context for the qualitative research when answering the two research questions.

> RQ1: How do principals describe their use of Transformational Leadership practices to shape school improvement within their rural schools and communities?

> RQ2: How do teacher-leaders perceive the administrators' use of Transformational Leadership practices to shape school improvement?

This case study research was framed through constructivism, which seeks to understand the world through our experiences and interactions with others (Genzuk, 2009). This study used purposive sampling to select principals and teacher-leaders who met specific requirements for the study. The researcher used a semi-structured interview to understand the local context of using transformational leadership practices in school improvement. Primarily, the focus was to investigate principals' and teacher-leaders' perspectives on using transformational leadership practices. Finally, an analysis of the data gathered sought to comprehend the context of the cases and how other principals and teacher-leaders in similar circumstances can improve their leadership practices.

Conclusions

This study sought to explore how principals use transformational leadership practices to lead school improvement in rural schools. The analysis also examined the perspectives of the teacher-leaders to describe how principals at their schools were using those practices for school improvement. The findings suggested that when principals used transformational leadership

practices to convey their shared vision, their influence widened to include teacher-leaders. As principals built mutual trust with their staff, relationships strengthened, resulting in a more positive school environment and culture. Additionally, principals who challenged their teacher-leaders to have a collective inquiry about data and other school-related matters were more likely to draw followers who shared similar qualities. Lastly, the combination of visionary leadership, trust, and inquiry created the semblance of whole collaboration, with teacher-leaders working together to tackle problems within the school and lead toward school improvement.

Implications

This study provides implications for educational leadership in small, rural settings where resources may be limited. While all the cases in this study are systems in rural areas, each is unique. Differences in the surrounding communities, leadership backgrounds, funding sources, and student populations are evident between the systems and schools. The individual needs of each school, even those within the same district, create the need for site-based autonomous improvement teams.

However, all rural schools face similar challenges of limited staff and fiscal resources (Farmer, 2009). They often continue to be hampered in hiring due to a lack of comforts that younger, new teachers may seek in larger suburban and urban areas (Tran & Smith, 2020). Additionally, they encounter obstacles such as small-town politics or good-old-boy networks that may limit or hamper their improvements (Cervone, 2017).

Implications have been provided to address these and other challenges. Each implication is meant to mitigate these difficulties at a level where the implementation or adoption may be the most impactful. The first implication is at the local school board level, where the effect could be immediate. The second would be at the leader preparation level, and it may take a few years to

see its influence fully. The third would be at the school system leadership level, where the significance could also be seen briefly. All three implications require little to moderate effort from policymakers or other influential parties but could be vital to the future of education, the local school, the school system, and the community.

Local Boards

Within local board policy, the expectation of a communal-based school improvement process would benefit all stakeholders interested in the schools. These parties may include teacher-leaders, school or system governance team members, parents, and local business partners. This study showed the benefits of having multiple contributors to the school improvement process. These teams know their students and their fellow staff members. They know the local politics and potential pitfalls that could delay their goals. They understand what it takes to be successful in their minds and the stakeholders in the community.

Working together, these groups bring their perspectives on what it takes to improve a school. Using a working group allows the plan to be shared more openly between the diverse participants and, in turn, the community. The use of a group also forces accountability across a broader range of people to ensure the plan is implemented and followed as intended.

Leadership Preparation

This study also has implications for leadership preparation. Potential school principal candidates may benefit from training in transformational leadership's tenets. This experience must be part of a Tier I or an Educational Specialist curriculum. Whether it was a book study, research paper assignment, or role-playing activity, each could be a viable option to help future school leaders see the relevance of this model. As shown, transformational or other collective

leadership styles can assist in school improvement by building a positive culture and enhancing the learning experience for students.

No one person can lead a school on their own. The understanding is that working together and building a leadership team from within the school building is vital to success. The pillars of transformational leadership can help principal candidates as they look to lead school improvement. Being able to successfully communicate their vision, motivate those on their future staff, implement innovative ideas, and recognize and develop untapped talent is vital to the school's future and the education profession.

Hiring Practices

In addition, understanding transformational leadership or other collective leadership models may benefit district superintendents seeking to hire principals. A knowledge of transformational leadership could assist in asking questions in the interview process should the system be looking for a principal who is needed to rebuild or reshape the culture of a staff or to inspire and influence a core of teachers who could assist in leading to changes within the building. This knowledge could be critical in schools with smaller faculties where shared leadership may stimulate more passive staff members to embrace an active role in school improvement.

While the superintendent has many responsibilities, one of the most important is hiring the right principals for their schools. A poor choice in hiring could lead to the continuation of a disgruntled staff and poor work environment or severely damage the climate and culture of a highly functional building that may take years to repair. A superintendent who understands transformational leadership practices and their impact may be able to find the right fit for the job both in the school and in the community.

Assumptions and Limitations

Given the qualitative nature of the study, identifying the situational settings and examples of transformational leadership practices by the principals in question provided a critical but narrow focal point. The findings from this case study did not lead to generalizability due to the limited selection parameter of principal interest responses. Snowball sampling may have created limitations as principals provided names of potential teacher-leaders. This action may have influenced some of the findings of the perspectives of those subjects as they may have been ones that the principals had an influence on, or comfort level with, in their understanding of school improvement. While these findings may only be easily transferable to some schools, a deeper exploration of the principals and teacher-leaders may provide a context for similar, small rural schools.

Additionally, the researcher's familiarity with leading school improvement processes and data interpretation may have been biased when interpreting the findings generated. The researcher's knowledge of standard practices, protocols, and vocabulary could have influenced the interpretation of the transcripts and public documents. Post-interview journaling notes were used to reflect on any internal feelings of bias that may have occurred during the interviewing and document reviewing process. A research design was developed concerning the sample selection, practice with the interview questions, and practice with the analysis tools to address any study limitations, most importantly, potential bias. The careful attention to the details of this design strengthened the study.

Suggestions for Further Research

Further research into transformational leadership practices in rural school improvement would benefit school leaders. Given limited resources compared to suburban and urban schools,

the opportunity to develop and build a superior, focus-driven school staff in a small rural school helps the students and community members of the area. In addition, as a leader, understanding the importance of building trust among employees may make the school improvement process much more effective in any setting.

A well-built school improvement plan sets realistic goals that students, staff, and parents can understand and interpret (Slavin, 2007). Using transformational leadership practices and focusing on school improvement with the lens of rural-based stakeholders could set the stage for growth in places unfamiliar with such change. Further research to quantify the impact of transformational leadership practices in school improvement among rural settings would benefit educational leadership and policy decisions at the local school district level.

In summary, teacher-leaders recognized and reacted positively to those behaviors when principals in this study used aspects of transformational leadership practices such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Transformational leadership promotes a workplace culture where followers embrace the leader's vision and develop shared goals (Quin et al., 2015). As school leaders challenge their staff, engagement in creative and innovative practice is produced to meet the school's students' needs (Money, 2017). Principals and teacher-leaders generate trust with one another through relationships that include individual support and consideration for professional development (Jovanovic & Ciric, 2016). This continuous cycle influences the school improvement process throughout the school year.

When principals in this study embraced Transformational Leadership practices, teacher leaders were more impactful in their professional learning communities and classrooms. These traits lead to a positive school culture focused on improvement for all parties in the building,

from students to staff. As success is achieved, more is desired and encouraged. Each group continues to challenge one another to improve themselves in what they do and how they do it.

As for the future of education, and more specifically, rural schools, strong leaders must be there to lead them. As educational resources become limited or resources diverted to other areas, a leader must be prepared to harness the power of the faculty and staff to efficiently use what they have on hand to improve the learning of the students in the building. Transformational leadership practices provide the leader with the tools necessary to accomplish such a goal and be a beacon for education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS (PSEL)

STANDARD 10

Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Effective leaders:

a. Seek to make school more effective for each student, teachers and staff, families, and the community.

b. Use methods of continuous improvement to achieve the vision, fulfill the mission, and promote the core values of the school.

c. Prepare the school and the community for improvement, promoting readiness, an imperative for improvement, instilling mutual commitment and accountability, and developing the knowledge, skills, and motivation to succeed in improvement.

d. Engage others in an ongoing process of evidence-based inquiry, learning, strategic goal setting, planning, implementation, and evaluation for continuous school and classroom improvement.

e. Employ situationally appropriate strategies for improvement, including transformational and incremental, adaptive approaches and attention to different phases of implementation.

f. Assess and develop the capacity of staff to assess the value and applicability of emerging educational trends and the findings of research into the school and its improvement.

g. Develop technically appropriate systems of data collection, management, analysis, and use, connecting as needed to the district office and external partners for support in planning, implementation, monitoring, feedback, and evaluation.

h. Adopt a systems perspective and promote coherence among improvement efforts and all aspects of school organization, programs, and services.

i. Manage uncertainty, risk, competing initiatives, and politics of change with courage and perseverance, providing support and encouragement, and openly communicating the need for, process for, and outcomes of improvement efforts.

j. Develop and promote leadership among teachers and staff for inquiry, experimentation, and innovation, and initiating and implementing improvement.

Appendix B

PRINCIPAL INTEREST SURVEY

Date: [Specific Date Emailed]

Dear [Specific Name of Principal],

My name is Charles D. Meyer, and I am the Coordinator of Accountability, Strategy, and Innovation with the Morgan County Charter School System. I have received IRB approval from Georgia State University (currently pending/in progress). As a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at Georgia State University, I am writing to you with a request to participate in my dissertation study exploring perceptions of principal practices and teacher leadership in school improvement planning. I value your time, knowledge, and expertise, and understand the demands placed upon your time. Please accept my sincere gratitude for considering participating in my study! Potential benefits include reflection on your practice as a transformational leader and how you influence teacher leadership development through a continuous school improvement process within your school.

This case study seeks to explore how principals and teacher leaders perceive the use of transformational leadership principal practices to shape the school improvement process in their schools. My study involves a *face-to-face* interview with the principal (approximately 5 minutes for the interest survey completion, 60 minutes with 15 minutes of transcription review, as needed) and two teacher leaders (approximately 60 minutes with 15 minutes of transcription review, as needed), as well as *observations* of participant- facilitated meetings (course team, curriculum, or grade level) and a *review* of documents, such as vision and mission, Local School Plan of Improvement, and accountability reports.

As part of the study, I am also asking other principals in the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement to 1) underline complete this brief survey and 2) underline recommend four teacher leaders according to the study's definition of teacher leadership. A separate invitation to participate in the study, indicating you have recommended them as a teacher leader, will be emailed to each identified teacher leader though not all individuals identified will be asked to participate.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study! Please contact me at chip.meyer@morgan.k12.ga.us with any questions.

Principal Name: _____

School: _____

Are you willing to participate in this study? ☒Yes ☐No

Are you willing to provide access to your school location and selected participants for this study?
☒   ☐Yes ☐No

If you selected YES to both previous questions, please complete this interest survey and return this form to chip.meyer@morgan.k12.ga.us or complete the online google form using the link: https://forms.gle/hm5Y6mQWYQGvhiHt5

Part I: Interest Survey

1.   How long have you served as a principal at this school? _____

2.   Have you served as a principal at other locations? ☒Yes ☐No

If YES, which locations (and district, if outside of your current district):

_____

For this study, a transformational leader utilizes vision, role model behaviors, and inspirational motivation to set high expectations for learning and professional growth in others.

3.   Do you see yourself as a transformational leader?   ☐Yes ☐No

4.   Do you create opportunities for teachers to develop leadership skills and talents while working in your school?   ☐Yes ☐No

Part II: Teacher Leader Recommendations

For this study, a teacher leader is identified through participation in leadership roles as department chairs, curriculum/course team lead teachers, or grade level chairs. Teacher leaders believe in their potential to influence others, motivate teams to function with high expectations and encourage innovative thinking. Serving in the identified positions, teacher leaders develop personal and professional capacity to lead others within the organization toward a common vision.

Please identify at least four teacher leaders you believe meet these expectations of a teacher leader:

A.   Name: _____

       Teacher-leader role: _____

B.   Name: _____

       Teacher-leader role: _____

C.   Name: _____

       Teacher-leader role: _____

D.   Name: _____

       Teacher-leader role: _____

Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Georgia State University

Department of Educational Policy Studies

Informed Consent

Title: Transformational Leadership for Rural School Improvement

Pipeline Principal Investigator: Dr. Will C. Rumbaugh

Student Principal Investigator: Charles D. Meyer

<u>Introduction and Key Information</u>

You are invited to take part in a research study. It is up to you to decide if you would like to take part in the study. This study investigates the perceptions of principals and teacher leaders on the influence of transformational principal practices on the school improvement process. You are invited to participate in this study because you are a school principal or a teacher leader in the selected school which participated in a Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) cohort. Your role in the study will last up to 75 minutes (teacher leaders) and 80 minutes (principals) over nine months. You will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in a 60-minute face-to-face audio-recorded interview which will be transcribed for your review (expected 15 minutes). The interview will be conducted in a private, quiet location that is mutually agreed upon by the participant and researcher.
- Be observed during a participant-led meeting (administration, department, course team, or professional learning session); no additional time required will be requested for this task since leaders are expected to attend as a typical job function.

<u>Purpose</u>

The study investigates the perceptions of principals and teacher leaders on the influence of transformational principal practices on the school improvement process. You are invited to take part in this research study because you are a principal or a teacher leader in the selected school which participated in a Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) cohort number. Eight people will be invited to take part in this study.

Procedures

Study participation will consist of an interview with each participant with a total time commitment of up to 75 minutes of time for teacher leaders and 80 minutes of time for principals. If you decide to take part, you will participate in the following two study-related activities:

- School leaders [*principals only*] will be asked to complete an interest survey which is expected to take five minutes.

- A 60-minute face-to-face audio-recorded interview which will be transcribed for your review.

  - Up to 15 minutes may be needed for participants to review their copy of the interview transcription.
  - The interview will be conducted in a private, quiet location that is mutually agreed upon by the participant and researcher.
  - An interview protocol will be used to guide the session.

- You may also be observed during participant-led meetings (administration, department, course team, or professional learning session).

  - The number of meetings will not exceed two sessions; meeting sessions are typically one hour in duration.
  - No additional time will be requested for this task since leaders are expected to attend a typical job function.
  - An observation note-taking guide will be used to capture real-time data during the meeting.

Future Research

Researchers will remove information that may identify you and may use your data for future research. If we do this, we will not ask for any additional consent from you.

Risks

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would on a normal day of life. No injury is expected from this study, but if you believe you have been harmed, contact the research team as soon as possible. Georgia State University and the research team have not set aside funds to compensate for any injury.

Benefits

This study may benefit you personally by improving your knowledge and skills by reflecting on leadership practices and strengthening your capacity to develop others. Overall, we hope to gain information about the influence of principal practices on teacher leadership development and school culture through the lens of the transformational leadership framework.

Alternatives

The alternative to taking part in this study is to not take part in the study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. You may refuse to take part in the study or stop at any time. This will not cause you to lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Confidentiality

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:

• Dr. Will C. Rumbaugh and Charles. D. Meyer

• GSU Institutional Review Board

• Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

We will use a study participant code rather than your name on study records. The principal interest surveys will be sent via the district email server. The audio recording of the interview and the electronic transcripts will be kept on separate USB drives and erased from the original device once uploaded. The spreadsheet files used for coding and data analysis will be stored on a password and firewall-protected computer in the office of the student investigator. Physical paper copies of the interview transcripts and observation note guides will be stored in a locked filing cabinet; the participant code keys will be stored in a separate locked filing cabinet. Both locked filing cabinets will be in the office of the student investigator. The USB drives, electronic files, and physical copies of information will be destroyed after a minimum of five years. When we present or publish the results of this study, we will not use your name or other information that may identify you, your school, or your school system.

Contact Information

 Contact Dr. Will C. Rumbaugh or Charles D. Meyer at 706474-0812 or cmeyer4@student.gsu.edu if you have questions about the study or your part in it, or if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study. The IRB at Georgia State University reviews all research that involves human participants. You can contact the IRB if you would like to speak to someone who is not involved directly with the study. You can contact the IRB for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your rights as a research participant. Contact the IRB at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu.

<u>Consent</u>

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to be audio-recorded for this research, please sign below.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

_____

Printed Name of Participant

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____

Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent   Date